

May 12, 2003

After reading last week's letter by Barbara Struthers and Janice Shaw, 2 members of the Deerfield Residential Redevelopment Task Force, I feel compelled to point out a different perspective. I have been to the last 2 hearings before the Plan Commission, have read the entire recommendations of the Task Force and still cannot figure out why they have created a mountain of legislation against a molehill of redevelopment. I'd like to point out the major concerns I (and several others) have, in the hopes not only of having my questions answered, but also to inform other Deerfield residents of what is at stake.

1) The Task Force claims 95% of Deerfield residents support their proposals (which have changed 3 times since I've paid attention), but has yet to produce a single Deerfield resident who will demonstrate they have been negatively impacted by a large home built near them. In other words, prove a single example where the value of a smaller home next to a new, larger home has gone down.

2) Why does the Task Force see itself as a flock of sheep so eager to follow the regulatory footsteps of neighboring North Shore communities? Just because other towns are regulating home reconstructions/additions doesn't mean we should. Several thoughts come to mind:

a) We didn't compare ourselves to all these other towns when designing a new downtown.

b) FAR (floor-area ratio) comparisons are usually made by the Task Force on an apples-to-oranges basis, and shame on the Task Force for trying to slip this by the public! Different communities factor some, none or all of the following into their FAR calculations: finished basements, attached garages, cathedral ceiling space, attics and porches. Also, the low FAR restrictions in other towns used as an example of how "generous" the Task Force here in Deerfield is are for much larger lots than typically found in Deerfield.

c) The Task Force has repeatedly stated that their proposals are "a work in progress". If it isn't a rock-solid, justified and just proposal, scrap it or keep working on it. The Task Force has also repeatedly stated that Glencoe is on their third revision of their residential redevelopment ordinances and Northbrook is on its fourth. Why are we so eager to jump on board a bandwagon so faulty it needs repeated overhauls? How many residents in Glencoe and Northbrook have been adversely affected by over-reaching ordinances while those towns struggle to get it right?

3) The Task Force, after nearly 2 years, is recommending a Phase I and a Phase II to their plans to alter residential redevelopment. Phase II issues include at least 7 specific items to consider. I believe that decisions on Phase I cannot be responsibly made without knowledge of the recommendations in Phase II. For instance, I am one of 25% of Deerfield homeowners (approximately 1600 homes out of 6000 total) that lives on a nonconforming (read less than 9000 square feet) lot. If the Task Force gets their way, I would be able to tear my house down and build a house as large as 3500 sq. ft. in its place. However, because my lot is 50 feet wide, the current zoning (which is not proposed to change) would require 20 feet total of side yard setbacks, leaving 30 feet of buildable space. Given the constraints, a rear-lot, detached garage is the only possibility for a 2-2+ car garage. However, the length of the driveway to access the garage and the square footage of the garage and a 2 story house with a 1750 sq. ft. footprint will be illegal with any revision to the impervious surface regulations, an agenda item for Phase

II. Alternatively, since I can't build higher than 22 feet on the sides of the house (rendering a third floor impossible), I suppose I could excavate 2 stories below the ground. I did hear Task Force member Johnstone (a developer, no less) say that basements are as nice to live in as above-ground floors. Comments like Mr. Johnstone's cause considerable erosion of credibility of the opinions of Task Force members with the public.

4) The Task Force likes to cast a condemning eye over the current zoning restrictions by referring to Deerfield as a "builder's free-for-all". I see the reasons for that epithet (attributed to an anonymous mortgage broker; one person's unsubstantiated opinion) in an entirely different light. Other North Shore communities have much more expensive housing stock than Deerfield. I think that builders like to work in Deerfield because the residents are affluent, the housing prices are only high but not unbelievable, and the housing stock begs for a makeover. For instance, building materials are much more energy efficient today than they were 10 years ago, let alone 50 years ago. Sociological studies show a significant increase in families returning to multi-generational households, and offspring are living at home longer. Houses need to reflect changing tastes, materials and lifestyles. Deerfield doesn't have many examples of impressive architecture, with most exceptions lying in the new home category. So what if all the houses on a given block don't match? Eventually they probably will! In the meantime the few who find it awkward are proposing measures that limits progress with no clear benefits to anyone.

5) The Task Force sometimes claims that smaller homes on nonconforming lots will not be hurt by their proposals, and at other times callously assert that it's too bad if it hurts a few but benefits the majority. Well 25% of homes will be negatively impacted, which is not an insignificant or trivial number. Without even considering ramifications from Phase II items, homes that are already greatly restricted from development under current zoning laws would be affected even more with the passage of the Phase I recommendations. If my property is not developable to the standards of today's housing market because of height restrictions, FAR and side-plane setbacks, I will lose value in my property the second the proposals are passed into law. I should point out that none of the Task Force members live on a nonconforming lot, and evidently can't put themselves in our shoes.

6) I wonder how the Task Force on Residential Redevelopment will clash with the Task Force on Downtown Development. The Residential Redevelopment folks give lip service to protecting neighborhoods and religious fervor to preserving trees (a Phase II agenda item!). The Downtown Development folks are planning to do away with several dozens of homes, building more multi-family housing (with roof heights much higher than 35 feet, if recent Deerfield complexes are the norm), and cutting down untold numbers of trees.

7) Finally, two of the members of the task force, Bob Benton and Chairman Bill Seiden are also Village trustees. I hope the public is aware of their conflict-of-interest in these redevelopment matters, and that they are required to recuse themselves from voting on these proposals when they are voted on by the Board.

To summarize, at least 25% of Deerfield residents stand to lose freedom to develop their property, whether they teardown and rebuild, or even make an addition. Current zoning is more than adequate, especially on smaller lots. The Task Force needs to be told that they are not representing the majority of Deerfield homeowners, and that we aren't concerned with zoning regulations in other communities.

Sincerely,  
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