



SAVE Colonie

A Partnership for Planning

Neighbors and Neighborhoods First

December 19, 2019

Dear Supervisor Mahan and Town Board members:

In her message on the Town's website, Supervisor Mahan reminds us that the Town's "highest priority is to provide a high quality of life for our residents. Citizen participation is an essential component to maintaining an efficient and transparent government."

For almost four years, SAVE Colonie has worked to bring Colonie residents' concerns into the Town's development review process. Each year, we have submitted a list of easy and cost effective process changes to make the development review process more efficient and user friendly for ALL stakeholders. While we can count some successes -- the Town's Comprehensive Plan update has been completed, the Neighborhood Coalition is stronger and more involved than ever before, Planning Board meetings are slated to be publicly broadcast, and project presentations are now projected — more improvements are needed.

The Supervisor and Town Board members who will be seated effective January 1, 2020 have an opportunity to build upon the results of the Town's Comprehensive Plan 2019 update and adopt SAVE's proposals for better town government. The November 2019 election results clearly demonstrated that there was no overwhelming majority of Town's voters who endorsed continuing "business as usual" for development reviews in the Town. In fact, nearly half of Colonie voters expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo, much of it over the pace and review of development in Colonie. It behooves the Town to address citizens' obvious dissatisfaction.

Here are some easy and cost-effective steps the Town can take to make the development review process more efficient and user-friendly for ALL stakeholders, along with two necessary updates to the town's Ethics Law and the creation of a Town Resident Advocacy position:

1. Require developers to reach out to neighbors, early in their project planning.

It is common for neighbors of land under development to be leery of changes the development might bring. Also, neighbors may have specialized knowledge of site characteristics, or particular local issues of use to a developer. Early involvement may calm neighbors' concerns and allow a cooperative relationship to develop, which would be beneficial to all. In addition to notifying neighbors when a nearby project will come before the Planning Board, there should be a 500 ft notice requirement for all projects before they come to the Department Coordinating Committee.

2. Provide on-line access to all project documents, throughout the review process, and archive them thereafter. It is unfair to residents that project documents (including TOC staff, TDE & other agency comments) are unavailable except through a FOIL request; even posted plans disappear after the Planning Board meeting date. Other municipalities maintain complete

on-line files which are readily available to the public. This eliminates time-consuming and costly Town FOIL responses, and readily provides the public what it is entitled to, anyway.

3. Post project information on line as soon as it becomes available; maintain current “applications received” page on PEDD website once again.

The PEDD website should provide a current list of all projects for which applications have been received. Upcoming milestone dates should be included. Developers know well in advance when their project will be reviewed by the Planning Board; residents deserve as much notice. Rather than merely posting agendas only a few days before a meeting, the Town should maintain a public schedule of PB agendas as they are being formulated, with links to the relevant files.

4. Allow and encourage public comment at Sketch Plan Review.

Frequently, neighbors are much more familiar with a site and its characteristics than the Planning Board when a project comes before them for Sketch Plan review. The Board can learn valuable information and better assess a project’s impacts if residents are allowed to raise issues at Sketch Plan review and at Concept. Earlier input offers a better opportunity to resolve difficulties before a developer is heavily invested in a particular plan and while neighborhood input can be meaningful.

5. Update the Town of Colonie Ethics Law to expand the Ethics Board’s membership to include members of both political parties and to provide for ethical oversight of town designated engineering firms and consultants who conduct business with and before the Town;

6. Create a citizens advocacy position to serve as a point of contact for town residents for matters affecting their neighborhoods.

Founding members of SAVE Colonie: A Partnership for Planning chose our name as an aspirational goal. We would prefer an actual partnership with our town. We want to work with you to create the changes Colonie needs to ensure that growth and development is sustainable, professional, and fair, and that Neighborhoods First becomes the highest priority for our Town.

We hope Supervisor Mahan will endorse and include our suggestions in her January 9, 2020, State of the Town address.

Sincerely,
SAVE Colonie: A Partnership for Planning

cc:
SAVE Members
Spotlight Newspapers
Times Union
Daily Gazette