

Town envisions 'Kensington Village'

Daniel Jackson | Posted: Thursday, July 12, 2012 10:49 am

The town is considering zoning changes to the area around the Berlin Train Station to encourage a development of a dense town center and put residents in the downtown--a "Kensington Village"--according to a report prepared for the town.

"Housing is an important element in villages," said the report titled Possible Zoning Options for Kensington Village, "Having more people live in a mixed use area increases the vibrancy and vitality which attracts more people and activity. In fact, it is hard to imagine a village without a major residential component."

The report, prepared for the town's planning office by a company called Planimetrics, envisions a downtown where residents park their cars on the street, walk along the sidewalks that run alongside buildings that evoke the idea of historic shop fronts. Because brick-making was an important aspect of Berlin history, "brick is the preferred material" to construct the buildings.

For several years, the town has looked make the half-mile radius around the Berlin Train Station a targeted economic development area. The report said this area could serve as the center of the town while building off the increased transportation potential of the area after the train service is improved.

"The train stations will serve as central focal point surrounded by a blend of business and residential uses."

In addition to putting people in the downtown, the housing would promote economic growth and give residents a sense of place, said the report.

Here's an example of how this would work: while the town wants to revitalize Farmington Avenue and New Britain Road as a "commercial strip" the report suggests new buildings could incorporate multi-family housing on the upper floors above the businesses. Of course, the new buildings are expected to be two to three stories tall. Residents would be within walking distance of shops, restaurants and the train station.

"While the detached single-family homes in Berlin will continue to meet the housing needs of many, there may be a growing interest in other housing options in the future."

The aging "baby boomer" generation may want smaller, more modest living spaces close to transportation, churches and shops, the report said. On the other end, young families with modest incomes could find the area attractive to get one of their first residences.

Hellyn Riggins, the town's planner, said the town is looking into several options on how to encourage growth and part of the process is studying the zoning options report for Kensington Village.

As one of the options, the town is thinking about applying for the HomeConnecticut program run by the state of Connecticut to aid in the downtown project, Riggins said.

Riggins said the town does not have a specific spot to apply the incentivized housing zone if they establish the zone. "We're considering the program as a whole right now," she said.

The program subsidizes the cost of building residential homes in a specified incentivized housing zone. The state will give a builder up to \$2,000 dollars for every home built. But the program has received the same amount of funding for the last four years and the portion for each town is capped at \$50,000 per year because the state of Connecticut is cash strapped.

The program was at one point in danger as it was on the list of programs that would have received significant cuts as part of the state's plan to mitigate the effects of a cutback.

According to the report on the incentive housing zone program prepared by the state, Connecticut has approved \$20,000 for Berlin under the program in a technical assistance grant. This grant will be used to help the town develop its zoning regulations for the zoning change.

In exchange for the money, the town must increase the density of their specified zone by 25 percent and a percentage of the development made into affordable housing.

Five towns in Connecticut have already applied for the program; East Lyme, New London, Old Saybrook, Sharon and Torrington. The incentivized housing zones in those towns are as small as 5.6 acres in Old Saybrook to 73 acres in New London.

Wallingford was going to designate an incentivized housing zone, but when several residents expressed their concerns over the change at the town's planning and zoning commission's public hearing, the town dropped the proposal.

"The monetary benefits are there for some towns," Riggins said.