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State helps towns push development

By Michele Morgan Bolton, Globe Correspondent | August 23, 2009

Bryan Taberner didn't waste time waiting for an economic recovery to put Franklin on a path to bolster its commercial tax base.

Like other area communities, Franklin needs the revenue now. So the town's director of community and economic development, working with the state, gave the sluggish economy a kick-start by having three key locations named as "priority development sites."

The designation, made possible by a 2007 state law, gives communities a tool to recruit developers by promising to have the permitting process for eligible projects completed within 180 days. It also can bring access to more state assistance.

Ashland, Marlborough, Medway, Norfolk, Shrewsbury, and Pepperell are among the communities that have taken advantage of the state program.

Obviously, the economy is not great, Taberner said. Just look at the number of vacant or underused properties.

"Businesses need all the help they can get," he said. "So, we are letting the world know we are here."

On Aug. 12, the state's Interagency Permitting Board approved Franklin's application to name 20 parcels in the Franklin Industrial Park as a priority development site. It spans 252 acres at Constitution Boulevard and Discovery, Freedom, and Liberty ways, just two-tenths of a mile from Interstate 495's Exit 16.

The industrial park has one undeveloped parcel and more than 365,000 square feet of vacant space along with a range of businesses, including Des Lauriers Municipal Solutions Inc., Winchester Electronics, Fidelity Investments, and EMC Corp., the town's largest employer.

The new site joins 30 parcels approved last month for expedited permitting in Forge Park, totaling 259.8 acres at the intersection of Forge Parkway, National Drive, and Route 140, just a half mile from I-495's Exit 17.

Forge Park, which includes General Cable, Pierce Aluminum, and Berry Plastics, has 400,000 square feet of empty space near an MBTA commuter rail station, a BJ's Wholesale Club store, and a Marriott Residence Inn.

The priority development designation has also been obtained for a 33.9-acre town-owned parcel on Pond Street that will one day be a commercial subdivision, Taberner said. The property once hosted the town's sewer-treatment plant.

Medway has three priority development sites, including Medway Business Park and two phases in East Medway Industrial Park. Marlborough has four sites, one on Hayes Memorial Drive, and the others at 417 South St., 326 Elm St., and 100 Crowley Drive.

In Shrewsbury, Cen Tech Park East just joined the South Street Business Park as the town's targeted sites. Pepperell has 128 Main St.; Norfolk, the old Southwood Hospital property and, also as of Aug. 12, a new Town Center District. And in Ashland, the town's two priority designation sites are at 60 Pleasant St. and 61 Waverly St.

With the designations come local tax incentives that encourage existing businesses to expand. The state then

offers priority consideration for grants, brownfield remediation assistance, financing, training, and - maybe best of all - free nationwide marketing.

"What we're seeing is communities opt into the program and then come back with several more," said April Anderson Lamoureaux, permit ombudsman and director of the Massachusetts Permit Regulatory Office, part of the Executive Office of Housing & Economic Development. "That's what we had hoped would happen."

There is value in planning ahead, Lamoureaux said. "Time is money," she said. "Massachusetts, in prior years, had a reputation as a difficult place for doing business. It could take a week or six years to get approval - people never knew. In this economy, you need to act."

Several parcels in both of the Franklin business parks are also within the town's Economic Opportunity Area, meaning owners can negotiate tax increment financing agreements, which provide discounts on property taxes for five to 20 years, based on increased property values due to improvements or new construction.

Franklin was also named a bronze "BioReady Community" from the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council and the Massachusetts Alliance for Economic Development. It is one of 44 communities to get the designation, including Burlington and Holliston. Framingham got the top-rated "platinum" designation.

"Whether the economy gets better or even if it's good, any community needs to do outreach marketing," Taberner said. "For us, there is very little investment in it. Just my time."

In Norfolk, the Southwood Hospital campus on Route 1A has been named a priority development site. The nearly 90-acre parcel, site of the former Pondville State Hospital, is owned by Caritas Christi Health Care. It was rezoned for senior housing, but the development faded after contamination from the state hospital was found on the property.

Caritas has been unable to sell the complex that town officials would love to see developed.

Earlier this month, Norfolk also received a priority development site designation for a downtown business district.

In Ashland, the most recent priority development site is the Gamewell Building at 60 Pleasant St., a total of 70,000 square feet on 4 acres where the sole tenant is a bingo parlor.

"We'd love to get another employer in there," said Matthew Selby, the town's conservation agent and economic development coordinator.

Ashland received a \$60,000 state technical assistance grant to ensure permits are produced in 180 days. Funds will also pay for conservation and sign bylaw updates. The state grant program, which had accompanied priority site designations, didn't survive cuts to this fiscal year's budget, however.

Ashland started pursuing the designation "before the downturn of the economy," Selby said. "This allows us to help ourselves."

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