

PUBLIC HEARING
Proposed Anti-Blight Ordinance
Grange Hall
April 27, 2016

Town Clerk, Debra H. Denette greeted approximately twenty-five attendees. She noted that all three selectmen had conflicts preventing them from attending this evening's meeting. She stated that Jim Ventres, the Land Use Administrator, would be presenting the document, copies of which were available to all on the front table. Following the presentation she would entertain comments and questions. She stated that the meeting is being taped for the selectmen's review and that she would produce minutes.

Mr. Ventres reviewed the background for the ordinance which came about in 2009 or 2010 at the request of the Economic Development Commission through the Planning and Zoning Department. Their concern was over vacant commercial buildings. Mr. Ventres reviewed the authority granted via statute to fire marshals, building officials and zoning enforcement officers. He noted that there is very little the town can do beyond boarding up an unsafe structure. Mr. Ventres provided examples of known problems throughout town.

Mr. Ventres added that this ordinance has been reviewed by at least three separate town attorneys over the years. He stated that the intent is to give the town a little teeth to be able to step in, and to keep the Town out of legal battles. He noted the frustration borne by many homeowners near these blighted properties when it has an impact on their ability to sell their home.

Mrs. Denette solicited comments and questions:

Terry Dickinson, Daniel Peck Road, raised concern regarding vacant parcels. She recommended eliminating 60 days noting that many residents winter in a warmer climate.

Peter Seaman appreciated the efforts of the Town to bring this document forward.

Dick Everett stated that he believed the document goes way too far. He stated that East Haddam is not Glastonbury and should not try to emulate it. He continued that he believed the town had the power now to address health and safety concerns. He summarized the ordinance as ridiculous.

John Turner of Bogue Lane applauded the work and the scope of the document. He questioned the remedy to help people found in violation. He noted that sometimes the blight could be a result of financial hardships. He inquired if there were programs that could come in and help. Mr. Ventres responded that the State and Federal Government often have low-interest loans to assist people, although he could not speak to their current availability.

Kim Dodge felt the draft ordinance violates private property rights. She felt that it goes way too far and gives too much control to the government. She further continued that people don't have the money to fix their properties because they pay so much in taxes. Copies of photos of

blighted properties were circulating about the room at this time. Ms. Dodge further suggested people work with their neighbors.

Mr. Ventres acknowledged that the blighted structures constitute a very small percentage of the total structures.

Jason Griffin noted an unoccupied home near his house that has been unoccupied and boarded up since 2003. It was noted that it could take another 20 years before the property caves in and as long as it is boarded and secure, there is nothing else that the town can do presently. Mrs. Denette reminded the audience to wait until recognized by the Moderator to speak and to be respectful of the individual that has the floor.

Linda Stuhlman of Palmer Martin Road stated that she sees the issues on both sides of the argument and recognizes the intent. She raised concern that the term “blight” is not well defined enough. She suggested that the document be simplified.

Doug Cassin of Palmer Martin Road suggested clarity to the definitions under 10; abandoned vehicles, abandoned watercraft, abandoned campers of any kind. He also questioned capable household member. Mr. Ventres stated that he would have the attorney review, the paragraph did seem to be in conflict or missing something.

Mrs. Dickinson followed up on the paragraph feeling that children under 18 should not be expected to maintain a property.

Mr. Cassin continued that fines, once imposed, would be \$100 per week. He inquired where that funding would go once collected. There seemed to be consensus that any fees collected should go into a fund to assist people with physical and special needs to clean up their properties.

Dick Everett commented that he still found the ordinance ridiculous and sick. Mrs. Dodge concurred. She further added that the blight ordinance may present hardships to certain groups such as women.

Mr. Ventres added that there is an appeal process built within the document.

Bob Casner, Old Kentwood Drive, noted his concern that this is overkill for a few select properties that ultimately will settle through estates or other means. He stated that he felt the document opened the door for arbitrary which subjects the town to litigation. He also noted concern for contractors and other businesses that store items in their yards. He added that he felt that the downside will not overcome the upside.

Ed Blaschik, Ray Hill Road, inquired how this ordinance would solve the problem. Mr. Ventres noted that these are properties that are owned free and clear. Taxes are being paid or the town would be able to take them over. Again, Mr. Blaschik inquired how this ordinance would remedy the identified problems. Mr. Ventres added it provides another form of prodding with the fine of \$100 per week.

Mrs. Dickinson noted that the original intent was to address Cumberland farms and the video store, she noted that it has clearly morphed to personal residences. She suggested that perhaps the community could provide assistance to help neighbors in need clean up. Mr. Griffin responded that it has been his experience that they do not want help.

Mr. Ventres noted that on the top of page 3 #10 refers to zoning regulations. Zoning regulations allow for 2 unregistered motor vehicles.

Todd Gelston of Homestead Road recognized the problem that we are trying to correct, and concurred that the pictures shown are sorely in need of intervention. He suggested, however, that we slow down and address each situation and not impose more government. He suggested taking small steps and walking before you can run.

Linda Stuhlman suggested that it would be better to address all of these issues as one of health and safety. Again she encouraged simplification of the document so it is not so scary.

Charlie Dickinson suggested that the duties of who can write the summons be standard for continuity.

Laurie Alt, East Shore Drive, stated that the word blight is a very broad word. She inquired what impact it would have on farmlands.

Terry Dickinson also raised concern with the authority to enter property as defined.

Gary Petersen stated that Farmington established a blight ordinance a few years ago which has proven to be very effective.

Doug Chasser inquired if the use of drone technology will be utilized to monitor. Mr. Ventres stated that no such purchases are planned. He stated that google is quite effective.

Mrs. Denette noted that the entire ordinance book has been under review since 2005. She stated that the purpose of the review is to codify it to existing statutes and remove items that are no longer effective as a matter of law. She stated that the document is in final draft, and has been for well over a year. She stated that she is waiting for the Board of selectmen to move it forward to public hearing.

The meeting ended at 8:15 pm