

Sterling Economic Development Forums – Citizen Preference Results

Prepared by Town Planner Stephen Wallace, March 15, 2024.

On the evening of Wednesday March 6 and Saturday morning March 9, 2024, the Sterling Planning Board and Economic Development Committee held public forums intended to educate citizens on the benefits of economic development, the impact of such development on municipal services and local tax rates and, lastly, to find out what citizens want for economic development. All told, approximately 70 citizens participated in the forums.

The geographical focus of the forums was the Performance Zone (PZ), an area in the south of town along Route 140, near the West Boylston I-190 interchange. The area is zoned for economic development, but has never been fully utilized as such. The PZ represents the Town's best and most immediate opportunity for new economic development as there are still 25 acres of vacant developable land in this zone.

These forums represent the start of the Planning Board's three-year effort to update, modernize and simplify the Town's Zoning Bylaw. This year, the Board is working on the economic development aspects of zoning, next year they tackle residential zoning, and the third year will handle whatever remains to be updated.

After the presentation, the public was shown a list of what Sterling allows for commercial uses (both by right and by special permit), along with what other towns our size allow for commercial development. The attendees were encouraged to suggest other ideas for economic development within the PZ. Once the suggestions were exhausted, each attendee was given four green dots and instructed to place a green dot on the types of economic development they want to see in the PZ. Then each participant was given four red dots and instructed to place a red dot on the types of economic development that they don't want to see in the PZ.

So what types of economic development do people want to see in the PZ? Here are the top choices:

- Multiuse buildings (retail ground floor, housing above): 17 votes
- Farmer's coop – 16 votes
- Brewery with restaurant and/or retail component. 15 votes
- Farms (excluding fur farms & piggeries), farm stands and greenhouses. 13 votes
- Farm to Table restaurants - 11 votes
- Business or professional office. 10 votes
- Restaurants, service of food and/or alcoholic beverages. 9 votes
- Restaurants with outside patios or decks. 9 votes
- Bed & breakfast. 8 votes

So what types of economic development do people not want to see in the PZ? Here's what topped the list:

- Restaurant fast food. 12 votes
- Commercial automobile parking facility. 10 votes
- Indoor sale or rental of new or used cars and trailers. 10 votes
- Car washing establishments. 7 votes
- Laundries and dry-cleaning plants. 7 votes

Planner's Analysis: It seems the citizens are willing to support those types of economic development that can fit in with Sterling's rural character, such as uses that revolve around farming, agriculture and tourism. More restaurants are desired, but not fast-food restaurants. A well-designed business office or multi-use building would also be welcomed. Not so welcomed are auto-related uses and heavy industry.

The citizen input from these forums will guide the Planning Board's deliberations as they work on updating the economic development sections of our zoning over the summer and fall. We anticipate holding a few more public forums either late this year or early next year to share our proposals with the public before bringing them to the 2025 Town Meeting.

Below is a full tabulation of the results from the citizen preference exercise. The **green** numbers represent the number of citizens who voted positively for each type of economic development and the **red** numbers represent the number of citizens who voted negatively for each type of economic development.

Commercial Uses Allowed by Right in Sterling:

- Farms (excluding fur farms & piggeries), farm stands and greenhouses. **13**
- Hotel, motel, inn. **1 - 5**
- Commercial recreation or sports facility. **3 - 1**
- Commercial automobile parking facility. **10**
- Restaurant, service of food and/or alcoholic beverages. **9**
- Retail sales, including antique shops. **6**
- Service, repair or trade shop. **1 - 1**
- Business or professional office. **10**
- Bank or financial institution. **1 - 1**
- Indoor sale or rental of new or used cars and trailers. **10**

Commercial Uses Allowed by Special Permit in Sterling:

- Hospital or sanitarium. **5**
- Commercial kennel, animal hospital, veterinarian office. **5 - 1**
- Major commercial project (50,000 square feet of building floor space). **4**
- Restaurant drive-in. **3 - 1**
- Restaurant fast food. **12 - 2**
- Sale, lease and manufacture of firearms and/or ammunition. **7**
- Open air display area, outdoor retail sales. **2 - 1**
- Motor vehicle service station. **5**

- Motor vehicle repair or body shop. 5 - 1
- Sale or rental of new or used cars and trailers in open lot. 2 - 1
- Bed & breakfast. 8
- Place of amusement. 3 green - 1
- Drive-in or freestanding ATM. 5

What other communities allow for commercial development

- Retail stores limited to 25,000 square feet of gross floor area. 2
- Restaurants with outside patios or decks. 9
- Brewery with restaurant and/or retail component. 15 - 1
- Studios for arts and handcrafts. 5
- Mortuary, undertaking or funeral home. 2
- Fabrication and sales of gravestones. 2
- Building supply store. 4
- Self-storage (mini warehouse facilities). 4 - 1
- Car washing establishments. 7
- Laundries and dry-cleaning plants. 7
- Printing, binding, publishing and related arts and trades. 1
- Bottling of beverages, including spring water. 3 - 1
- Artisanal manufacturing. 5
- Combined business and dwelling. 4 - 1
- Business centers (3 or more businesses up to a maximum of 100,000 sq. ft. of floor space. 4

Other Potential Land Uses to Consider (Citizen Suggestions):

- Independent Living Facility **3**
- Senior housing – **3**
- No development **7 - 7**
- Rural farmland **4**
- Residential housing – **1 - 2**
- Golf Driving Range **3 - 1**
- Multiuse buildings (retail ground floor, housing above) **17 - 1**
- Trader Joe's – **5 - 2**
- Dog park – **1**
- Farmer's coop – **16**
- Artisan market – **6** greens
- Medical campus – **1 - 1**
- Farm to Table restaurants - **11**
- Small hotel – **4 - 1**
- Marijuana retail store – **6 - 3**
- Agri-tourism/theme farm **2 - 1**
- Historic tourism – **1**
- Small warehouse – **3 - 1**
- Advanced manufacturing – **2 - 1**