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# BELLINGHAM TOMORROW

a newsletter for citizens who want to know about tomorrow today

## Special Interest Articles:

- Q & A.
- Understanding Special Permits.
- Meet Dave Brown.
- Learn about the Pulaski Boulevard Mixed Use Overlay District for the May Town Meeting.

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Bellingham Planning Board \* 5 Common Street \* Bellingham, MA \* 02019  
Ph: 508-966-0991 \* Fax: 508-966-2317 \* email: [planningboard@bellinghamma.org](mailto:planningboard@bellinghamma.org)

## Q & A: We answer your most frequently asked questions about the Planning Board

Of all the Town departments, the Planning Board seems to be the one most cloaked in mystery. We aren't out there directing traffic, fighting fires or issuing building permits. Yet much of the way the Town develops is based on a Planning Board decision. In this issue, we hope to be able shed some light onto how the Board makes those decisions and why. Below are some of the most frequently asked questions that we hear from the public.

**Q:** *I'm constructing a new home—do I need a*

*Planning Board permit?*

**A:** No. Provided all zoning requirements are met, single family and duplex homes do not need a Planning Board permit. The Planning Board reviews subdivision plans (3 or more residential dwellings off of a subdivision road), development plans (commercial or industrial in nature) of new construction over 1000 square feet, additions over 2500 square feet and certain Special Permits.

**Q:** *Does the Planning Board dictate what happens on a piece of*

*land?*

**A:** Absolutely not. The Board cannot tell someone what to do with their property. The use of a property is guided by the zoning (i.e. Agricultural, Residential, Industrial, Business etc) and zoning by-laws, all of which were approved at Town Meeting.

**Q:** *Can the Planning Board deny projects that are not in the best interest of the Town?*

**A:** Yes and no. Certain types of projects, such as site plans, are hard to

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## Understanding Special Permits

Most people think that all Special Permits are reviewed by the Zoning Board of Appeals. This is true about many types of use variances that people request. However, there are certain activities that require the Planning Board to review Special Permits. These include drive-thrus for banks, restaurants and retail sales or service, back-lot divisions of land, major

business complexes, major residential developments and some activities within the Water Resource District.

Special Permits are unique tools for the Board in that decisions are based on more subjective criteria. A Special Permit is a use not allowed by-right, meaning that what a developer is proposing for a site that requires a

Special Permit is not automatically entitled to receiving that permit. The developer has to go above and beyond the regular requirements to get a Special Permit.

Two of the most common Special Permits that the Board reviews are those for drive-thrus and Major Residential Developments.

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## Meet the Members – Dave Brown

*Dave Brown, a life-long resident of Bellingham has just started his second of three years on the Board.*

*“Traffic is the single biggest problem needing the full attention of Bellingham and the surrounding towns.”*

*--Dave Brown*

**Q: What made you decide to run for the Planning Board?**

A: “I have been in business in town for 34 years and felt this would be a good opportunity to give something back to the community.”

**Q: What do you hope to bring to the Planning Board?**

A: “A good solid construction background, ability to read and understand plans, proposals, etc. Hopefully level-headed decisions in the Town’s best interest.”

**Q: How do you envision the future development in Bellingham?**

A: “Hopefully development can be balanced with improvements to traffic. Traffic is the single biggest problem needing full attention in Bellingham and surrounding towns. This is affecting all of our insurance rates, as well as quality of life.”

**Q: What advice would you give to new members joining the Board?**

A: “Take the time to observe and get a feel for the direction the town needs to proceed in.”

**Welcome** to new members Stephen Bartha and Patricia Buckley.



*New member  
Stephen Bartha*

## Understanding Special Permits

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Drive-thru Special Permits must show that the traffic generated by the use of the drive-thru can be mitigated to without any reduction in current traffic level of service and without hazard to other vehicular or pedestrian traffic (footnote 15, Section 2400 of the Zoning By-law).

The Major Residential Development Special Permit is automatically invoked for those subdivisions of 10 or more

units. It requires that a developer consider an alternate plan, in addition to the conventional plan, in which lot sizes are reduced to offset more open space or preservation of unique site features. The Board then reviews both plans and determines which one has the most public benefit. Major Residential Development projects provide much needed open space for both active and passive recreation, as well as environmentally friendly plans because they reduce the amount of

road pavement.

Often, Special Permits are needed along with a Subdivision or a Development Plan Review. Approving one permit does not guarantee approval of the other. Unlike Development Plan Reviews, which only need to show that a project meets the Zoning By-law, Special Permits should always show a public benefit or no additional detriment to public safety. Special Permits, if not acted on, expire within one-year.

## Q & A: Your most frequently asked questions

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 deny if they meet all of the zoning requirements in the by-law. Special Permits, however, are a different matter entirely and have more subjective criteria for approval. (For more information on Special Permits see article on page 1.)

**Q:** *How does the Board protect abutters from new development?*

**A:** The Board cares about the impacts of a project on abutters and encourages anyone who comes to the meetings time to speak about the project. Developers are often asked to provide mitigation to impacts on neighbors

such as adding fencing or buffer zones to protect the adjacent residential properties.

**Q:** *How does the Board know if a project has been designed properly?*

**A:** The Board hires outside consultants to review the traffic and engineering aspects of the project. These consultants protect the Town's interest by thoroughly reviewing the project for its impacts and require the developer to meet or exceed the Town's and State's standards. The Board won't even consider a vote on a project until the consultants have given a sign-off on it.

**Q:** *What happens after the Planning Board process?*

**A:** After a project is approved at the Planning Board level, the developer still needs to get other permits—building permits, Board of Health approvals (for septic systems), Department of Public Works permits for water and / or sewer (if available), street opening permits from the Board of Selectmen and sometimes even state level permits from MassHighway or other agencies. The Planning Board stays involved as necessary to make sure conditions imposed for approval are completed as required.

Check meeting agendas and past minutes at our website:  
  
[www.bellinghamma.org/planning](http://www.bellinghamma.org/planning)

## So You Wanna Know About...

### ...The Shoppes at Bellingham.

The Shoppes at Bellingham is a proposal for a large retail project, known as a "lifestyle center" located behind The Home Depot. It is a mix of retail and restaurants laid out in a plan similar to a traditional downtown, where one can park in front of a store and walk around to shop. The developer, W/S Development, has constructed similar projects throughout New England, including Hingham Derby Street Shoppes in Hingham, Massachusetts and The

Crossing at Smithfield in Smithfield, Rhode Island.

The project requires 3 permits from the Planning Board: Development Plan Review for the site plan itself, including stormwater, drainage and traffic; Water Resource Districts Special Permit; and a Major Business Complex Special Permit.

A proposed access road between Hartford Avenue and North Main Street will be voted on at the Fall 2007 Town Meeting and MassHighway has jurisdiction over the 495 interchange at Hartford Avenue, so the Board will not be hearing

those issues directly.

The first public Hearing is scheduled for May 24, 2007 at 7:15 PM in the Arcand Meeting room of the new Municipal Center.



Rendering of The Shoppes at Bellingham

**Bellingham Planning Board**

5 Common Street  
Bellingham, MA 02019

PHONE:  
(508) 966-0991

FAX:  
(508) 966-2317

E-MAIL:  
[PlanningBoard@Bellinghamma.org](mailto:PlanningBoard@Bellinghamma.org)

HOURS:  
Tuesday and Thursday  
8:30 AM – 3:30 PM  
Friday  
9 AM – 1 PM

Let us know what you think!

Send or email your thoughts and we may print your letter in the next issue.

**We're on the Web!**

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[www.bellinghamma.org](http://www.bellinghamma.org)

**At Town Meeting**

**Article 16 – Pulaski Boulevard Mixed-Use Overlay District**

The Pulaski Boulevard Mixed-Use Overlay district **is not** the same as the overlay district proposed at last fall's Town Meeting. Although the Assumption Church and Rectory are included in the Pulaski Boulevard Mixed-Use Overlay, the overlay benefits all of Pulaski Boulevard in the Business 1 zone from several properties north of Granite City Electric all the way to the Woonsocket border.

The Pulaski Boulevard Mixed-Use Overlay District is intended to improve the Pulaski Boulevard area by:

- Preserving property values;
- Enhancing neighborhood character;
- Encouraging revitalization;
- Promoting high quality design; and
- Improving pedestrian safety and comfort.

An overlay **is not** a zoning change. It is a new by-law that provides an

alternative to the existing zoning—it does not change the existing zoning. The benefits to the developer under the overlay include decreased setback and parking requirements, and allowing for both residential and commercial development to be combined on the same site, something that is not currently allowed under existing zoning.

Since one of the goals of the overlay is to visually improve the look of Pulaski Boulevard and make it more pedestrian friendly, buildings tend to be closer to the street. Certain uses allowed in the existing zoning, like auto sales and gas stations, are not permitted with the overlay, but can be developed under the existing Business 1 zoning. In fact, because the existing zoning remains in place, as well as the added mixed-use option with the overlay, a property owner has **more** opportunity to maximize the parcel, not less.

The benefit to the Town is

that when someone chooses to develop using the guidelines of the overlay, they also have to abide by the design standards put into the overlay. Just a few of these standards, which don't exist with the current zoning, include:

- Landscaped buffers between new development and existing residential;
- Design of all sides of a building, not just the front façade;
- Shared driveways to minimize entrance/exits onto Pulaski Boulevard to improve traffic safety;
- Open space requirements for public use.

A developer understands that conforming to these design guidelines is a small price to pay for the return on their investment... but the benefits to the Town...priceless!

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Whether or not you agree with the Mixed-Use Overlay District, we encourage you to come to Town Meeting and make your voice heard.

**A fond farewell** to long-time members Roland Laprade and Tom Guerin. After many, many years on the Planning Board, much of that time as Chairman, Roland has decided to hang up his official Planning Board hat, but not his community activism. He will remain on committees as a Citizen-At-Large to work for the betterment of Bellingham.

Tom has decided to retire to a cabin that he will be building in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia. Good luck to you and here's to hoping you don't ever meet a bear up close and personal!