

Protect the coop

It was expected that Fox Hill Investors would continue to seek exception zoning. No matter to them that the town of Camden and citizens have already been forced to invest a ridiculous amount of time to debate this issue. To the Fox Hill Investors, a 4-1 vote by the Selectmen was just a bump in the road. They clearly want to protect their investment, and are not concerned about becoming my unwanted neighbor.

I expect the 279 signatures to be obtained and measure to be placed on the ballot, however with a June election, the voting "snow birds" will have returned and expanded our flock. We will protect our Chicken Coop from the self-centered Foxes.

Sincerely, Dave Bowles

Objections to editorial

We are writing to object to the opinion piece published in the Camden Herald on February 13 regarding the Fox Hill proposal. It is clear that the editors have a bias in favor of rezoning the property. While they are of course entitled to their opinion, to couch the debate in terms of voters' rights is irresponsible and demonstrates that the editors have no understanding of the right to vote, the purpose of zoning and the comprehensive plan.

In 2005, all citizens of Camden DID vote on whether allowing commercial activity in the Coastal Residential Zone was a good idea, and the vote was a resounding "No." They did this by enacting the most recent Comprehensive Plan, which Camden is required to amend every 10 years or so. The Comprehensive Plan is only voted on once a decade because it is supposed to represent the town's long-term goals with regard to how it will operate, grow and prosper. It is not meant to be hacked away at piece by piece, property by property, or amended at the town's leisure. It certainly is not meant to be disregarded whenever someone wants to make money. It is a long-term contract among all citizens of a town that protects ALL of them from short-term impulses and unwise decisions. It is part of the town's social fabric.

The residents living in the Coastal Residential Zone should be as protected against commercial development in their area as everyone else who lives in a residential neighborhood; the Comprehensive Plan provides that protection. The Selectmen recognized that in their decision. Contrary to the opinion piece, the Select Board has not taken away anyone's right to vote. The Board only stated the obvious: the Comprehensive Plan does not allow for commercial operations in that neighborhood.

The Camden Herald's failure to recognize that this is a zoning issue, not a "voters' rights" issue, is a profound lapse in judgment.

Jeff and Deb Dodge

Camden Herald and Neutrality?

I read the February 13 Editorial with great dismay, not because the Camden Herald expressed an opinion contrary to our Select Board's informed decision about the proposed Fox Hill zoning change, but by the insulting and disrespectful tone.

Camden's respected Select Board did not make a decision to deny town residents a chance to vote, but rather they performed their duty to enforce our already voted-upon Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Laws. The long view is taken precisely to avoid impulsive changes, such as some of the unenforceable lines that were proposed for this zoning change.

You may disagree with the Select Board's decision, but that does not render their decision wrong! They acted to protect the welfare of all Camden citizens, including everyone's right to conduct business in our business zones, and for all of us to live without threat from commercial development in our established residential neighborhoods.

As representatives in the field of news coverage you must rise to the highest standard of professionalism, lest your reporting will lose credibility.

Sincerely, Dorie Klein

A rebuttal to Klein

Editor's note: The following letter is a rebuttal to the above letter authored by Dorie Klein and submitted to Publisher Reade Brower.

Dear Dorie;

Thank you for your letter to the editor. We appreciate hearing from readers, whether they agree with us, or not.

I just reread the editorial and I find it, like your letter to the editor, respectful and clear. I see no “insulting or disrespectful tone” used so perhaps you might enlighten me and expand upon that observation. I think where we part ways is merely in what we believe. It is a newspapers job to report factually when reporting on the story; I think all stories regarding Fox Hill have had integrity and fact reporting at their core.

On the other hand, a newspapers job, like our selectmen, is to take stands and we do that on the editorial page. Nothing underhanded or transparent about it. Rather, this allows us a forum to dissect what is happening in our communities and spark the discussion. This is what newspapers of record do.

If I could summarize your opinion; I think it is that you believe it is the selectmen’s job to protect us from ourselves because we don’t have the time (and reading between the lines, perhaps the intelligence) to, as citizens, do the research for ourselves.

I agree with you that the Board “acted to protect the welfare of the Camden community.” Where we can agree to disagree is the philosophical argument that in a democracy, we should all have the right to vote when an important issue like this arises and not let five people decide our fate.

While I realize we elected this board to serve us, I think they better serve us by giving guidance on what we are voting for, and how they think we should vote. You might have had a unanimous vote on this particular issue as one of the selectman in the minority that voted “ought to go to voters” stated that he leans against the proposed zoning amendment.

In the end, discussion is good. I am left wondering if you would have felt the same way if the board had decided to allow this amendment because of positive community economic impact rather than give it to the voters of Camden to decide.

This is bigger than you and I, and in the opinion of this newspaper, bigger than the five person Board of Selectmen who did an outstanding job putting a light on this over the past months, while guiding the discussions in public forum.

Keep the conversation going; Onward!

Respectfully, Reade Brower
Publisher of Camden Herald, Courier-Gazette and The Republican Journal

Editorial off the mark

I believe that the Camden-Herald’s Editorial Board erred in its February 13th piece entitled “An Anti-climatic End?” by confusing issues—voters’ rights, the role of the Select Board, the rationale for their votes, and the legality of FHRE’s request to rezone the Fox Hill property. They created a rambling, misleading editorial. Let me consider each separately.

First, voters’ rights: The Selectmen did not take away anyone’s right to vote. They thought the proposal was a bad idea and voted against it, which is their job as our elected representatives. If 279 registered voters don’t like the decision, they are free to file a petition for the issue to appear on the June ballot. Elected representatives should not be chided for arriving at a decision; that is what we elect them to do.

Secondly, if the staff at Camden Herald are unclear why the Selectmen voted as they did, I feel compelled to ask, “Did they watch the meeting?” Four Selectmen stated their views quite clearly, articulating that they found it to be spot zoning, illegal, and not allowed by Camden’s comprehensive plan. I think their vote represented the majority of citizens who spoke that evening. Most speakers in favor of the rezone were paid out-of-towners, not Camden citizens who will be left holding the bag should McLean bow out.

Lastly, the question of legality in FHRE’s request. Though “Town Attorney Bill Kelly has repeatedly said, in his legal opinion, the wording is not a case of spot zoning,” several other reputable attorneys disagree. The recent finding by a Superior Court judge in Portland on a very similar case certainly suggests that were the Fox Hill question sent to litigation, a similar finding of illegality would likely result on the same grounds—that the rezone is not allowed by our state-approved comprehensive plan.

I encourage the editors at the Camden Herald to strive toward more objectivity and fact-checking in future opinion pieces.

Robert P. Collins

Longer-term implications

The precedent that would be established by allowing any spot zoning in a residential zone would change the protection and value of residential real estate and thereby alter the very fabric of our community.

Let's be clear about the longer-term implications of violating our residential zoning ordinance. Legally, a town granting spot zoning in a residential zone for one commercial drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility, cannot deny anyone else who wishes an exception, for almost any use. The Federal Housing Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act forces a municipality to treat all applications equally. Citizens before considering this zoning change further should ask themselves, "How would I feel if this proposal were placing a 24/7 commercial business next to my residence?" It is an unwanted intrusion to the affected neighbors whether on Bay View Street or Pearl Street.

I am a strong supporter of growth, and along with others welcome the opportunity to evaluate new commercial development to our town; however, commercial business belongs in approved commercial zones, not forced upon residential neighborhoods.

This issue is much, much larger than one property on Bay View Street; it is nothing less than a conversation about what we wish for Camden's future: to continue as a desirable place to live, or to turn into a small city of mixed-use areas. I hope we remain the charming town by the sea that welcomes newcomers, long-time residents, and visitors, and that these unique qualities will be preserved.

Sincerely, Philip Fowler

What about property values?

Much has been written on the issues surrounding Fox Hill, on almost every conceivable argument, pro and con, to the possibility of rezoning a property for a McLean rehabilitation hospital. But a topic that is perhaps most important of all has received scant attention — the impact on our property values.

We are all very eager for a more robust local economy and more jobs, but let's not lose sight of how critical it is to protect the value of our single largest asset: our homes. Many of us count on our home values as collateral for college loans, as financial security, as a way to fund retirement. We simply assume that our houses will retain their value should we wish or need to sell them.

I fear that allowing a drug rehabilitation facility to open in the heart of our residential area threatens the stability of Camden's property values, not necessarily the one McLean has proposed, but the others that will inevitably follow. Let's be honest: potential buyers do not look favorably on drug addicts as neighbors. Nor do they wish to invest their life savings in a home, or neighborhood, that is open to hospitals, clinics, or rehab centers. I'm frankly worried about Pandora's Box. If we allow this one exception, it won't be an exception for long.

If you doubt the very serious downside of altering our zoning to allow rehab clinics, I encourage you to visit: responsiblezoning.weebly.com/national where 37 links take you to unsettling news accounts from communities across the country struggling with the chaos in their previously tranquil neighborhoods, towns and cities. It will scare you. And if you are tempted by the, "Well that won't happen here in lovely Camden" mentality, note that 26 local realtors have warned us of this danger in their December 12th letter to the Pen Bay Pilot. There they state, "People purchase homes in Camden because they appreciate the character and quality of our community. One of the primary purposes of the zoning ordinance is to "protect existing neighborhoods."

Charlie and Julie Cawley

News to us

We understand that proponents of a zoning exception for a substance abuse treatment center are disappointed by the Camden Select Board's decision to reject the proposal, but we are confused by the accusation of the Herald editorial board and certain letter-writers that the matter was not handled democratically.

Democracy relies in part upon elected individuals representing large groups, but it also allows for citizens to voice dissatisfaction with rulings passed by those officials. Supporters of a zoning change now have recourse to other actions, so it seems only fair that they should restrict their objections to the Select Board's decision itself, rather than fault the standard democratic process by which it was rendered or question the integrity of the Select Board's members.

Perhaps more confusing to us is why any Camden resident who has thoroughly reviewed the Fox Hill proposal would be in favor of it, and, furthermore, why several authors of letters to the Herald feel justified in framing the situation, relying on uncivil language and unsubstantiated claims, as a battle of the haves versus the have-nots.

Opponents of the zoning exception are indeed worried about how the neighborhoods nearest to Fox Hill will fare should McLean Hospital be allowed to locate there, but we also fear that a precedent of spot-zoning would lead to more incursions into residential areas all throughout Camden. And since the McLean facility will serve only very wealthy clients, and its lease payments will enrich a number of (mostly unidentified) investors, the stance against local residents perceived as belonging to upper economic echelons is especially puzzling.

One letter recently published in the Herald proclaimed that all opponents of the zoning exception have “independent income.” Not only is this news to us, but as for the implication that McLean will offer employment opportunities, their representatives have not provided assurances that the majority of positions created will differ significantly from openings already available in our area.

These authors also assert that opponents do not need “the education and outreach McLean will bring because they likely do not have young families. But regular Camden residents have these needs.” Again, news to us (nor have we been regarding ourselves as irregular residents) and to the fellow opponents our family knows best, given that among us we have four children below the age of 18. In addition, what “education” and “outreach”? McLean Hospital is under no legal obligation to provide programs for the public, and, in fact, their clinic in Princeton, Mass., has offered nothing of the sort.

We suggest that Camden residents refrain from directing prejudicial comments toward fellow townspeople and instead fully research the Fox Hill proposal. It surprises and saddens us that charges of elitism have been bandied about by residents of a socioeconomically diverse town notable for its close-knit community. Such efforts hinder a temperate and — dare we use the term? — democratic approach to debates on civic concerns.

Amy and Dan Smereck

A landslide

In response to the Camden Herald’s Feb 13th editorial piece, “An anti-climactic end?”, what the Herald’s editorial board author fails to understand or be willing to convey is that the democratic process WAS being upheld, since the five members of the Select Board had already been voted into their positions so that the average person on the street wouldn’t have to mire themselves under tomes of existing zoning and Comprehensive Plan verbiage. Indeed, Planning Board member Lowrie Sargent had basically punted the issue to the Select Board after suggesting that the issue was too complex for the voters to fully understand. The Comprehensive Plan had also been approved by the voters, so where, exactly was this disconnect in the democratic process supposedly taking place?

It wasn’t. In fact, the only thing missing here was a convenient way for investors to do an end run around the already voter approved Comprehensive Plan in order to breath some life into an investment project strapped by an otherwise dead real estate market, and this is the real issue that the voters need to focus on.

The notion given by the Fox Hill people that the average person on the street is sufficiently versed in the technical merits of this argument would be like Jay Leno running out of comedy material during his infamous “Jay Walking” episodes. That was where Jay would stop people on the street to ask them about their knowledge of common everyday events and politics. Sadly, in today’s educationally dumbed down “Common Core” infected culture, the average person on the street is about as ill-informed as a chunk of asphalt and, because of that, Jay wound up with years’ worth of comedy material from people’s ignorance over simple current events. If that was indeed more the case, how then are people to be expected to sufficiently familiarize themselves with complex zoning laws they have virtually no working knowledge of before the onslaught of Fox Hill canvassers show up at their door this spring to sway their vote?

What I heard at the meeting last week was a commanding voice from those in attendance who patiently waited to inform the Board and their fellow citizens that putting both this issue to the voters, as well as the entire Fox Hill plan, was not wanted. It wasn’t even close; it was a landslide and yet the forces behind this effort are now poised to send this issue to the voters by suggesting to them that they are somehow being robbed of their voice in democracy.

Frank Long