

ROUTE 22 AND THE FUTURE OF AMENIA

Our town is learning from the experience of the towns in Putnam and southern Dutchess and trying to manage its future. The Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee (CPIC) has essentially taken Amenia's existing Master Plan, which was reconfirmed by the public at several meetings, and is now writing zoning regulations that will be in compliance with the Plan and the wishes of citizens. This will be presented to the Town Board for approval and implementation. These regulations or laws are the basis for development and for approving developments.

The volunteer citizens that make up CPIC have spent two years reviewing our present Master Plan and to find out what the community wants, and how to turn those wants into law that can be not only adopted, but also enforced. Because all issues have good points and bad points, they have had many, difficult questions to consider — soil mining, quarrying, business zones, affordable housing, architectural review standards, balancing the need for new housing with the desire to preserve open space, to name only a few. The future of Route 22 is one of the most critical issues that they have had to consider.

Route 22 is the gateway to our town. What we put along Route 22 and how fast we allow cars to travel this route within the boundaries of our town, for example, will determine whether we can develop business in our town center and whether we can entice travelers to stop and patronize our businesses for more than a passing hamburger.

Route 22 is considered a corridor and also an arterial. This dual designation means that Route 22 — one of the two main streets passing through our town center — not only provides access to the homes and businesses along it, but also carries a large volume of traffic from town to town, and from region to region. Residents who live in the Victorian houses north of the town light use Route 22 when they drive to the grocery store or to the cleaners, but Archer Daniels Midland trucks use the same Route 22 to travel from their grain depot in Hudson to the bakeries around New York City, as do weekenders traveling from New York City and Westchester County to ski resorts, summer homes, and attractions such as Tanglewood and the Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival.

Route 22 serves regional as well as local needs. This fact has two significant implications: 1) the future of Route 22 will be affected not only by our local town board, but by county and state planners as well; and 2) the increasing volume of traffic carried by Route 22 will be even more attractive to business owners who will want to take advantage of that traffic.

At a town meeting in the summer of 2003 on the then-proposed (now enacted, but challenged in the courts) law to grant a zoning change allowing an automobile repair shop to relocate to a stretch of Route 22 zoned as residential, one of the speakers said, "Route 22 is the business corridor. It's a no-brainer." This comment meant to imply that business would naturally locate along Route 22, as it has to our south. Where traffic is, business will locate. End of story.

But is this conclusion inevitable, and right? Most of the town centers to our south — Patterson, Pawling, and Brewster — do not have Route 22 as a main street. Route 22 skirts these three towns. Where Route 22 has been developed, it has diverted consumers from the town centers to Route 22, just as Route 9 did in Poughkeepsie. Since then, these towns have worked hard to build their town centers again. Pawling has signs along Route 22 inviting passers-by to visit the "mall-free" shopping in the town center, a kind of village green bordered by 19th brick buildings alive with retail and professional businesses on one side, and a rail connection to New York City. This is a "walkable" village where folks who want to look around can slow down and casually visit several shops. Businesses built along through routes are usually "destination points" or places that customers intend to go to and do not usually visit other places.

In Amenia, however, all the traffic, local and through, uses the same two-lane roadway. In June of 2004, the New York State Department of Transportation answered an inquiry by saying that there were no plans to widen Route 22 in the Amenia area, and no plans for Route 22 to bypass the town center. So the roadway we have — two lanes through the town center — is what we will have, for the foreseeable future. This means that to build our business base, we must also develop a "walkable" town center, supported by lower speed limits that are enforced not only by police, but by design. Narrowing the road at the corners, overhanging trees, and other means are long established, proven tools for doing this.

But if Route 22 turns into a "business corridor" with strip malls, what has happened to our south will likely happen here. What has happened to our south happened in three phases:

1) Single houses became businesses. In Southeast (South Patterson and Brewster), houses have become real-estate offices, cell-phone stores, and package-shipping depots. The houses are close to the roadway (as they are in Amenia), and the road frontages are narrow. So there is little parking, and many curb-cuts (driveways to allow traffic to exit the arterial). A package-shipping depot might get \$4 to \$10 per customer; drop-offs (for FedEx and Ups) are free. How many cars turning into the driveway a day would it take to make such a business profitable? And, since each lot has a small frontage, many such businesses could develop — one for each house lot — and they look like whatever the current business owner thinks he wants to or can afford to look like.

2) The single house properties degrade, because small lots with no parking can't always support the volume of traffic needed to sustain a business. So the businesses turn over frequently — the package drop-off place has become a doggy daycare center — and the owners or tenants can't afford to improve or even maintain their properties. Eventually larger blocks of lots are assembled. And a developer bulldozes the houses and builds a development, usually a strip mall or full-fledged shopping plaza.

In 1980, the stretch of Route 22 just north of the northern terminus of Interstate 684 had one plaza, about ten stores with a single highway access road. Now this original plaza has been greatly expanded, and there are two additional large plazas plus a strip center within half a mile. Every house along this stretch has become some kind of business or has been removed and replaced by new commercial construction, such as the Mt. Maya Car Wash. There are no sidewalks and minimal pedestrian traffic.

3) The third phase, comparable to the botanist's designation for a "mature forest," does not yet exist along Route 22 in our area but can be seen along Route 9 between Poughkeepsie and Fishkill: divided, limited-access highway lined by mall after mall on both sides. Few residential home structures survive, and most that do have been converted into delis, diners or the offices of automobile dealerships. This is the mature "business corridor," the place where people go to make money and spend it. But not to live.

If Route 22 in Amenia is allowed to become a "business corridor," the profit motive guarantees that this three-phase process will begin to unfold here. BUT ROUTE 22 IS THE MAIN STREET OF OUR TOWN. WE MUST FIND A WORKABLE BALANCE. Some business must be here, as it is already. Some home-based business should also be here, as it is already. But we can not leave it up to property owners, many of whom do not live in our town, to decide which properties will be business, and how each of those businesses will look or accommodate the parking needs of customers. Consider Route 22 north of the town light: there are six roadside houses between the bank and Amenia Archery on the east side of Route 22. On the west side, there are six more, plus several lots and a long stretch of vacant land now zoned residential, one of which is the contested commercial rezoning. *What will the town look like if each of these turns into whatever kind of business the present or future owner can imagine or attract?*

All of this is being considered by CPIC as well as regulations addressing the size of business frontage, setbacks, provisions for traffic, parking, and density. Clustering, along with limited access to the arterial, and landscaping to screen business developments from the view of the arterial should be encouraged, and the alternatives discouraged, if not prohibited.

How can citizens influence this future?

- By attending meetings to keep abreast of what is happening (the meetings of CPIC are open to observers);
 - By showing up to comment at Town Board meetings and at the Public Comment sessions that will be a part of adopting the new Comprehensive Plan;
 - By writing letters to the editor;
- and finally,
- BY FINDING OUT WHICH CANDIDATES FOR OFFICE SUPPORT MANAGING THE FUTURE RATHER THAN STUMBLING THROUGH THE PRESENT. Vote for them; contribute to their campaigns and volunteer for them both before AND AFTER they are elected. If you don't work for what you want, you will have to accept what you get!

