

A 'critical opportunity' to determine the scope of a town

By Gina Macris/Journal Staff Writer

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PORTSMOUTH -- What do residents want to buy locally? How far are they willing to drive for a good selection of blue jeans or refrigerators?

What limitations should be put on the size and aesthetics of commercial developments? How can the rights of commercial property owners be protected?

Officials of the town and the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission will ask those questions of the public during a brainstorming session tomorrow night at the Senior Center on Bristol Ferry Road.

In a statement, Town Administrator Robert G. Driscoll said the workshop will be a "critical opportunity" for residents to voice opinions on "where the town should head, so everyone with an idea should definitely plan to be there."

Plans for the event grew out of the controversy over a recent proposal by the Target Corp. to build a 146,500-square-foot department store on West Main Road at Union Street.

The company withdrew its request for a special-use permit, required of any commercial development bigger than 5,000 square feet, rather than challenge a moratorium against any new large-scale retail operations.

The ban, first enacted by the council in June and later extended until the end of January, allows the town time to consider changes to the commercial zoning ordinance, which all agree did not anticipate the "big box" development that the Target proposal represented.

Tomorrow's discussion will be the first event in overall review, Crosby said yesterday.

The evening will begin at 6:30 with coffee and dessert.

After introductory remarks by Driscoll and Tina Dolen of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, the audience will view photographs of about "40 different types of development" and be asked to rate each, according to Crosby.

The exercise will "get the juices flowing," he said, and help begin formulating "an idea of that the like or don't like."

Then the audience will break up into groups of 8 to 10 people each to discuss the impact of large-scale commercial development in greater detail, he said.

Facilitators, including Driscoll, Dolen, Town Planner Robert Gilstein, William Clark, the director of economic development, and Crosby, will guide the small-group discussions.

Before the evening is over, each group will be asked to summarize five key points and report back to the entire assembly, Crosby said.

He said town officials plan to "compile the information as best we can to see what the community wants and see if the language of the Comprehensive Plan reflects that."

The Comprehensive Plan is due for an update before the end of the year regardless of the debate over commercial development, Crosby said.

In the second phase of the review, Crosby said, he plans to simulate the review process of a large-scale proposal, such as the one submitted by Target earlier this year, to determine whether existing ordinances governing the special-use permit and the planned unit development are adequate.

He said the panel holding the mock review would include representatives from the Planning, Zoning, and Design Review boards, as well as Planning Department staff, local lawyers, and citizens -- a total of 15 to 18 people.

The review would be open to the public, Crosby said, but he has yet to select members of the panel or schedule the sessions.

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