

Most at meeting favor capping size of stores

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Posted on: Wednesday, August 8, 2007

SARANAC LAKE — Concerned citizens turned out in force Tuesday night for a special meeting of the town and village boards to hear public comments on a possible retail size cap. Of the 20 people who spoke, 15 were in support of a cap.

The Harrietstown Town Board and the Saranac Lake Village Board of trustees heard from two representatives of local groups, then opened the floor to a public forum. Jamie Konkoski, who presented on behalf of the Save Saranac Lake Coalition and the Sound Adirondack Growth Alliance said the organizations are in favor of a retail size cap similar to the one instituted in Lake Placid in 1998 that limits a single store to 40,000 square feet and a retail plaza to 68,000 square feet.

“We are in favor of an interim retail size cap for two years to allow for the new comprehensive plan to be completed,” Konkoski said.

Konkoski said large retailers have a negative impact on the local tax base, infrastructure, small businesses and tourism. She also stressed that the two groups are not anti-development and that the size cap would encourage the growth of small and medium-sized businesses to come to Saranac Lake because there would not be the threat of a large retailer.

The boards then heard from Rick Gonyea, who represented Citizens for Advancement of Retail Development, who said his group was opposed to a cap.

“The area needs growth. Two stores closed last week,” he said, referring to Strober Building Supply and the Fellion’s Diamond Center. Gonyea said a cap would discourage new businesses from coming to Saranac Lake and that small, local stores survive better when there is one main retailer in town to draw shoppers.

Gonyea also said his group has 2,400 names on a petition of those who are against the cap.

The boards then heard comments, limited to four minutes, from members of the community, most of whom expressed support of a retail size cap. Keith Wells said Saranac Lake needs to resist urban sprawl and that a cap would create a level playing field for all businesses.

“(A size cap) will provide guidelines for developers that will come into this community,” he said. “It allows us to be masters of our destiny, not beholden to the developers.”

A concern of many in favor of the cap was that if a retail space is allowed to be developed without a limit on size, it will result in vacant downtown businesses because they cannot compete with the low prices of a mega-retailer.

“For a few more cents, you can get what you need downtown,” said Jason Brill. “If you shop locally, be proud of it. It might take a few more cents out of your pocket, but it’s the way to go.”

Town of Franklin Clerk Sandy Oliver, who said she wasn't sure if she was in support of a cap or not, asked the boards not to forget the people who can't afford to shop downtown.

"Please do not forget those people who budget in pennies right down to the last penny," she said. "Remember those people that are on a fixed income."

Other opponents of the cap also expressed concern that the needs of all Saranac Lakers were not being taken into consideration by the boards.

Shawn Boyer said small groups should not decide what's best for the whole of Saranac Lake.

"Everyone who lives here now needs to have input," he said. He suggested a referendum on the topic.

Mayor Tom Michael said the boards would not vote on the issue immediately, and he hoped this meeting was the beginning of a conversation about the issue.

"I think it's fantastic. I love to see the involvement in the community," Michael said, referring to the packed auditorium of the Harriestown Town Hall. Michael said the next step will be for the two boards to have another joint meeting and that they must agree on what action to take.

"The town and the village have to do the same thing; otherwise, it will be pointless," he said.

Harriestown Supervisor Larry Miller, who admitted he was torn on the issue and still had research to do before he could make a decision, said input from the community is the only gauge the boards have to judge whether they are headed in the right direction.

"If you went by public opinion, we could make a decision here tonight," he said. "I would like to see this many people come to a board meeting."