
To the editor:

I was taken aback by the two letters in support of the “Retreat” proposed for North Amherst. It is never sufficient to agree to something because “we’ve said no too many times.” By that logic, kindergarteners should plead repeatedly for the right to drive. I mean, after a while — apparently — it’s no longer okay to say “no” to destructive and hazardous activities.

I supported the thoughtful and carefully planned development of North Amherst that was rejected at the last Town Meeting. I understand it was only a few votes away from passing, which is too bad. I wholeheartedly support carefully thinking about and planning for the growth and future of our town.

But tripling Cushman village’s population — literally overnight — by establishing a new massive student housing project will be an environmental disaster. The area infrastructure simply isn’t sufficient to absorb that kind of population explosion. This is not planned, or intentional, or thoughtful.

We don’t “own” our land — we are protectors of it for the time we are here. We love and want the best for our children. So is it so difficult to love and want the best for our great, great, great grandchildren?

Please check out the FACTS for yourself — and don’t be bullied by those who say “stop whining, you reactionary Amherst anti-business curmudgeons.” Every proposal should be decided on its own merit, and this has none.

Marian Wolfsun
Amherst
Gazette.net, May 22, 2013

To the editor:

One of the tenets of good zoning is that property owners know what to expect. I don’t think any of us in the Cushman area had any idea that property zoned “out-lying residential” could be developed into a 700-plus student-housing complex. The complex closely resembles a student dormitory or apartment complex (both of which are specifically prohibited) but because the complex is to be constructed as 190 separate units, the developers are attempting to exploit a loophole and qualify as a “cluster” of single-family homes.

Equally troubling is the way the complex is being marketed, beginning with the name “The Retreat,” which promises to be anything but. The project is being presented as a “solution” to the problems experienced by other neighborhoods in Amherst. I am skeptical of any solution which invites an additional 700 students to move into another residential neighborhood.

It has been suggested that by moving students from single-family dwellings to a large complex they will behave more appropriately or if they don’t it won’t much matter. You only need to read the newspaper accounts of the Blarney Blowout at the Townhouse apartments to doubt the veracity of the first claim and to realize the irresponsibility of the second. Supporters of the

complex hope that disruptive students located in single-family houses near campus will magically “self-deport” to the “Retreat.”

Most importantly, student behavior is not going to improve by changing the location of the students or from changing the configuration of their homes. The problem is accountability.

The most practical solution is to locate the complex on the UMass campus.

The new chancellor of UMass has spoken favorably of the “Retreat” and therefore I am optimistic that he will support legislation to allow for private-public partnerships on his campus. The university has buildable land, largely deforested with good infrastructure. Building the “Retreat” on campus is both environmentally responsible and cost effective but perhaps most importantly it will house students under the wing of the institution that can most effectively nudge them to adulthood — my alma mater — Go UMass!

Eva Lohrer

Amherst

Gazette.net, May 19, 2013

To the editor:

We in Amherst are very sensitive to the accusation of being “unfriendly” to business, and thus anti-development. It seems that we are finally at the point at which we accept any development, and questioning it “proves” we are against development and against expanding the tax base.

Can we have an honest discussion about the merits of a development and whether it improves Amherst, or if in fact it creates more problems than it solves?

Of course I am referring to Cinda Jones’ proposal to sell Cushman acreage to Landmark Properties so they can build “the Retreat,” an upscale cottage-style student housing project with 170 units “and all the amenities like a gym and theater.” Does anyone think this will solve a single problem that now exists due to student rentals?

Downtown housing will always be in demand due to its proximity to the university. Now there will be increased parking demand in central Amherst as students from the Retreat will leave their cars in town and take busses to class. Outdoor parties will migrate from Hobart Lane and Meadow Street eastward on Pine Street to the “wooded” Retreat in Cushman and create a “party artery” between these student enclaves.

Traffic at the Pine Street-North Pleasant Street intersection will routinely back up in all directions and the dangerous East Pleasant Street-Pine Street-Sand Hill Road intersection will become significantly more so.

None of these critical considerations speaks to the loss of passive recreation land and open space, both emphasized by our master plan.

Wasn’t this plan created by the citizens of Amherst to direct our town boards in their planning

and actions?

Without this public discussion, Amherst is left to the dealings of private enterprise who maximize their profits but do not have Amherst's long term best interests in mind!

Jack Hirsch
Amherst
Gazette.net, May 16, 2013

To the editor:

On April 16, over 50 residents of Amherst met with the representatives of Landmark Properties at Jones Library where we learned of their intention to build 191 houses for over 700 students on 150 acres owned by Cinda Jones that directly abuts Cushman Village.

At several points, the Landmark representative spoke of "their product" when referring to their "Retreat" brand of student housing. Such language was a simple but significant indicator of the clash of cultures between the developers and the local residents. What for Landmark is a "product," is for the residents of Cushman and North Amherst the heart and soul of our community.

In the formal and informal exchanges with Landmark representatives — as well as informally with Cinda Jones — it became transparent that, while paying lip service to community, these developers were insensitive to the hypocrisy of proposing plans in which they have everything to gain while the residents of Cushman and North Amherst have everything to lose — the destruction of natural habitats, intensification of already existing traffic risks, expanding the domain of student partying and the loss of property value, to name only a few.

The Retreat project in Cushman is the tipping point that brings all the student-related issues to a head. They must be addressed comprehensively, not piecemeal. For this reason, all off-campus student housing projects must be put on hold to allow for a comprehensive reassessment of what is right for Amherst residents as much as the university and developers.

The sustainable forms of energy and agriculture we need for the future cannot be developed through individual and corporate power plays but through new capacities of collaboration. Similarly, individual power plays no longer serve but destroy sustainable forms of community. I invite Landmark, Cinda Jones, the university and other real estate developers to step up to the quickly changing social landscape by not pressing forward with business as usual. Instead, play a leading role as an equal among equals. Lets develop Amherst together as an authentic and sustainable community.

Power destroys community; Empathy builds community.

Michael Howard
Amherst
Gazette.net, May 16, 2013

Taking exception to housing column's claims

By Betsy Mathews

The errors and inaccuracies that run through Nick Grabbe's op-ed piece in the May 10 Bulletin cry out for correction at this critical time.

Its opening sentence, "Many residents of the Cushman neighborhood are upset," gets two things wrong right off the bat. Most people in Cushman do not see themselves as "residents of the Cushman neighborhood" but as Cushman Village residents — a very different state of heart and mind — and they are not upset, they are outraged. They are outraged by a development that Grabbe refers to with the minimizing, elastic phrase of "about 170 student housing units." Accurate information from Landmark Properties calls for 191 cottages to be built on the woodland site.

Grabbe claims understanding "that Cushman residents would feel they must try to protect their homes" from student noise and traffic. Cushman residents do not want to protect their homes from noise and traffic, they want to protect their neighborhood, their quality of life, and their long-time investment, and they want to protect their town. Current and past opposition to off-campus student housing is not an epidemic of NIMBY (Not In My Neighborhood)-itis. It is a healthy reaction to the university's poorly managed growth and inadequate planning. Residents throughout Amherst clearly see that the university, once a respected partner in the community, has created a problem for the entire town that it is addressing with ineffective speed and commitment.

Grabbe's statement that opponents of the Cushman student development are asking Town Meeting "to spend millions" to buy the land in question is simply inaccurate. Warrant article 43 calls for the town to spend 30 percent of \$1.2 million with the state paying 70 percent. Additional grants and gifts are being sought to further reduce the cost to the town.

The claim that the land in Cushman "seems to be appropriately zoned" for the proposed project fails to specify that the Cows property is classified Residential Outlying where house lots require 150 feet of frontage and 30,000 square feet. Due to Amherst's zoning bylaws, high-density cluster developments can be built in RO districts without any special permits. Sadly, this proposal may be legal, but it is by no stretch of the imagination appropriate for an historic village district.

The suggestion that concerned neighbors might "negotiate" with Jones and Landmark to minimize the impact makes little more than feel-good sense. Jones is a land owner, not a developer or planner. When the land is sold, her role in the project will be finished. Landmark representatives made it clear at an April meeting that they would negotiate with abutters to the extent of tearing up more Cushman landscape to accommodate traffic and destroying more woodlands to abate noise.

Moreover, Grabbe's assurance that party noise will not be a problem because it is "about 350 feet from the closest single family residence to the development" is supported neither by fact nor experience. The distance from the development to the closest residence is 100 feet. Frequent

experience in Cushman reminds us that we can hear the UMass marching band, the sports crowds, the bells and loudspeakers from campus — two miles away as the crow flies. Clearly a cordon of 100 or even 350 feet is no guarantor of peace and quiet.

Finally, the statement that “there will be only one access point to the development” is at variance with Landmark’s designs that show two access roads, one from Market Hill Road and one from Henry Street, both town scenic routes not engineered to bear hundreds of additional cars each day.

An evocation of NIMBY concludes Grabbe’s op-ed piece. Though it falls short of actual name-calling, the aura of this dreaded label lingers in the reader’s mind, a rhetorically well-played conclusion but one without substance. Actually, the tired NIMBY phrase could experience some fresh usage in this discourse if supporters of Landmark’s “Retreat” proposal would have the integrity to say, “I think it’s fine to build a development for 700 students in historic Cushman, and it’s not in my backyard.”

Betsy Mathews lives in Cushman.
Amherst Bulletin, May 13, 2013

I’m a Cushman resident who is opposed to the Landmark “Retreat” for 700 students. I read with interest the article “Game changers: Who are the investors altering Amherst neighborhoods?” Turning neighborhood houses into student rentals with absentee landlords is nothing new. It has happened all over the country in university towns.

Unfortunately, the landlords see good monetary value and students want to live close to the universities and businesses. If the university and town think students will leave the close proximity to the University of Massachusetts Amherst for remote housing on the outskirts of Amherst like the one proposed at Cushman, I think they will be fooled.

Students will always want to live nearby. Location. Location. Location.

I understand that in interviews, students have said The Retreat is too far from campus. We are all concerned about the out-of-control partying that occurs in Amherst. Unfortunately with Twitter and Facebook, partying can go global quickly.

We can’t stop students from using their cell phones. The town and university need to come together and have a serious joint plan to address the many problems. A joint effort to build new off-campus housing within reach of UMass and downtown would be a start.

Deborah Rubin
Amherst
Gazette.net, May 6, 2013

To the editor:

I applaud the Gazette’s decision to run a three-part series exploring the off-campus student housing problem in Amherst. But the paper missed an opportunity by not investigating the latest development in this story: the announcement by W. D. Cows that it would sell 154 woodland

acres near Amherst's Cushman Village to Athens, Ga.-based Landmark Properties, which plans on building "The Retreat" — 191 "cottage-style" units that will house between 650 and 700 students.

Some of the same forces that are rapidly converting neighborhoods in central and North Amherst to student rentals have also landed this large, out-of-state firm at historic Cushman's doorstep. Just as the weak housing market has brought in local investors like Jamie Cherewatti, so too has it opened up a space for forces like Landmark and other highly capitalized developers of student housing complexes.

The Amherst zoning bylaw also enables local and outside investors to capitalize on the student housing market. As the Gazette series makes clear, the conversion of single-family residences to student rentals in the town has happened rapidly under Amherst's zoning bylaw. Likewise, we in and around Cushman are threatened by a zoning bylaw that could enable the destruction of both our community and the largest contiguous woodland forest in North Amherst. Landmark will submit its plan to the town as a cluster subdivision, which in Amherst is a by-right approval process. In contrast, most municipalities in Massachusetts control cluster subdivisions through a special permit, which allows the Planning Board discretionary review.

The special permit process allows a Planning Board to say no. So while the public will be allowed to comment on Landmark's plan in public hearings, and the relevant town boards must oversee the permitting process to make sure Landmark's plan conforms, the board ultimately does not have the power to prohibit the plan. Not unlike our neighbors near the University of Massachusetts, we are struck by how little protection the zoning bylaw affords us, residents of Amherst who have planted roots in the Cushman area, as opposed to the absolute right the zoning bylaw potentially hands to a land developer with no ties to our community.

It is no wonder, then, that citizens across Amherst have organized — be it the Coalition of Amherst Neighborhoods or our group, Save Historic Cushman.

Now is the time for a truly private-public partnership to solve the off-campus student housing problem in Amherst. We look to both UMass and Amherst town leaders to join with our citizens' groups in that effort.

Karen Merrill
Amherst
Gazette.net, May 3, 2013

To the Bulletin:

I am a resident of North Amherst, Cushman Village. I attended a meeting last week between Georgia-based Landmark Properties and local residents. Landmark advertised this meeting as a chance for it to hear and address our concerns about the proposed 191-unit (three to four students and parking places per unit) development in the Salamander Crossing woodland. We showed up with a lot of questions.

What was so striking to me was how unable the Landmark representatives were to answer our

questions. They had the following non-answers: How much blasting will occur? “We will try to keep it to a minimum.” Will the blasting affect the wells of residents on Flat Hills road? “We will follow guidelines.” What about the destructive, loud partying that occurs in these types of places? “We will handle it.” What about the fact that our police already can’t handle the current level of disruption in the three such housing units in North Amherst? “We have several security people.” What about the huge increase of traffic on already overtaxed roads and neighborhoods? “We are doing analysis.” This development will destroy our community. That is our feedback. How do you feel about this? “We appreciate your feedback.”

When all the evidence points to how destructive their plans are, their main message was simply “Don’t worry, we have it covered.”

This message is given without addressing the real questions. This is because there is no answer to the bottom line issue that this project is unworkable for this area for a huge variety of reasons (traffic, danger, noise, salamander habitat, water protection, decreased property values in the area, fire risk etc.).

If they were being honest I think these would have been their answers: How much blasting will occur? “As much as it takes.” Will the blasting affect the wells of residents on Flat Hills road? “We don’t know and don’t really care.” What about the destructive, loud partying that occurs in these types of places? “We will be gone by the time this starts.” What about the fact that our police already can’t handle the current level of disruption in the 3 such housing clusters in North Amherst? “Not our problem.” What about the huge increase of traffic on already overtaxed roads and neighborhoods? “Get over it.” This development will destroy our community. That is our feedback. How do you feel about this? “We are a corporation. We don’t have feelings.”

The meeting they called was a sham.

Thank you for providing a place where our voices can be heard.

Sharon Weizenbaum
Amherst
Amherst Bulletin, April 24, 2013

To the Bulletin:

As a 50-plus-year resident of North Amherst, I offer the following comments regarding the rental problems in Amherst.

1. UMass should provide adequate campus housing for all undergraduate students. On-campus land is still available for dorms and should be utilized. The crux of Amherst rental problems lie with the university.
2. The 170-unit complex proposal on Henry Street should be absolutely rejected by the town. I am extremely disappointed the owner of the land would even consider selling to apartment investors and bring the student rental problems to yet another area of the town.

3. The investors cited in the “Game Changers” article in last week’s Bulletin should feel responsibility for disruptive changes that have occurred in our town. Evidently greed is a much higher priority than peaceful neighborhoods and the beauty of the town. Local real estate companies should pledge to sell only to families who want to live in the house they purchase or rent to families.

4. It is hoped our town can urge those responsible to help restore our neighborhoods and demand that UMass house undergrad students on campus.

Dick Bergquist

Amherst

Amherst Bulletin, April 24, 2013

To the Editor:

Does a small town with proud local sensibilities have a chance against big corporations?

Student housing development has become big business. The weak economy has brought publicly traded companies such as Toll Brothers and Lennar into the supposedly recession-proof student housing market. In her Wall Street Journal article, “Big real-estate firms are going to school” (Feb. 26), Dawn Wotapka quotes J. Wesley Rogers, president of Landmark Properties, the Georgia developer planning 170 houses for 600 students in the Cushman Village of Amherst: “A lot of people think our space is hot.... You see a lot of players circling the space right now.”

Wotapka points out that established student housing developers such as Landmark are trying to buy up land to keep up with the competition. Sometimes these developers pair up with huge real estate investment trusts, which you can trade like stocks, at the buying, managing, or developing stage. Landmark Properties sometimes partners with the largest trust, \$4.3 billion American Campus Properties, traded as ACC on the stock exchange.

Meanwhile, many college administrators are moving toward privatizing their dorms or encouraging more off-campus housing, as financially strapped states are not providing sufficient funds for building dorms. This group seems to include our own UMass Amherst Chancellor Subbaswamy (See UMass Amherst, Fall, 2012, p. 16).

So this proposed housing project in Cushman is a small cog in a very big wheel. Are we going to let our small town get swallowed up by big business? If so, maybe we should consider buying stock in ACC to offset the decrease of our property values.

Ann Hollingworth

Amherst

Gazette.net, April 19, 2013

Dear Editor,

I find the Landmark project in Cushman to be terrifying. It would be, if built, one of the largest off-campus student concentrations in Amherst. We have not had good luck in this town with the existing developments. Hobart Lane has caused enormous difficulty with extensive property

damage including police cars and buildings. Recently, the Townhouse Apartments have become the center of extreme parties. With more than 600 residents the Landmark project would almost certainly become a new hub of destructive behavior.

It is the size of the project that is most disturbing. The plans call for the maximum number of units allowed on this piece of land, 170 units. This may be compared with the 96 units at Townhouse. If the project causes the problems many people expect, it will all be in existence from the outset and there will be no way to ameliorate the consequences. We will be stuck with them forever and the quality of life in Amherst will be diminished permanently. Can we not limit the construction to a fraction of the full project and permit further construction only after the consequences are better understood?

Sincerely,

Norman Ford
Amherst
Gazette.net, April 18, 2013

To the editor,

We in Amherst are very sensitive to the accusation of being “unfriendly” to business, and thus anti-development. It seems that we are finally at the point at which we accept any development, and questioning it ‘proves’ we are against development and against expanding the tax base.

Can we have an honest discussion about the merits of a development and whether it improves Amherst, or if in fact it creates more problems than it solves? Of course I am referring to Cinda Jones’ proposal to sell Cushman acreage to Landmark Properties so they can build “the Retreat”, an upscale cottage-style student housing project with 170 units “and all the amenities like a gym and theater”. Does anyone think this will solve a single problem that now exists due to student rentals? Downtown housing will always be in demand due to its proximity to the University. Now there will be increased parking demand in central Amherst as students from the retreat will leave their cars in town, and take busses to class. Outdoor parties will migrate from Hobart Lane and Meadow Street eastward on Pine Street to the “wooded” retreat in Cushman, and create a “party artery” between these student enclaves. Traffic at the Pine Street - North Pleasant Street intersection will routinely back up in all directions, and the dangerous East Pleasant Street, Pine Street, Sand Hill Road intersection, will become significantly more so.

None of these critical considerations speaks to the loss of passive recreation land and open space, both emphasized by our Master Plan. Wasn’t this plan created by the citizens of Amherst to direct our town boards in their planning and actions? Without this public discussion, Amherst is left to the dealings of private enterprise who maximize their profits but do not have Amherst’s long term best interests in mind!

Sincerely,

Jack Hirsch
Amherst

Gazette.net, April 18, 2013

To the editor:

We came to Amherst in 1967 to a beautiful, small, safe and peaceful New England town where the residents clearly prided themselves on keeping it that way. It remained so for many years but recently things have changed. Now the town seems to be on a slow but sure path to self-destruction.

The latest dilemma is the proposed 170-student “cottages” to be sited in Cushman Village by Landmark Properties of Athens, Ga., and to be built on 154 acres of woodland owned by W.D. Cows Inc. This horrifying proposal has the potential of severely affecting not only Cushman but also the entire town of Amherst.

It is totally incomprehensible that after all the good development work in North Amherst, particularly that Jones family members have done over many years, the younger generation should choose to overthrow their patient stewardship. This proposal would destroy our formerly tranquil neighborhood, triple its population in a year, cause chaos with vehicular traffic and noise and, in the process, cast contemptuously aside the Amherst zoning ordinances.

This is one of the most appalling and short-sighted proposals ever. It makes a complete travesty of former generations’ contributions to orderly community planning. It would be a very sad day indeed for Amherst if, in defiance of the existing zoning, this proposal were to go forward.

Ann & John Martin
Amherst

Gazette.net, April 15, 2013
