WORKING TOWARD POSITIVE REDEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTH AMHERST VILLAGE CENTER

Comments on amendments to Article 25
Valerie Cooley, Precinct 1

I am a Town Meeting member, N. Amherst resident, and I live across the street from the proposed new NAVC zone. I want Article 25 to pass, but NOT as currently proposed. I do support an amended Article 25. Since public discussions on N. Amherst rezoning began almost two years ago, I have supported redevelopment—if done thoughtfully and incrementally. I have advocated for two key principles.

First, I believe that we should start small and expand the new zoning districts gradually.

- The proposed new village center zoning encompasses a very large area. From the look of the maps, it appears to triple the size of the existing B-VC area. The walk from north to south would be roughly equivalent to a walk downtown from the Common to Kendrick Park. One small parcel of the overall area is expected to have approximately 100 residential units plus commercial space.
- A key principle in the Master Plan is to develop more densely on already-developed parcels. The
 proposed NAVC boundaries include undeveloped areas that abut conservation, recreation, and
 agricultural land. If we want to avoid sprawl, we should restrict the boundaries to focus initially on
 the areas that need redevelopment and in-fill. Considerable acreage in the existing village center
 core and between Sunderland and Montague Rds. should be more densely developed first.
- We cannot know all of the impacts, good and bad, of such an extensive zoning change. The Finance Committee acknowledged such uncertainty and withheld a recommendation. Optimists hope for young professionals and quaint bistros and pessimists assume more college students and liquor stores, but we do not know the effects that will occur. The uncertainty surrounding the benefits and costs warrants a more modest scale initially to enable accurate assessment and prudent planning. We should decrease the NAVC district now and expand later when the benefits become clear and associated problems are identified and addressed.
- Regardless of who moves in, there will inevitably be a large increase in residential density. Greater commercial activity is expected; both are underlying reasons for the rezoning and both contribute to an increase in traffic. To date, small steps have been proposed and nothing accomplished to guarantee necessary accommodations for the increases in traffic and ensure safety. The form-based code relates to new construction and does not obligate the town to deal with existing traffic problems in the village center or improve existing sidewalks and crosswalks or consider traffic-calming techniques. Until we ably address these concerns, we need to keep the NAVC district small.
- We need to ensure that the existing village center core is not abandoned. We should strengthen and build on the core so that it remains the foundation for future development. A large new NAVC district moves us further away from the current village center (now zoned B-VC) and does not guarantee redevelopment in the core.

Given issues regarding uncertainty of impacts, traffic, the existing village center, and undeveloped land, we need to decrease the overall size of the proposed NAVC district.

Second, we need to preserve Montague Rd. as a residential corridor north of the Mill River.

- Montague Rd. already contributes significantly to the pleasant and distinctive character of N. Amherst and does not need immediate redevelopment. Why fix what isn't broken?
- Montague Rd. is primarily a RESIDENTIAL neighborhood of historic homes and several long-time residents and families. The few very small businesses grandfathered into the R-N zoning now have minimal to no impact on traffic and daily life. Despite being a state road, the only real traffic occurs at 8 am and 5 pm when Montague and Leverett residents are commuting back and forth to Amherst. The proposed R-VC zoning allows greater density and limited mixed-use, both of which raise concerns about traffic safety, noise, and litter to name a few. To ensure the safety and positive quality of life for current residents and to preserve the character of the neighborhood (a Master Plan principle) Montague Rd. should remain R-N and provide a transition or buffer between the denser developments and the existing residential area.
- The river walk outlined in one design proposal would be a lovely addition to the village center. It is not necessary, however, to rezone the east side of Montague Rd. in order to develop a river walk. Multiple arrangements could be considered involving various property owners and the town.
- Both primary developers have land that they can redevelop without the sections on Montague Rd.
 If the new development is positive and various concerns and challenges are addressed, it would always be possible to further extend the R-VC zoning along Montague Rd. at a later date.

For these reasons and others, I believe that Article 25, as currently proposed, does not promote the strongest possible redevelopment of the N. Amherst Village Center and I do not support it as written.

I would support an amended Article 25 including the proposed amendment to:

- Remove the property west of Sunderland Rd. from the NAVC district and keep it commercial.
- Keep the east side of Montague Rd. as R-N zoning north of the Mill River.
- Keep the west side of Montague Rd. R-N north of parcel 5A-42.

In addition, I would prefer to drop the commercial property north of Cowls Rd. from the proposed NAVC district for the reasons discussed above. In that case, I would enthusiastically embrace Article 25. In the interest of working collaboratively and allowing us to move forward, however, I would also support an amended Article 25 with just the 3 changes highlighted above. I hope that you will support these changes so that we can pass Article 25 and move forward in revitalizing the North Amherst Village Center. Thank you for your consideration.