Innovative Zoning in Amherst – A Long History

Some have questioned whether Amherst should pursue village center form-based zoning, given that it is a fairly new zoning technique in the New England area, and unprecedented in Amherst. One answer is that Amherst has been a leader in innovative zoning approaches for decades. Some examples:

Planned Unit Residential District (PURD) overlay district (1970s) – First adoption and use of PURD zoning in Massachusetts and the eastern United States.

Zoning Moratorium (1986) – In response to sharply increasing development permit applications and strained water and sewer infrastructure capacity, Town Meeting suspended the issuance of building permits for two years until new sewer/water infrastructure could be built and new zoning developed to allow the community to moderate its rate of growth. Between 1986-88, new zoning was adopted protecting aquifers and watersheds (those serving as public water supplies) and critical farmland.

Phased Growth (1987) – One of the first in the state to adopted this method of 'growth restraint' capping the number of building permits issued in any given two year period, and establishing community goals which, if met, could speed development, and, if not met, could slow development down. Interacted with the moratorium at first, exempting some developments which met community goals such as the inclusion of affordable housing. Amherst's phased growth bylaw rendered unconstitutional as a zoning method by a 2004 Massachusetts Supreme Court decision, which also served as a spur for developing and completing Amherst's Master Plan.

Village Center Zoning

1974 - Village Center Business (B-VC) District created in response to the 'village center concept' established in the 1973 Select Committee on Goals (SCOG) community plan.

1989-1990 - Use of the B-VC District is expanded and a new Village Center Residence (R-VC) District created as a transitional district—all based on the 'village center concept'. Applied in North Amherst, then Pomeroy Village.

1991 - R-VC zoning is added to East Village.

2007 - B-VC and R-VC are added to the south end of East Village (College and South East Streets)

2010 – Amherst Master Plan adopted, with goals and objectives founded on the 'village center concept.' Many zoning amendments before and since have been explicitly directed at implementing this goal.

Demolition Delay (1999) – A method for delaying demolition of historically significant buildings, providing time for explore alternatives to demolition—initially adopted with a six month delay, later extended to 12 months.

Open Space Community Development (2003) – A residential development method that sets aside a large percentage of open land at the beginning, and then allows dense clustering of dwelling units on the remaining buildable area. The method allows for the design options often preferred by intentional communities such as cohousing groups.

Inclusionary Zoning (2005) - Regulations requiring provision of affordable housing units in some developments.

Digital Official Zoning Map (2010) – Official Zoning Map converted from outdated paper format to digital.