



November 3, 2011

To: Members of the Northampton City Council

From: Suzanne Beck, on behalf of the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce

Re: Our endorsement of the King Street Zoning Recommendations

The Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce endorses the new zoning proposals recommended for King Street. Here and on the following pages, the Chamber has detailed the rationale for the zoning, the reasons for our support, a timeline of the process and an FAQ answering questions we've anticipated from our members, elected officials and the general public.

KEY ATTRIBUTES OF THE ZONING RECOMMENDATIONS

Starting in December of 2009, the Chamber developed a set of zoning recommendations that supported this vision for King Street:

Our vision is that the role of upper King Street as a regional destination for everyday goods and services will expand to include medical offices, hotels and other business uses. We also foresee the day when the corridor's residential population will grow. We believe every stretch of the King Street Corridor can become inviting and convenient for pedestrians, bicycles and automobiles. We envision an attractively landscaped environment and robust commercial zone that will enhance the street's important role as a gateway to Northampton's vital Downtown.

The recommendations put forward by the Planning Board and Office of Planning and Development support not only the Chamber's vision, but the interests of the entire community that participated in the public process.

1. A clearer, simplified and more predictable approval process:
 - The table-format for each zoning district clearly specifies the requirements in a user-friendly way incorporating all the rules governing development.
 - Design guidelines are illustrated with exact specifications for approval while leaving the door open for alternatives.

2. Expansion of allowed uses in CB, EB and HB:
 - Under the current zoning a special permit is required for a number of standard commercial uses. This creates uncertainty that can limit developer interest and investment.
 - The recommended uses allowed-by-right and approved through site plan review maintain appropriate public oversight while streamlining the approval process.

3. An emphasis on allowing rather than requiring creates flexibility for changing market conditions.
 - More flexible zoning will allow property owners to respond to emerging opportunities as the economy gradually rebounds. This flexibility creates a climate conducive to investment, while not precluding the development patterns desired in the current zoning.
4. The zoning recognizes the 3 distinct zones through zoning tailored to their market and current development patterns.
 - King Street has now, and will have for some time in the future, several distinctive characters as one travels the length of the corridor. The new zoning recognizes these different characters through different approaches to zoning at different spots along the corridor. One size does not fit all.
 - An especially important part of the King Street Corridor is the automobile- and retail-oriented section to the north of the new Bike Path. The new zoning provides flexibility for property owners to locate buildings and parking based on market needs.
 - The zoning recommendations open opportunities that will enhance the area's economic role and potential to generate additional property tax revenue for the City.
5. The zoning creates a safer environment for pedestrians and bicycles.
 - In Highway Business, the required tree belt, sidewalk in the public way and landscaped buffer on private property are designed to enhance pedestrians and bicyclists.
 - In Entryway Business, a sidewalk and landscaped buffer frame an improved gateway to the Downtown area.
 - The zoning recommendations build on the existing patterns for setbacks and landscaping, assuring that the streetscape will evolve to maximize access for all.
 - Internal circulation requirements in HB connect the pedestrian and safety measures in the public way to the design on private property.
 - Major improvements to pedestrian and bicycle safety will require significant public investment in new crosswalks, traffic controls and amenities in all zones, but especially in the CBD and EB zones.

Finally, I'd like to make the point that as we shaped the zoning we learned the importance of issues unrelated to zoning, but critical to the experience and safety of King Street. Those issues included parking conflicts amongst businesses and residents, the substandard quality of the sidewalks, impossible street crossings and erratic traffic behavior.

As a closing note, the Chamber encourages the City to invest its time in addressing these concerns as a critical component to the package of zoning changes you're considering.