

Guest Commentary

Being Realistic – and Honest -- about Economic Development

By Councilwoman Susan Slegel

I wish there was a magic bullet solution to filling our vacant stores and enticing more new commercial development into Yorktown. Sadly, no such magic bullet exists.

It's easy for politicians, whether in office or running for office, to label themselves "business friendly" and promise that they'll revitalize our hamlets, bring in more tax rateables and lower our taxes. But the hard truth, the indisputable truth, is that it takes more than labels and promises to fill vacant stores or attract new development.

For better or worse, like it or not, the town is only one piece in the complex mosaic that results in economic development: there's the general health of the economy; Yorktown's demographics and access to major highways; changing consumer buying habits; personal lifestyle choices, the federal tax code, business strategies, etc., etc.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying the town is powerless to promote economic development or should stand by and do nothing. Absolutely not! What I am saying, though, is that I wish politicians were honest with residents and took the time to explain the realities of what the town can and cannot do to influence economic development.

As someone who has observed and participated in the economic development process as both a resident and town official, here are just some of the tools in the economic development toolbox that Yorktown has been successfully using for the past sev-

eral years.

Comprehensive Plan and Zoning. The two go hand in hand and are the most important tools the town has at its disposal to encourage more commercial development, both in the town's existing hamlets and along its two major commercial corridors, Route 202 and Route 6. But, as we've learned in recent years, even the most business friendly Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code can only go so far: economic development takes place only when the private sector is ready, willing and able to come forward with and pursue a specific development plan.

- In 2013, the town rezoned 30 acres of the 100 acre Stateland property along Route 202 for commercial use, but we're still waiting for the property owner to come in with a site plan.

- In March, 2014, the town amended its parking and signage requirements to facilitate the upgrade of the JV Mall, No sooner was that done then Simon Properties, the mall's owner, underwent a corporate restructuring and sold the mall. The town is now waiting for the new owner to proceed with the upgrade.

In the meantime, there ARE signs of progress. The Staples Center, with the active support of both the Town Board and the Planning Board, is undergoing a major facelift and a planned expansion. (Zoning changes also enabled the lower level of the main building to attract new tenants.) A new CVS and second building is planned

across from the shopping center and indications are that as the Costco plan moves closer to getting its final approval, it will spur interest along Route 202. The Costco project will also pave the way for a potential mixed use development along Old Crompond Road between Best Plumbing and Costco.

Streamline the development approval process so businesses can open up more quickly. This is a process that started in 2010 when, as supervisor, I brought together developers and town staff and together we identified -- and implemented -- procedural changes in the approval process, procedures that continue to expedite the approval process to this day. Can more streamlining be done? As a regular attendee at the Planning Board meetings, the answer is yes, especially in the area of improving communications between various town boards.

Honesty. We need to stop blaming the town for causing delays in getting businesses open. Truth be told (and it seldom is), many of the delays are caused by the businesses and/or their architects and engineers. One business stands out as a classic example of a property owner causing his own delays by continually failing to submit a proper site plan and then, once the site plan was approved, failing to submit the proper documents to the Building Department for his building permit.

Making Yorktown a destination. That's why I helped start the Yorktown Trail Town Committee in 2014. We need to let folks

know about Yorktown's best kept secret and major asset and tourist attraction -- our network of walking, hiking and cycling trails. The all-volunteer Committee is working on a series of initiatives designed to bring people into Yorktown -- and tell them where they can spend their money once they're here. Are there more opportunities to make Yorktown a destination? Yes...which leads to...

Partner with the Chamber of Commerce and the Yorktown Small Business Association. Create more reasons for making Yorktown a destination. Sponsor joint meetings to brainstorm on issues, strategies and joint efforts. Identify problem areas for business and outline solutions. No one person or one group has all the ideas. We need to work together.

And while we're being realistic and honest, let's acknowledge what the town CAN'T do. The town can't tell a landlord who to rent to, or not rent to. Nor can the town tell a landlord to lower his or her rents. Given the tax code, some owners can actually make more money by keeping their spaces vacant. We're a free market, capitalist economy. We're not Russia. We don't tell businessmen how to run their business.

In my 45 years in Yorktown, many of them working to promote change, I've learned to be persistent, aggressive, honest, realistic, and above all, patient. Change doesn't happen overnight, especially when it involves as many different moving parts as economic development.