



Town of Orono Meeting Minutes- Main Street Overlay District

MEETING MINUTES

Meeting/Project Name:	Main Street Overlay District		
Date of Meeting: (MM/DD/YYYY)	September 28 th , 2016	Time:	7 pm
Facilitator:	Evan Richert, Town Planner	Location:	Council Chambers, 59 Main Street, Orono, ME

1. Meeting Objective

Early stage initiative to implement the Main Street Overlay District as described in the Comprehensive Plan. The purpose is open-ended discussion, seeking guidance from community members. Time frame of action was around 90 days.

2. Attendance at Meeting

Community Members & Guests (Voluntary Sign-in): Approximately 30 community members and one Channel 5 TV Correspondent. *Voluntary sign-up list is available*

Town staff: Evan Richert, Dave Milan, Bill Murphy, Avinash Rude and Belle Ryder

3. Review of Main Street Overlay District

Mr. Richert started with the background of the initiative. Main Street corridor is defined as the properties that are located along the segment of road between Juniper Street and Kelly Road. Much of this segment falls in the Medium Residential District (MDR). Allowed uses are: Single family homes (on 20,000 sq ft lots), Two family homes (on minimum of 40,000 sq ft lots), home occupations: incidental to residential use, minimal signage with maximum of two employees from outside home; and rentals upto 2 rooms in single family homes. Currently, the corridor has mixed uses with 60 lots in single family use (49 owner-occupied and 11 rented), 13 lots in 2-4 family use, 4 lots in 5+ family use, 3 lots in mixed residential-commercial use and 6 lots in commercial use. Current zoning provides limited flexibility – the only tools available for non-residential use are home occupations, contract zoning, or, for a few properties, conversion from one legally non-conforming use to another.

The Comprehensive Plan identifies the issue: “The need for flexibility in the Main St. Corridor for land uses that are economical and compatible with residential uses” and recommends “Create a Main Street Overlay District...allowing properties that front on Main St. to have ‘low impact, non-residential uses’”. The reasoning for this initiative is to provide flexibility to owners participate in low impact commercial activity that may allow them to help with upkeep and preserve the buildings. There is concern whether the demographic and economic trends favor continued investment in single family use in large buildings along a artery with 12,000 cars per day. Further, there is no requirement for preserving historic elements.

Examples of structures that are characteristic of the Main Street were discussed. A section of the corridor is an historic district on the National Register, including 21 late 19th C buildings representing Gothic, Federalist, and other historic architectural styles. Town hired historic architect Mac Collins, AIA to survey and identify an updated list of architectural and street elements that contribute to the appeal of the corridor. He has identified 34 additional structures (for example, Four Square) with exemplary and noteworthy architectural styles, as well as several streetscape elements, such as stone walls, landscaping and spacious yards.



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Questions & Discussion

Participants raised a number of questions which were discussed. Key points are as follows:

- One attendee disagreed that there was a problem, saying that when homes go on sale they sell quickly; and that this may be a “solution in search of a problem.” Others indicated there are long lead times for sales or rentals, and flexibility in the uses to which homes could be put would be helpful. Mr. Richert noted that following the recent recession, many properties were for sale for extended periods, and this situation undoubtedly has improved in the past few years. But the Town has had a half-dozen inquiries about flexibility in use of Main Street properties.
- You cannot start an office on Main St with the current zoning without going through the burden of zoning change, a monetary burden of \$2500 and time of going through a planning board member approval. The offices that are present in the MDR are grandfathered.
- The standard to be considered, if greater flexibility were to be provided, would be “low-impact” nonresidential uses, such as professional offices, software engineering, artisans, small-scale retail or personal services.
- Contract zoning does not really address this issue. Zoning is a tool meant for defining sizable sections of a community, where all the properties are treated equally. Contract zoning is mostly intended to address a relatively small number of unique properties (such as the St. Mary Church complex) that clearly are not like most other properties in the neighborhood, and using it to create many lot-by-lot zones is not appropriate.
- Adding flexibility to the zoning, with the possibility of certain non-residential uses, probably would not directly affect assessed values of property and taxes, but Mr. Richert said he would consult with the Town Assessor to understand this question better.
- “Low-impact” would mean non-residential uses that do not generate a lot of new traffic, would limit the need for new parking, would include design standards, etc. The art is in defining that.
- A planning and zoning tool called Special Exception (or Conditional) Uses can also be used. Such cases will come to planning board and neighbors will have a chance to comment.

Ideas & Concluding Remarks

There are three options while approaching this initiative: voluntary, incentive-based and regulatory approach. Voluntary approach has very limited flexibility with encouragement to preserve important elements of buildings. Incentive-based approach has a little more flexibility as an incentive, with trade-offs that require preserving important elements. The Regulatory approach has built-in flexibility, but also incorporates regulations that apply whether or not taking advantage of the flexibility.

In closing, Mr. Richert remarked “The general feel I got is to be very cautious”. He asked for 4 or 5 volunteers to be on the sub-committee. The subcommittee will meet for 4-6 months.

Action Items

A sub-committee will be formed from four volunteers consisting of Mr. Jon Henderson, Mr. Scott Thomas, Mr. John Tierney and Mr. Mart Lapin.