The Topsfield Select Board

West Common St

Topsfield MA 01983

Dear Board:

Managing a town’s affordable housing stock is a key element to the successful administration of all towns in the Commonwealth and should be included in the master plan of each town. We live in a state where affordable housing is a key reason that people are leaving Massachusetts or businesses are resistant to locate here and this will impact state’s future from an economic standpoint as well as a social one. This has been a subject much discussed and debated with the conclusion that Massachusetts needs to create more affordable housing thus the legislation’s push on 40B projects whether welcome or not to local communities.

 As our community is now in the process for reviewing and revising our “master plan” I am advocating the re-establishment of an affordable housing committee (AHC) in town which can help by being proactive in this regard. For towns, like Topsfield, that want to remain rural in character and avoid developers gaining ability to force an unwanted 40B project on the town, managing and encouraging certain affordable housing projects is necessary and critical to the overall well-being of the community.

An AHC can seek opportunities for the town to increase the number of affordable units in areas and in ways where the impact is minimal and benefit is maximum for the town’s character and economy, respectively. A town’s vibrancy and its economic well-being is best served by having a diverse and intergenerational resident population. The development of Amberwood Village on Rowley Bridge road was such a project and was done with the assistance of the then Affordable Housing Committee of which I was chair. We assisted builder John Sanidas in creating a community that is both attractive and beneficial and yet adds living units to the town’s affordable housing stock. Finding such opportunities and encouraging “friendly” development is the best way to achieve our goals as a town and should an integral part of the master plan.

Other opportunities may also be available. An Affordable Housing committee can recommend to the town to buy and manage currently existing units in town and turn them into affordable units in order to add to the affordable housing numbers. This demonstrates the town’s commitment to creating more affordable units and helps us reach the standard set by the state to insulate against unwanted 40B projects that may negatively impact the essential elements of our community. Such efforts would require working with developers and perhaps creating funds for acquisition of existing units in town or converting unused space in town. This proactive method can be seen to be less invasive in the short term and more welcoming to the town’s population in the long run. This, naturally, depends on creative methods and managing any opportunities that may be present. Creating a mixed-use space in the old highway garage space was an idea once discussed when the AHC existed and should be revisited now. Naturally any and all ideas would be presented at the annual Town Meeting for residents consideration and approval by vote.

While discussing the subject of affordable housing I would also like to comment on a current project that is in development here in Topsfield, the Emerson Fields. This seems, in my opinion, to also benefit the town. In full disclosure I am a member of the Church that is selling the land to the Caleb Foundation, which seeks to develop the property and put 45 senior affordable housing units on the property and I understand that there is some resistance in town to the project. But as strictly a citizen of Topsfield I believe this is an overall benefit to the town for several reasons some of which I have already outlined in this letter. First, this project for Emerson fields importantly adds to the town’s affordable housing stock with minimum impact on our schools and gets us withing striking distance of achieving the necessary level of units that the state requires of all communities who wish to void unwanted 40B projects. Such an opportunity, while not ideal because it does not create the necessary number of units, does help us greatly and shows us moving toward such a goal. Second, this project adds numbers to the demographic population of elder citizens that is leaving Topsfield because they feel it is too expensive to live here. The vibrancy of our community is dependent upon having an intergeneration mix of residents and this is the type of opportunity that we should encourage for our community.

I understand that the Council on Aging has had a mixed reaction thinking that it will increase the number of clients it must serve and they do not have the present resources to do so. I see it as an opportunity to make the COA a more robust and meaningful element in our community and create an opportunity to expand services for senior citizens. For a town that spends millions on educating the younger generation to add funding for senior citizens is not only good but also adds focus to how disproportionate our town budget is in serving all of the residents of our community. Lastly, the Emerson Field project adds real estate tax revenue without adding young people to the school population and becomes the type of additional revenue that we should welcome in balancing our budget.

In closing, I realize that I began by advocating for the reinstating of the AHC and gave reasons for doing so. I may have diverted to a current project under consideration by the Town but did so to demonstrate an approach to affordable housing that needs to be encouraged by the Select Board. It is a proactive approach that seeks to weigh the pro and cons of our present dilemma: needing to add more affordable housing without impacting the rural character of our community. Such a goal needs to be addressed as part of the master plan currently under consideration and can not be achieved by reacting to project that may be imposed on the community but rather cooperatively working with those who want to help us in achieving such a goal.

 Thank you for your consideration and I welcome the opportunity to discuss our Town’s need of affordable housing with you at a future time. And yes, I am willing to serve should you create an Affordable Housing Committee for the purposes outlined.

Sincerely,

Stephen Whelan

Cc to ZBA Topsfield