

## Packed house airs thoughts on Fox Hill proposal

By Stephanie Grinnell | Aug 29, 2013

CAMDEN — Washington Street conference room was filled beyond capacity Aug. 29 as Camden Planning Board members accepted public comment regarding a special exception zoning request for the Fox Hill property on Bay View Street.

Proponents of the special exception once again presented information about plans for the property and cited staffing levels, projected traffic impacts and other aspects of the planned alcohol rehabilitation facility.

### How zoning works

Planning Board Vice Chairman Lowrie Sargent said, based on feedback from the public in recent communications to the planning board, there continues to be confusion about how the zoning process works.

He said the first step is someone presenting a rezoning idea, which is followed by discussions between the proponent and planning board members. If the planning board agrees the proposal has merit, those discussions are followed by public input meetings to weigh public sentiment. (The Aug. 29 meeting about Fox Hill was considered a public input meeting, Sargent noted.)

After receipt of public input — sometimes more than one meeting — additional discussions take place between proponents and planning board members. At least two public hearings are hosted by the planning board once specific and exact language for the change has been established.

The planning board then votes whether to send the rezoning proposal to the select board. Selectmen also hosts public hearings before voting to include, or not include, the issue on the town warrant. “Ultimately, the voters decide,” Sargent said.

More than a dozens residents spoke against the special exception while a few spoke in favor or were neutral. Planning Board Vice Chairman Lowrie Sargent said the board received about 35 letters and emails regarding Fox Hill in the past two weeks as well, all of which are available for public viewing at the town office and are anticipated to be posted on the town website.

Town Attorney William Kelly reminded those in attendance the purpose of the planning board at this point is to consider the amendment to zoning.

“This is not an application to run the facility,” he said. “This is really about the language in the zoning amendment.”

Nearly everyone agreed on the idea of a high-end rehabilitation facility but those against the proposal cited the Coastal-Residential zone as inappropriate; some noted more than 80 properties in town within an acceptable zone.

As the nearly 3-hour discussion addressing Fox Hill wound down, a site walk of the property was set for 3 p.m. Sept. 18. The site walk will be open to the public. The following day, Sept. 19, planning board members will again meet with the Fox Hill team to further discuss language as well as any issues uncovered during the site walk.

While contract zoning was discussed Aug. 15, Kelly said Aug. 29 there are no plans to pursue that option.

“I don’t think that process is something this board will be entertaining,” he said, after advising meeting attendees and planning board members, “don’t worry about it.”

During the public comment portion of the meeting, Code Enforcement Officer Steve Wilson was notified by Fire Chief Chris Farley the conference room had exceeded capacity; but the meeting continued uninterrupted.

“I think it’s an absolute crime to change the zoning,” Camden resident Felicity Farrell said. “...I feel like it’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” She said the “idea is great but it’s the wrong location.”

Some speakers opposed to the special exception zoning change noted the neighborhood feel in the area, while others pointed out Fox Hill has been for years used as a pseudo-commercial property.

“Change has already come to that property,” Camden resident Meg Sideris said. “...Zoning is catching up with reality when you think about what the next use should be.”

Former owner Charles Cawley said he lived at Fox Hill for 22 years and felt a special exception to allow a rehabilitation facility would represent a “pretty significant change to the character of the town over time.”

“I guess I’m against it and I have a hard time with that because I’m for making a living wherever you can,” he concluded.

Those in favor of the special exception noted McLean Hospital’s reputation as well as the need for rehabilitation facilities. McLean Hospital, which is affiliated with Harvard Medical School, is the anticipated long-term tenant of Fox Hill, according to proponents.

Chestnut Street resident David Hague said it is his understanding there will not be treatment programs made available to lower-income people, in part because McLean is a for-profit business.

“I’m a nurse and substance abuse treatment is very important to me,” he said.

Other close neighbors of the property, including Dyke Messler, encouraged subdivision of the property rather than development into a rehabilitation facility, citing a greater opportunity for property tax income for the town.

A number of questions from both the public and planning board members were directed at Princeton, Mass., resident James LaChance and Alan Sentkowski, a Princeton, Mass., former selectman. Another rehabilitation facility operated by McLean called Fernside is located in Princeton. Questions ranged from traffic impact to community presence of the facility as well as privacy of those treated. Because Fernside is a nonprofit, it was allowed to locate in a residential area of Princeton, the men said, agreeing there has been no negative impact on the community in the seven years the facility has existed.

Long-time land use attorney Cliff Goodall spoke on behalf of the Fox Hill team and noted the proposal is to attach a special exception to the property, not to rezone.

“This is a residential facility in a residential zone,” he said, adding a special exception permit also must be secured.

Goodall extended the invitation for the planning board to visit Fox Hill. “Words can’t really describe what Fox Hill is like,” he said.