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GAZETTE

Route 9 rezoned for business use

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[Originally published on: Friday, November 30, 2007]

AMHERST - Town Meeting ended Wednesday after approving the rezoning of the land just south of the intersection of Route 9 and South East Street to promote business development.

The vote was 115-53, achieving the two-thirds majority needed for zoning changes by four votes.

The change was designed to provide services and employment within walking distance of numerous residences and apartment complexes.

It was part of a series of initiatives, which Town Meeting mostly approved, to broaden the tax base by promoting economic development.

The landowner most affected is Amir Mikhchi, owner of the nearby Auto Express and Reliance Auto.

He bought five houses on South East Street that he rents to students, and he wants to construct buildings there for retail and office uses.

Mikhchi said the area is not suitable for residences because of the traffic and proximity to Route 9.

"I am a local business owner," he said. "If you want to see how much I care about this town, look at Auto Express. It's not a cheap cinder-block building painted blue and yellow. It is a charming building."

Robert Wellman of Precinct 7 said the design of Auto Express is in keeping with the nearby Florence Savings Bank, while the existing houses on South East Street are an "eyesore."

Robert Phillips of Precinct 8 said the area between the intersection and Colonial Village is not appropriate for a residential area.

"It's not a family-friendly, walk-your-kids neighborhood and won't be anytime soon," he said. "Let's get some tax money (from it)."

James Oldham of Precinct 5 defended an alternative proposal that would have allowed more intense residential use while restricting some business uses and providing a buffer between residential and business areas.

"(Our plan) balances opportunities for development with greater assurance for replacement of housing and prevents the spread of commercial strip development," he said.

Carol Gray of Precinct 7 said it is "dangerous to rezone in the interests of one person." She said the zoning change would cause the loss of moderate-priced housing.

Mikhchi said after the vote that he will now seek financing for his project. "I'm glad I'm in Amherst," he said.

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