

A Recycler's Approach to Development in Washington

By Kelly Boling

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In the Town of Washington's recent zoning commission race, a good deal of debate centered on efforts to transform the former Wykeham Rise school into an inn.

Many people have taken issue with particular aspects of the inn proposal—or with specific regulatory changes that have been proposed to accommodate it—but it is difficult to persuasively argue that the property, with its multiple structures, numerous acres, and location within a *de facto* hamlet, isn't suitable for a more intensive use than a single-family residence.

In fact, the Wykeham Rise parcel is just one of many local properties that were developed long ago for uses that are no longer viable, or in configurations that are no longer deemed desirable. Some of these properties simply go underutilized, while others have become forlorn dinosaurs, saddled with the improvements of yesteryear, and heavily constrained by contemporary land-use regulations.

Although Washington's current zoning regime extensively contemplates the conversion of raw land to developed land, it gives minimal consideration to repurposing properties that are encumbered by obsolete legacy developments. This seems counterintuitive for a town whose Plan of Conservation and Development sets ambitious goals for preserving open space, enhancing existing village centers, and diversifying the local housing stock.

Rather than emphasizing the method by which pristine land can be built upon, shouldn't Washington's zoning regulations instead give priority to development proposals that responsibly recycle—or add dimension to—already-disturbed sites that, because of their location, configuration, or character, lend themselves to adaptive re-use or wholesale redevelopment?

Assuming that Washington's newly reconstituted zoning commission will revisit the question of how its regulations might be amended to green-light some incarnation of the Wykeham Rise Inn, the commission would do well to address the issue of adaptive re-use on a town-wide basis.

One possible approach would be to establish a redevelopment incentive zone encompassing previously developed land parcels that are currently underutilized—or which, in their present state, detract from the town's rural character or contravene its land-use planning goals. Such a zone might include former institutional properties like Wykeham Rise, the old Texaco station in the center of Washington Depot, and the commercial strip developments found along Route 202 in Marbledale and Route 47 north of the Depot.

By providing economically valuable incentives, such as density and lot coverage bonuses, focusing those incentives on carefully chosen locations, and providing a clear path to securing regulatory approvals, a redevelopment incentive zone could coax the market into transforming today's obsolete and disfigured properties into tomorrow's thriving local businesses and diverse housing opportunities.

If a transfer of development rights component were incorporated—whereby the building rights associated with a land parcel targeted for conservation could be transferred to another property that's been designated for re-use—a redevelopment

incentive zone would bring the additional benefit of linking new construction to the simultaneous preservation of open space.

The legal power to establish a redevelopment incentive zone in Washington rests with the town's zoning commission, but a good set of standards for such a zone would, in my view, involve input from town residents and other land-use commissions—particularly with respect to the type and intensity of new uses that would be encouraged.

There's a good chance that the newspaper you're reading right now will be recycled. Shouldn't land in Washington also be treated as a valuable resource that's worthy of re-use?

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