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## Mixed-Use Centers, Again

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To stroll through the state's historic village or town centers, with their greens, churches, shops and homes, is to confront a conundrum: In many municipalities, zoning would prohibit such centers from being built today.

The traditional zoning rules that developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century tended to separate residences from commercial or industrial districts. Since many commercial districts then had noxious factories, it made a certain sense.

The factories are gone or cleaned up, but the zoning rules remain and have led to many sterile or sprawling commercial and residential areas.

The opening of Blue Back Square in West Hartford reminds us that mixing residential and commercial uses in a town center can create social life, boost commerce and taxes, and be a tool to fight sprawl.

West Hartford isn't the only town to realize this. Some communities have allowed mixed-use "design districts" or "village districts" for years, while others – most recently Groton and North Stonington – are changing their zoning rules to encourage mixed-use development in certain strategic areas.

"Mixed use in appropriate locations via innovative zoning mechanisms is the next step in the evolution of zoning in Connecticut," said Groton planner Matthew Davis.

In Groton at least, it has been more evolution than revolution. Planning director Michael J. Murphy and his staff, which includes Davis, worked on the idea for almost a decade, first to get mixed-use into town's plan of conservation and development and then to get a mixed-use regulation approved. That took two votes of the zoning board, the last earlier this month.

Groton now allows, with town approval, mixed-use "floating zones" in four "nodal," or potential growth, areas. To gain approval, the town and developer have to work out a number of issues. There are questions of how much commercial and how much residential will go into the mix, as well as questions about design, density, and car and pedestrian traffic.

Groton resolves this by having the developer come in with a plan, letting the zoning board change it if members choose, and then having the plan in essence become the zone. "This (approach) puts the town in a strong position," said attorney Tim Bates of the firm Robinson & Cole, who represents a developer who hopes to build a mixed-use project at Routes 184 and 117 in Groton.

There can be other issues with mixed-use proposals. Glastonbury land-use lawyer Mark K. Branse, most recently involved in getting a mixed-use proposal called Milltown Commons approved in North Stonington, said some proposals being put forward as mixed use actually aren't and still segregate uses.

He also said mixed-use projects have to be carefully planned. For example, if condominiums are built next to a shopping center with early-morning deliveries or dumpster pickups, there is a potential for discontent.

But done right, mixed use has a major upside, as Connecticut Main Street and other groups take pains to point out. It can increase the number of commercial outlets in a town center, create a lively street life, take pressure off open space and encourage more walking and less driving. It can give towns the kind of town centers New Englanders used to be proud of.

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