

To; Haddam Planning & Zoning Commission

From; Patrick L. Pinnell FAIA CNU APA / Architecture & Town Planning LLC

11 March 2021

In Re; Proposed Amendment to Higganum Village District (HVD)

(Item 6.1. on 3/18/2021 meeting Agenda)

Dear Chairman Wallor and Commissioners,

I wish to offer testimony germane to the proposed amendment. Please note, first, that I'm referring to the code section explicitly as a Village District. This is deliberate, because there is an argument that the amendment violates the spirit of the Connecticut General Statute's 1998 enabling legislation for Village Districts. Here is its opening section,

Sec. 8-2j. Village districts. Compatibility objectives with other uses in immediate neighborhood. (...) (a) The zoning commission of each municipality may establish village districts as part of the zoning regulations adopted under section 8-2 or under any special act. Such districts shall be located in areas of distinctive character, landscape or historic value that are specifically identified in the plan of conservation and development of the municipality.

The undeniable basic implication of this is that in a Village District the overall context is paramount. No new use or structure may be considered only in its own right. In my opinion it is simply not legal to do so.

Now I am going to chew on you a bit, though not for the reasons you may expect. Our Haddam leadership, including your Commission, too often has not shown a clear

sense of vision for the Town and its three Villages, despite that being enunciated in the 2018 Plan of Conservation and Development. (I served on the Buildings Committee, the Infrastructure Committee, and the Committee for that PoCD. I am now on the PoCD Implementation Committee, which your vice-chair, Steve Bull, is very ably chairing.) The result of that shaky sense of what Haddam is and what it aspires to be has been a distinct, disappointing, and measurable underperformance relative to our neighbor Towns.

Allow me to be specific. For starters, we have good data on what Higganum Center could be IF it had the community water and septic services so long discussed. The report of 9/28/2018 by Camoin Associates on the Scovil Mills was referred to by Mullin Associates (John Mullin was Bill Warner's professor at U. Mass) and L.A.D.A. Planners during the highly attended 10/30/2019 and 11/2/2019 charrette for the Center. It states that if people living within a 5-mile radius of the Center spent their money on restaurants and other businesses there, instead of elsewhere in the area, it would support 3.8 new restaurants (11,445 sf at 3,000 sf +/- each) and 3.5 stores (17,309 sf at 5,000 sf +/- each). That would more than fill the vacant former Citizens Bank, the vacant pub building, the building at 310 Saybrook Road (2,450 sf), the former Pat's Cleaners next to the Post Office, and a good part of the Scovil Mills. Related, according to Town profiles compiled by CERC (Connecticut Economic Resource Center) Haddam has easily the highest median household income (\$105,920) among the four towns of Haddam, East Haddam, Chester (next highest at \$86,675), and Deep River. More money could easily be spent in Higganum

Center if the businesses could be there, and of course that would mean more taxes for Haddam. Our mill tax rate is the highest of the four Towns, in good part because of that. So, does this Commission and Bill Warner have their eyes on the right ball?

Why is Higganum so underperforming? At least part of the reason is what I said. Lack of a clear vision and a concerted, systematic push for it has resulted in a Village context which is seemingly not only unattractive but cumulatively off-putting. Start with the lack of community septic and no apparent leadership urgency to get it started, then add the contamination uncertainties of the Rossi property, the controversy over the Town Garage location (charrette participants, despite the Report, were at best divided about putting it on Rossi), and it's no wonder the Citizens Bank building has sat empty and unsold for a very long time, and that Nutmeg Pharmacy seems headed towards putting its new prescription packaging center not in Higganum but East Haddam (according to good sources over there). And now, into the already weak context – let me state again the Commission is obligated to consider the context – you are contemplating an amendment permitting a controversial use, formerly specifically prohibited? Anything possibly askew in this picture? It's certainly not making the work of EDC chair Kate Anderson (whose energy and focus I admire), and that Commission easier. The last "Available Commercial Properties" listing on the EDC page dates from December, 2018.

That ought to wound a bit. If so, good, and here comes the salt. Further, those empty places, filled with the market capacity Camoin Associates identified, would provide

jobs. Of the four Towns, Haddam at 14% has the lowest percentage of in-town jobs compared to resident population; Chester is almost FOUR TIMES that at 53%. That's Town wide of course, not just in the villages, but still a telling statistic. I'm aware our citizens are tired of being compared to Chester, but it has water, sewage treatment in its center for thirty years, walkability, full storefronts, lots of construction and a hot real estate market right now, and jobs.

Haddam has the best educated population of the four Towns, 46% of the population with a Bachelor's degree or higher, with Chester next highest at 42%. The Higganum Center charrette's clearly highly informed and articulate participants reflected that. Again related to what should be in Higganum Center but isn't, besides jobs and taxes, Haddam has the highest percentage, 91.5% of all living units, of single family (SF) homes of the four Towns, Chester the lowest at 76.3%. Consider these demographics; 55% of Haddam's population is over 45 years old, higher even than aging Connecticut's overall 45%. If the Center had water and sewer, it could also attract a private developer to build single family empty nester places, probably as 10 to 12 unit per acre bungalow courts, a concept revived and newly popular as "pocket neighborhoods", using the Housing Overlay District zoning, of which you are aware, on the two Reservoir-view properties now up for sale, an easy walk from the intersection of Saybrook and Killingworth Roads. Haddam's house prices are not as high as Chester's, but they are high and Chester has a lot more apartments; younger households -- your children and their

spouses -- would be a second strong market for small, cute houses. I know this because the CEO of Beacon Communities in Boston, Dara Kovel, a student of mine thirty years ago, looked at those two properties and said exactly that. Get the vision of Higganum strong and clear, get its basics DONE right, and the builders will come. Pay attention to the PoCD.

I'll close by noting I'm a twenty-plus-year resident of Haddam, an architect and planner, licensed since 1977. I helped found the national planning movement for walkable mixed use development which has come to be called New Urbanism, and have experience with controversial projects in sensitive historic contexts. One such was being one of the Fenway Seven, the group which in 2000 showed how to save the historic Ball Park, distinctive for being so thoroughly embedded in its context. Locally, I designed the 17 newish Goodspeed Actor Housing cottages, fitted within the National Register Historic District context of East Haddam Village. That is my drumbeat; in your vote please strongly consider the real physical and economic context of the proposed Amendment.

(1,263 words)