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Framingham: Residents discuss Saxonville's future

FRAMINGHAM – Saxonville residents on Thursday said they hope for a more walkable village center with restaurants, more river access and new uses for vacant properties.

A large group of neighbors came together to share ideas during a public workshop looking at strategic economic development in the village commercial center.

Planning consultant Steve Cecil with The Cecil Group said the village was built on innovation and ingenuity around the historic Saxonville Mills, but times have changed.

“We need new kinds of ingenuity to think about what they’re going to be in the 21st century,” he told the residents at Cameron Middle School.

From the mills to what happens when the McAuliffe branch library soon moves to Nobscot, residents thought about all the current problems and opportunities for Saxonville in the future when they broke into smaller groups.

For many, seeing the old State Lumber site redeveloped is a big issue.

Residents said they’re concerned developer Tony Kwan has left it sitting vacant for so long in such poor condition. “Deplorable was the phrase used in our group,” said Josh Fiala, project manager with The Cecil Group.

Town Manager Bob Halpin told the crowd he doesn’t know when Kwan will get to work.

“I think we’re concerned that nothing is happening by way of development,” he said.

The town’s Economic Development and Industrial Corp. brought in The Cecil Group as its planning consultant as it studies ways to spur investment in both Saxonville and Nobscot. Nobscot residents had their say at a public workshop on Monday, concerned mostly about the largely vacant Nobscot Shopping Center.

For Saxonville, the fact its village center is fragmented adds to the challenge.

In his small discussion group, Chuck Samiotes of Samiotes Consultants, a civil engineering firm in the village, said the center needs some anchor or magnet tenants to draw people.

“One is a decent restaurant,” he said.

“Or a really good coffee shop,” resident Mary Stasik added.

“We haven’t had a decent restaurant in that area since I can remember,” said Ricki Campbell, a Saxonville resident for 50 years.

Residents considered that people now can’t really park and walk from store to store, since there aren’t many. Many people said parking is a problem.

Residents said they like the historic buildings, including the Athenaeum Hall, which is now empty, the tight community and amenities such as trails and waterways.

Some hoped for better access to the Sudbury River that flows through the village.

“Someone said you can’t access the water from Water Street,” said Erika Oliver Jerram, the town’s deputy director of Community and Economic Development, who guided one group discussion.

Cecil said the conversation about what works and doesn’t in Saxonville is important for planning ahead.

“If you know where you’re headed you actually can get there,” he said.

He said the study sets the stage for historic preservation and possible change. It will look, in part, at how to meet a burgeoning need for rental housing, mainly by people under 35 and over 55 who want to live in a walkable place, Cecil said.

As part of the economic development study, a second round of public meetings on the Nobscot and Saxonville village commercial centers is planned for April.

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