

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Just below the surface of some of the louder and shriller voices raised around Barnstabletown during the last year has been the murmur of concern for the revitalization of downtown Hyannis.

A few weeks ago the murmur became a clear call for citizen participation. Those who've served on the Barnstable Committee for Growth and Change rose up, made themselves heard above the chatter and melee, and in clarion tones laid the problem before the people. They ask for input, help, ideas and support to solve it.

Always there are those who'll knock every idea coming down the double-barrel. These will say there's no reason everyone in town should participate in revitalizing Hyannis.

The objections will be costs to taxpayers in our other villages, reminders that Hyannis village was once as attractive as its satellites -- before it was commercialized --, and the dismal promise of more, more, and more tourists.

Let's take a second look at the objections. First, take real estate taxes. No matter how we slice it, it costs a scary amount of dollars to operate Barnstable's schools, DPW, police and fire departments, and to administer the business of the town.

If the value of any piece of real estate in town drops, then the owners of all other parcels must chip in a few more coins to make up for that lost value. On the other hand, if values of certain parcels rise, each of the other owners of real estate can look for a bit of relief.

While it's unlikely, extremely unlikely, the dollar amount of taxes each of us pays will decrease in coming years, it's a sure bet the amounts will increase faster if downtown Hyannis real estate loses its value.

That could happen. It could happen quickly if the buying public's purchasing habits change, and stores on Main Street begin losing money. No businessman will take losses, year after year. He'll decline to renew his lease and move with his market, go into some other business in another location, or close his doors for good. And the assessed value of the property he leaves vacant will tumble.

When the Malls were being built, some thought the shopkeepers there would starve. Instead, it's so crowded most of us, who shopped the Malls when they were new, have now resumed our old habits of shopping Main Street; at least we can find a place to park and don't spend twenty minutes going in circles trying to fight our way out of the parking lanes.

The second objection, that Hyannis once was a charming village and commercialism spoiled it, has some merit. Is it to our collective benefit, however, to wash our hands of it, turn our backs on it, and refuse to participate in action that could prevent further deterioration?

Aside from the effect on property taxes, what else will happen if we do that? Initially, probably a third Mall will be built, with additional acres of blacktopped parking lots. And, inevitably, more and larger businesses will seek commercial space in outlying, already over-crowded, smaller business districts.

Is that really what we want?

Finally, although we moan, groan, and bemoan the flood of visitors who invade our shores for longer and longer periods each year, down deep in our pocketbooks, we know our economic survival lies in providing an increasing number of them with what they come looking for and, still, in spite of commercialism, find here.

For how long will they find it if downtown Hyannis becomes a row of shops with empty shelves or boarded up windows? Empty storefronts aren't exactly a tourist attraction.

The East End, until recently, was beginning to present just such a seedy picture; then some buildings were torn down, some modernized, some new ones went up. East of Barnstable Road, Main Street has had a face-lift over the past decade. It's still going on.

The West End needs similar surgery, for except for a few welcome exceptions, changes there have been for the worse in recent years. And property owners, here too, are investing to make it more appealing.

From Barnstable Road west to High School Road, the south side of Main Street is presentable. Plans to hold the line and preserve the fine older buildings in this area are meeting with broad support.

The north side of Main Street in this area could benefit from changes such as have been wrought in the old O'Neil's Grocery. It's not hard to visualize how pleasant this part of town could be if vehicular traffic were prohibited from Barnstable Road to Winter Street, if the roadway were converted to a brick-paved esplanade complete with gardens, plants and shrubs. Hyannis center could become the town's most delightful public park, complete with convenient shopping facilities.

Where's the money coming from? There are both state and federal funds available for projects such as this. Sure, it's our money whether it comes from state or federal or local taxes. But we're paying those taxes, regardless of whether we utilize the programs or not. We save nothing by ignoring their availability. Since our town, like many others, is eligible for financial assistance we've already paid for, and since we'll continue to pay for similar projects in other towns across the country, doesn't it make sense to bring some of it back home?

A little seed money can go a long way toward attracting private investment if the climate is inviting. Other places have done this successfully.

It wouldn't have to be done all at once. Improvements in the East End have brought new life there. The waterfront, Bismark Park and the harbor, are only two blocks from Main Street. A logical direction for business expansion is south on Ocean and Old Colony Blvd.

Adequate pre-planning for parking and attractive shops could upgrade the entire village. It could also relieve pressures to change zoning on South Street from residential to business.

At a recent conference at Cape Cod Community College, representatives from the Office of Local Assistance, Mass. Dept. of Community Affairs, urged maintaining the cultural and historical characteristics of centers of towns. It was suggested this is best done by keeping churches, schools, town offices, and businesses operating in the older centers, for if they move, there'll be nothing to bring people into these centers, and they are bound to go-to-seed.

While there's not enough room on Cape Cod to provide entertainment for the entire population of the country, there's still room -- and time -- to plan for those who do come, and for the ones who will be coming in even greater numbers in the years ahead.

The trick is to plan now, act now, to offer them good reasons to keep coming. If they ever stop, we'll be in a sorry state, indeed. If we plan and act to accommodate them, their presence will be less disturbing to us all.

The best things in life may be free, but we can't eat them nor wear them, nor shelter in them. For the things we must purchase, the necessities of life, we need income.

Let's do all we can to revitalize downtown Hyannis.