



Lexington Center Business Forum

Shaping Lexington Center: A Discussion on Issues Facing our Center
Wednesday, September 30, 2015, 7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

MEETING NOTES

The Chamber of Commerce sponsored a business forum to discuss various issues affecting our center. This forum was held on Wednesday, September 30, 2015 at the Lexington Depot. Pam Shadley of Shadley Associates, was the Moderator and gave a brief introduction. She stated that the “Chamber’s mission is to promote and develop a diverse local economy and overall prosperity within the Lexington, business community, so as to support an enhanced quality of life for the town and its people”. The Chamber’s goal for the forum was to develop mutual understandings of the many issues affecting our center and to generate ideas for our Center’s success. The Chamber identified five panelists from different entities in town, a Town representative, a business community representative, a Lexington Center Committee representative, a restaurant representative and a landlord representative. The Chamber asked our panelists to offer their point of view, share their experiences in Lexington and to address questions from business owners, landlords and residents.

The forum began with an introduction of the panelists, who gave a brief description of who they were, whom they were representing and their ideas for a positive change. Introductions:

The first speaker was **Fred Johnson**. Fred was invited to join this panel to represent the Center Committee and to provide an overall perspective of our Center. Fred has been a resident of Lexington for 21 years. A retired publishing industry executive, he has long been an active volunteer in town affairs– as a Town Meeting member, member of the Meriam Hill Association board, chair of the Lexington Symphony board, member of the LexMedia board, member of the Center Committee, and all the committees charged with the renovation of Cary Hall. He has a special interest in initiatives that support the vitality of the Center.

The second speaker was **Filippo deMagistris**, who provided his perspective on restaurants in Lexington Center. With his two brothers, Filippo owns and manages il Casale here in Lexington, il Casale Belmont, and Restaurant Dante in Cambridge. Originally from Belmont, Filippo moved to Lexington 3 years ago with his wife and his two children, ages 3 and 6. As one of our newer Center establishments, Filippo can share his perspective on why he chose Lexington and what his experiences have been in setting up and running a restaurant.

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The third speaker was **Kathy Fields**. Kathy has been a Lexington resident for 21 years. In 1994 she purchased CRAFTY YANKEE from another local resident and has operated the store for the past 21 years. Crafty Yankee is known as the "community giving store," both for their unique gift selections and for their charitable programs sponsored during the holidays. Kathy has been a town meeting member for the past 5 years, and previously served on the Chamber of Commerce Board and on the Center Committee. She is also a member of the Lexington Retailers Association, an important part of our Center.

Representing the landlords on our panel is **Jeff Lyon**. Jeff is the third generation owner of W.H. Lyon Real Estate, founded in Lexington in 1935. Born in Lexington, he has been both an observer and participant of the growth in Lexington. Currently serving on the Lexington Center Committee, he has also served on other town boards here and in Concord. He brings the perspective of a third generation owner/ landlord of Lexington Center properties.

Lastly, we invited **Melisa Tintocalis**. Melisa is the Economic Development Director for the Town of Lexington. Melisa's career integrates urban planning policy, real estate economics, and economic development. Since coming to Lexington from Somerville several years ago, Melisa has spearheaded the Center's parking management plan, is currently managing the Visitor Center and integrating our visitor/tourism economy with other Town activities, has created the highly successful parklet in front of Ride Studio Café, and is currently working to enhance Grain Mill Alley as part of our public open space.

Fred Johnson went on to describe the Center Committee and their responsibilities. The Center Committee has 11 volunteers appointed by the Selectmen to advise them on matters related to keeping the Center alive for commerce, culture, government, and gathering. Members include residents near the Center, center business people, realtors, landlords, architects, planners, lawyers. He explained in his words what the Committee's mission has to be in order to bridge multiple interests. The mission is to try to facilitate discussion among all the committees in town with any interest in the Center... trees, sidewalks, bikeway friends, transportation, disabilities, along with town staff and agencies like the planning board and historic district commission.

The Center Committee has had some successes, for example changes in zoning regulations to allow uses previously prohibited such as fitness centers, and residences. They mounted the two-year campaign which successfully allowed alcohol to be served in restaurants with fewer than 100 seats. They have been working with planning board to address the growth of quasi-office uses displacing stores – primarily banks but also realtors. There is a moratorium in effect on banks but it expires June 30, 2016 and the Committee is expressing interest in making it long term.

To improve density, The Center Committee took an article to a recent Town Meeting to increase the allowed heights of buildings in the CBD to reach at least the same 40+ ft allowed in residential zones. The proposal failed to get the two thirds votes required... in part, Fred believes, because some of the visual presentation implied a canyon-like look, and because the need for parking associated with additional square footage was thought to be daunting to prospective developers.

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The Center Committee took a stance with the current parking issues, by suggesting to have improved connections from the bikeway and depot parking lot to Mass Ave's north side. It is engaged in work to design a new parklet and passage at Grain Mill Alley. It has begun implementing the two-year parking management plan ("We've added parking behind NStar and on Mass Ave between the Muzzey condos and Woburn St and the new meters being previewed now are part of this effort.").

The Center Committee gathered information by surveying residents, conducting a major two-day charette, and attending workshops on keeping downtowns vital, developing meetings of business people and landlords to explore common interests. Today's chamber-initiated event is a good example of public engagement in building policies that keep the Center alive and make it better.

Filippo deMagistris gave an explanation of why he chose Lexington over Weston and Concord. His restaurant in Belmont was already a great success. His business plan was to have Belmont and Lexington complement each other. He explained how he needed to come up with a "smart business plan" and that included locations and demographics.

The hurdles that Filippo and his brothers faced pertained to lease and rent structure. They had a hard time moving forward with the permitting process, so much that he described the procedure to be daunting. He was able to get support from the Town's Economic Development Director, which made the process a bit easier.

His suggestion to help local restaurants thrive was simple: by patronizing them more often. He asked everyone to go online and write reviews. Since the world is so focused on the web, the best way to support local restaurants, besides patronizing them, would be to get online and write great reviews. People from other towns and locals all read reviews. He discussed not only one site but also several sites, stay positive and endorse your local restaurants.

Kathy Fields shared information about Crafty Yankee and how she has been successful for 21 years. Her observation in the last 21 years in retail since she took over was that small independent retailers have a hard time following the changes and making immediate adjustments.

She believes that there is not enough shopping variety. That's why she opened and ran another store, "Small indulgences," that had different products than Crafty Yankee and a different format. She believes there needs to be a balance of mix, for example a restaurant needs enough seats to accommodate for their customers, but those seats also need to turn. There needs to be a balance, just like if there are more retailers there would be more customers, and if there are more customers than there will be more retailers.

She believes that the general public has a misunderstanding of retail stores; they don't understand what goes with running a small business. From a lack of understanding; a proprietor has to do the buying, maintaining the inventory and evolve the inventory to follow the trend in order to purchase new inventory. A proprietor has to make the entire inventory investment up front to open a store.

Another issue she noted was rent. Rent is consistently going up and rent is a percentage of sales and payroll. The more sales go up the more payroll goes down.

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Her suggestion were to buy locally made products, understand the price point and carry a variety of products. More residents need to shop locally, eat locally and use local services. Balance and mix.

Kathy touched on the bank issues; her point of view is that it's neither good nor bad. Without the banks people would go elsewhere but if there are too many then there is not place to shop nor storefronts to attract customers.

She explained Lexington Retailers Association: their main focus is Discovery Day, Halloween and now the Holiday tree lighting. They have recently been promoting shop local and a few other discount ideas.

Jeff Lyons explained his background as a third generation landlord and resident. He made an observation about Lexington's restaurant and retail industry. He noticed that Lexington retail industry was booming when Hanscom was doing well and they sent a lot of people into town for lunch. Once that disappeared so did customers.

He explained what landlords look for in tenants. A landlord wants stability and a way to thrive in town. They focus on business plans; there are many "good ideas" but are the good ideas economically lacking? Will the good ideas make money? All businesses take time to become profitable. It takes a full year of business to make money. He expressed a concern with tenant and retailers, landlords looking for business to pay rent, along with succeeding. Closing Valentines and Elephant's truck was based on age of existence and time.

He believes the hurdles of new small businesses coming to town are that they need to hit too many deadlines without guidelines. Hearing from new tenants that they don't understand the process nor how many departments and commissions they will need to appear before. There is so much involved with a new retail store, you have to have the space and inventory but the HDC takes a long time for signage and you have windows in which you can attract customers and tenants. Most people will look for rental space in the month of February and March. What tenants are willing to pay in taxes, retail lease, triple net, by comparison with Concord is that Concord is half the cost of Lexington.

Melisa Tintocalis addressed the Town's desire to help new businesses come to town, become established, and succeed. What to look at: changes in consumer tastes, changes in demographics, land use policy changes.

Questions new businesses ask: Is the use allowed? Is the site in the CB District? HDC? Is there enough parking? What are the parking regulations? There may be obstacles in the small sizes of available space. Melisa doesn't actually have any regulatory teeth. She can help by identifying issues, nudging and re-assessing, and addressing guidance and changes. She also works with planning department.

Melisa works on how to make areas successful such as by increasing foot traffic, plus interrelated issues- food, traffic, parking, and offerings. She works on parking and parking prices and issues. She believes there should be a help packet in place: booklet on costs, difficulties in starting a business but who the call and how to get help.

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Introduction of Innessa Manning of the Lexington Center Alliance:

She spoke of the density in town, and how we need more density. She asked if the tax rate in the Center could be lowered or a split rate be equal with residential. What do other towns do? She suggested dedicated employee parking in the center. She brought up the bank moratorium to see what special permits there are for banks and chains. She made a suggestions to expedite the permitting process for retailers. She asked how we can make the Center better.

The panelists answered with:

Fred- rents, split tax might be interesting, could there be a separate tax related to density? Take initiative to see if we can come up with approach for town meeting.

Filippo- expedite the permit process, make process simpler. It is daunting but simplify it. Consumers should promote and control online reviews. Consumers should review businesses online for a positive effect on local businesses.

Kathy- Conversation about taxes is good. Work with landlords to identify issues and shared goals/solutions. Each landlord has their own issues based on their situation.

Jeff- discuss the real estate tax, maybe it is reduced and savings passed on to tenant. Taxes are too high. Gross rent not paying full freight tax. Create a group to look at this.

Melisa- expedited retail program with Center Committee would be good. Town is going through a re-organization, the permit reviewing process will go to assistant town manager. All permits of land use will be reporting to one person.

At the end of the forum, the Moderator asked for a **brainstorming session** from the panelists and audience, with people identifying ideas that could help Lexington Center. Here are the responses:

General:

- ✚ Look at the tax rates to see if split rates would benefit Lexington Center
- ✚ Prepare a Manual for New Businesses, that identifies the process of approvals
- ✚ Prepare a Master Plan for the Center, that could be a guide into the future, and against which success could be measured.
- ✚ Add a Dog Park
- ✚ Make it easy for residents to get involved
- ✚ Give residence guidelines, map of who to contact when and about what for Center issues
- ✚ Address the scope, jurisdiction and meeting frequency of the Historic Districts Commission. Is it appropriate? Can it be made more efficient for businesses?
- ✚ Establish electronic boards with town information in the Center
- ✚ Have public restrooms in the Center
- ✚ Move police department outside of the Center so more retail space and parking is available

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Temporary/Seasonal/ Events:

- ✚ Outside ice skating rink where farmers market is
- ✚ More antique shows; create diverse programs year-round
- ✚ Centralize events calendar- town, chamber, public, private...Can there be one location to look for all event information?
- ✚ More live outdoor music
- ✚ Line Adirondack chairs in the BOA Alley
- ✚ Program events to draw people to the east end of the Center

Businesses:

- ✚ Be able to buy fruit in the center
- ✚ Create a seasonal Rooftop Cafe
- ✚ Salad Bar restaurant
- ✚ Bakery
- ✚ Encourage Wilson's Farm to open up a small place in center of town: fresh fruits, vegetables and flowers
- ✚ Incubator space -home to small, new businesses
- ✚ Temporary retail businesses in vacant spaces. Pop-ups?
- ✚ Encourage people to write online reviews
- ✚ Buy local vs. online

Laws:

- ✚ Use the temporary moratorium to create a permanent moratorium for Banks and Real Estate (ie limit office use on first floor)
- ✚ NO Grandfathering Banks and Real Estates

Infrastructure/Parking/Transportation:

- ✚ Must have universal design for all Center areas
- ✚ Support the streetscape project for improved safety and aesthetics
- ✚ Create structured parking
- ✚ Free parking in the Center
- ✚ Centralize bicycle parking
- ✚ Offsite employee parking
- ✚ Access parking without going to Mass Ave: open up Meriam Street parking and close depot entrance
- ✚ Increase number and frequency of express routes, and all bus routes
- ✚ Restaurants in Lexington could invest in a pick -up service for those who can and cannot drive, that will alleviate parking stresses, join together with other restaurants
- ✚ Discount for bicyclists

The Forum was concluded with the shared desire of establishing procedures for addressing these goals.