

The town of Williamstown is asking us, the voters, for more time. This is a very different message from the one they were sending last winter when they announced the FEMA grant application, specifically named Lowry in the announcement, sought legal opinion from town counsel on the steps required to remove the property from conservation and approved a \$5800 project expenditure to develop conceptual site plans for Lowry. All of this happened within a very short time frame and with little public discussion.

This series of events was cause for alarm among many citizens, particularly those who voted to put the land into conservation at the Town Meeting in 1987 by an overwhelming vote of 77%. Little, if any discussion has been had about alternative sites that are more suitable for development, no one talked about the lack of funding for the type of project being proposed. The conversation, up to this point, has been focused almost exclusively on the Lowry land when there are a number of town-owned sites that are not active agricultural lands. The discussion has been dominated by emotion rather than logic. And we felt that it was time for some responsible action, so the citizens went to work.

We began by drawing up the citizens' petition, which was signed by over 300 of us and is the reason we are having this Special Town Meeting tonight. This petition would add another level of protection to this prime agricultural land, something this country is losing at a rate of an acre a minute. We purposefully did not name a holder for the conservation restriction with the intention of collaborating with the Conservation Commission on designating a holder at a later date. We were also aware that the Con Comm is not required to act on any of the votes taken here tonight, however it will allow us to move forward on protecting these properties further and focus our collective energies on other, more viable sites.

In addition to the petition, we began to do research. We consulted with developers, engineers, architects, environmentalists, soil scientists, lawyers and planners. We reached out to state and federal agencies, including the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and the Department of Agriculture.

We'd like to share the results of our research with you tonight. We suggest embracing a "smart growth" strategy, which is endorsed by the state of MA, and encourages development of affordable housing in town centers, integrating it into the community and by extension, revitalizing neighborhoods. Ann McCallum has come up with some excellent ideas for these alternative sites and will present those to you shortly.

You will see from the numbers in front of you that the "seed money" of \$3MM from the FEMA grant will go much farther on the downtown sites – our research shows that downtown site development costs per housing unit are about one third the cost to develop Lowry, which means we will be able to help more people. The other good news is that funding is available for these types of projects, whereas it is doubtful that funding would be available to develop Lowry. We will go into more depth on this later as well.

Truly, we all agree that there is a need for more affordable housing and that this FEMA grant represents a great opportunity for our town. But it is up to us to ensure that we spend it in the most responsible way, maximizing the number of units we create and maximizing the number of people we help.

We are lucky enough to be home the country's #1 liberal arts college. With the wealth of intellectual capital here, surely we can come up with a more creative plan than to build on farm land! We can do better than that. There is no need for us to sacrifice one vital community asset – prime agricultural land – for another vital community asset – affordable housing. In this case, Williamstown CAN have it all and it does NOT involve developing on Lowry.

I'd like to turn it over to Ann McCallum, who has spent years doing designs for town-owned properties and is here to share some of her exciting ideas.