

# Zone of contribution

■ What are those old town lines good for, anyway?

**T**he difficulty of making beneficial changes to town zoning was illustrated once again last week at Yarmouth Town Meeting.

An ambitious plan to create a South Yarmouth "village core" zone near the Bass River was pulled by nervous planning board members before the meeting. A bylaw to add motels back into the allowed-use category, and thereby allow much-needed redevelopment after a 20-year lapse, was almost sabotaged by an amendment offered on the floor that would have cut the number of allowed housing units per acre in half.

Both of these bylaws had been developed over months, if not years, with a lot of professional expertise and input and cooperation from the business community and other players. Compromises were made while striving to make the best use of property, encourage investment and solve one of the town's persistent problems: the lack of affordable rentals – or any rentals at all.

The damaging amendment to the motel bylaw was defeated, but the fact such bylaws can be derailed so easily at the last minute – sometimes (though not in this example) by emotional arguments from people coming late to the party, and sometimes by frustrated voters who simply can't see through the dozens of pages of dense legalese to find the bylaw's intent – helps explain why so-called "smart growth" is slow to develop on the Cape.

It also explains why the leaders of the Association to Protect Cape Cod and its Business Roundtable recently issued a "call to action" that recommended putting some critical zoning and development issues in the hands of a higher authority – the county, for instance. Rather than being too powerful, the Cape Cod Commission, in their judgment, is too weak and limited in reach. It doesn't use powers it does have, like the District of Critical Planning Concern, or DCPC, aggressively enough to really make a difference. In the meantime, more conventional retail development lines up along the roadside, village centers go begging and efforts to sprinkle rental apartments around are stopped by neighbors who don't want to rub shoulders with anybody who rents.

That's what sank the South Yarmouth village district. A divided planning board heard the opposition from two neighborhood groups, which included wealthy estate owners along the Bass River. The bylaw was pulled so it wouldn't be shot down at town meeting and kept off the warrant next year.

The APCC vision could be called anti-democratic, since it would remove certain land-use decisions from town voters, and could affect property rights. But others argue that it's time to blow up town borders in favor of a regional approach, to emergency services, to wastewater, to protecting critical habitats, to affordable housing, to schools, to health care.

Pride of place makes us loyal to our towns, and protective. The question is whether pride of place must sometimes be broadened to larger swaths of Cape Cod real estate and Capewide solutions.