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MEMORANDUM

TO: Select Board and Town Manager  
FROM: Housing and Sheltering Committee  
RE: 2014 Annual Town Meeting Zoning Articles  
DATE: March 26, 2014

**Introduction**

There are a number of articles included in this year's Town Meeting Warrant that have an impact on the housing supply in Amherst. The Housing and Sheltering Committee, although not experts on zoning regulations, took seriously the responsibility to review and comment on these Warrant articles. At the most basic level, the committee framed these proposed zoning changes within the current context of findings and recommendations from the recently completed Housing Production Plan (HPP) and Comprehensive Market Study. These two reports have made clear that future zoning amendments should address the issues and problems identified in the reports to help increase housing opportunities in town.

**The Issues and Problems**

First, there is a shortage of affordable housing in Amherst. Low and moderate income families and individuals have difficulty finding appropriate housing. The HPP estimates that at a minimum, the Town should add approximately 50 units of affordable housing annually for the next five years, for a total of 250 ***new*** units to meet the demand and need prevalent in Amherst. Despite the Town's commitment to try and achieve this goal and maintain the State's 10 percent threshold of affordable housing units, it appears the community could be going backward, not forward. The possible loss of affordable units at Rolling Green, coupled with the loss of units at Echo Village, is part of a bigger trend that needs to be reversed.

Second, Amherst has been losing and continues to lose young families. Adults aged 26-45 and children under the age of 18 are disappearing. As stated in the HPP, using US Census information, the Town lost almost half of its family-aged population between 1990 and 2010. Amherst is slowly, but surely, becoming a community that is largely people between the ages of 18 to 25 and over 60, "losing important social and economic vitality in the decades ahead. The community can no longer afford to support the status quo, but needs to take action to affect important changes" (HPP). The median single-family home or average rental unit in Amherst is too expensive for young families whether college or university faculty, school teachers, public safety employees, other town employees, or young professionals. Not only is Amherst unaffordable for low income families, it is unaffordable for middle income families, as well.

These problems are a consequence primarily of two factors: the growth of the University of Massachusetts and the lack of growth of residential units. Housing supply has not kept pace with

demand, and neighborhoods are gradually being taken over by houses that were once occupied by families but are now rented to students. The existing zoning regulations, even though it includes specific provisions to promote smart growth development and affordable housing, has been largely unchanged since the 1970's (HPP) and has contributed significantly to holding back the growth of new housing. Whether in good economic times or bad economic times, the past thirty years have seen little increase in residential units, with much slower housing growth since 2000. However, in the past two years, Town Meeting has approved minor zoning changes to allow for increased development, but these steps are not enough to support adequate growth of affordable housing to solve the problems and issues identified in the HPP and Comprehensive Housing Market Study, or to achieve the goals of the community's Master Plan. More needs to be done.

### **Goals for Zoning Amendments and Articles**

The Housing and Sheltering Committee is aware that meeting Amherst's need for affordable housing will require a multi-pronged approach of new goals and policies as well as new construction and rehabilitation of existing units; there is no silver bullet and one zoning amendment cannot fix the problems and issues identified in the reports. With regard to affordable housing, there are two types of affordable housing that needs to be addressed—the affordable housing that meets the State's definition and can be counted toward the Town's Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI), and affordable housing for families and individuals that are not eligible for SHI units but who cannot afford to live in Amherst because of the high cost of housing. It is also important that new housing preserves the character of the Town, is located in appropriate areas, and contribute to other civic goals found in Amherst's Master Plan. In order to address the housing problems in the community the committee believes that changes to zoning regulations should meet three overarching goals:

- 1) Expand opportunities for affordable housing (ownership and rental) that meet or exceed the minimum goals outlined in the HPP;
- 2) Reverse the current demographic trends to encourage a significant increase in the population of young families; and
- 3) Expand student housing (on and off campus) with appropriate increases in amenities and services to reduce the pressure of converting owner-occupied neighborhoods to student havens.

### **Review of Zoning Amendments**

#### **Inclusionary Zoning**

The proposed inclusionary zoning bylaw would help Amherst increase the supply of SHI-eligible housing by balancing the need to encourage the development of both market rate units and affordable housing. The bylaw does so by explicitly requiring that all but the smallest new residential developments include at least 15 percent of total units (7.5 percent in the BG Zoning District) that meet the definition of affordable housing, or make a payment that will be used to develop affordable housing. It ensures that affordable housing is integrated with other types of housing throughout town.

#### **Small House/ Supplemental Apartments**

This change would promote the growth of small residential units, either freestanding or attached to an existing single-family house that could meet any of the three goals above, and could provide affordable housing to meet the various income levels in Amherst and the trend of smaller size of households. The change would apply to only one-family houses and requires that one of the units—the primary structure or supplemental apartment—be owner occupied. This allows property owners

who need or want an additional source of income to add one (and only one), small supplemental unit.

### Atkins Corner Rezoning

This change would also promote the growth of residential units that could meet any of the three goals above, and would help achieve goals of the Master Plan and HPP. It would allow more flexibility in the development of the village center with “mixed use” buildings around Atkins Farms store. For example, multistory structures with first floor businesses and residential units on the upper floor could be built.

### Conclusions

The Housing and Sheltering Committee did not vote on each individual article, but voted affirmatively to support the zoning amendments because when viewed as a suite of tools, helps accomplish many of the goals and objectives of the community. The committee found that there would be no negative impacts from the changes, rather, they all provide more opportunities to increase housing, economic development and mixed-uses. The committee knows that the proposed zoning amendments represent small steps to encourage the development of new residential units in Amherst, and that additional changes to zoning or other regulations will be necessary to continue to address the issues and problems identified in the HPP and Comprehensive Housing Market Study.

The committee believes that a vote to approve these proposed zoning changes is

- A vote to change the future of the Amherst community,
- A vote to expand access to affordable housing,
- A vote to expand access to housing appropriate for young families, and
- A vote to expand access to housing appropriate to students.

Therefore, the committee recommends approval of these proposed zoning changes.