

MAYOR'S NOTES

Perspectives on Stewart's Proposal Vote

Many in the community showed intense interest in Stewart's request for rezoning property adjacent to its building, which included a proposal to tear down the adjacent property in order to expand. I want to share my perspectives on the Stewart's request and describe how it relates to my philosophy of governmental decision making. I want to express my appreciation of your involvement and how it points out how important the individual's role is within the community, and particularly its role with the election of elected officials.

In 2005, before the March election outcome that resulted in me and two others still on the Board being elected, the League of Women voters organized a community forum to give the four candidates for the office of mayor a chance to share their positions on topics of interest to the community. I recall vividly the issues that were predominant on the agenda - controversy surrounding the purchase of land for the village to gain access to additional water resources, concerns regarding the operation and management of our police department, proposals to increase attention to our senior and youth population, and the need for increased attention to our cultural and historic heritage.

I promised at that forum to practice balanced decision making about these and any future issue that might plague our village. I committed myself to look carefully at all matters related to the village comprehensively and not jump to judgement, but take the time to study and consider many factors before decisions are made. For the last 11 years, I believe we've maintained that 2005 promise.

In my view, many factors had to be considered in the Stewart's request. For one, the Village's 2008 comprehensive plan needed to be consulted which many community members touted as the most important thing. In my opinion, it is a guiding template to make balanced judgements about an array of factors which include preserving our history, as well as encouraging and promoting the business environment, among other things. There was the fear and concern of neighbors adjacent to the proposed project about the encroachment on their neighborhood. The Board struggled to apply good building practices as was judged in the project's early referral to our planning board, the true experts in this area. They had to balance into the decision equation the importance of supporting a long-time business that has meant a lot to our community - a goal which is front and center in our comprehensive plan as well.

Information and opinions that were offered in letters to us and to the press have not always been aligned with the facts and data as I know them to be. For example, the house designated for purchase is not within the historical district, nor is it on the historical register. On the site, businesses have operated for much of its life, and it was in the Central Business District until 2008, probably for that reason the *Altamont Enterprise* spent considerable effort to find the reason why it was taken out of the district in 2008. No one nor any record of deliberations related to the house gave a reason, other than a guess that it would "square" off the area between two districts.

Another key factor was that the prior plans by Stewart's to refurbish the building on its current site ran into issues of safety and design that couldn't be adequately addressed in earlier concept hearings with our Planning Board. The expanded site plan was meant to address those issues. Many expressed concern that the trees on the property may be removed, not understanding that Stewart's as the owner of the property, can still remove the trees on their own property even if the request for a rezone was denied.

These and other variables have been mentioned throughout the process, but tucked away and forgotten in the furor and objections generated by the rezoning request. Now that this year-long process is at an end, I feel comfortable with my personal decision. I feel comfortable because I had an opportunity to review and digest our comprehensive plan again and weigh all the facts.

I had hoped that the outcome on an expanded site would be site appropriate, a building would be modernized, and that the building would reflect the unusual character of our historic community. I had hoped that the business choices would be appropriate but be measured and not overwhelming. In the end, I felt the best chance for an updated and site-appropriate building for the Village was on an expanded space, and for that reason I voted to accept the rezoning request. I still hope that that a refurbished building can happen if the project returns to our Planning Board for their guidance. I believe the Planning Board should be trusted to implement design proposals in a responsible way. In fact, this is where the project rightfully belongs in the end because the appointed members of that board have the expertise, talent, and understanding that can make this happen.

Some board members understood that it was impossible for Stewart's to make any real improvements within the current footprint, but voted with the majority of those who expressed displeasure with the project as a function of democratic majority rule. Others saw merit with both sides, but expressed concern with the size of the proposed project's footprint, its encroachment on the neighborhood, and the direct affect the project would have on families in the neighboring property. Lastly, some felt the State Environmental Review which found no major impact, should be the guiding force.

The Village board has worked to enhance business opportunity in the Village, and seeks to encourage our current businesses to thrive. Stewart's is a good corporate neighbor and deserves some positive attention for seeking to improve its business and update its building, not the vilification of them as an evil corporation as I have been told by some. My hope is that we can work together to strike a sensible compromise in this area, and I intend to continue to work with Stewart's to bring them back to the table to see what can be accomplished on the current site.

The results of the Board vote was 2-2. The tie vote means that Stewart's request to build on an expanded site is defeated and cannot go forward. My vote may be viewed as an unpopular choice regardless, but it was made, in my view, as true to my belief about the best balance of all the facts. Although I may disagree with some community members on this topic, I respect their opinions and am encouraged by their interest in the welfare of the village. I hope everyone sustains interest in Village affairs now that the decision has been made to reject Stewart's application to rezone the adjacent property.

Community Involvement in Government

I encourage those of you who were active in this issue, that you step forward to fill open positions on our planning and zoning boards as well as consider taking on the day-to-day leadership of the village as an elected official. In these roles you can best support a transition plan for the Village's future that maintains the good work that has been accomplished during the last decade. Some on our current board will have served 12 years by the time the next election comes in March 2017. There may be opportunities as we, including myself, consider retiring from elected office.

We try to seek interested citizens in joining the leadership team as vacancies occur and as our tenures on the board come to logical end limits. As I looked out among you at the many meetings discussing the Stewart's request, I remember having approached some of you to serve in these capacities, but couldn't at the time. I hope that you will consider serving or will recruit and support candidates that reflect your belief in what the village priorities should be, and by that I mean all the priorities that are spelled out in our comprehensive plan, not just some. It is not an easy or materially rewarding job, but can be very satisfying when you know you are giving back to your community, and keeping it thriving and welcoming into the next century.

We currently have an opening due to a resignation by recently elected trustee Cathy Glass. I can appoint someone in the near future and would welcome interested citizens to submit a letter of interest to me. Regardless of whether I appoint someone or not, under Village Law we must conduct a special election next March to fill the trustee position vacated by Ms. Glass and the Village judge position currently being filled by my appointment of James Green.

Please check the Village web site at: altamontvillage.org for information on other program activities. Read more there about the kick off ceremony of the Village's 125th year at the Village Community Room next Sunday, October 18, 3 - 5 PM. Help us cut the cake and join us presenting our new exhibit: "Remembrance: Images of Selected Memorial Windows from Altamont Churches." This exhibit is the 17th archive historical exhibit since 2008 when we highlighted the Altamont Hose Company. There have been many other special programs highlighting the history and culture of the Village conducted throughout the years. I hope with your invigorated interest in our Village culture, you will make effort to support these events meant to honor our history. Please contact me if you have any questions at my email address: altamontmayor@aol.com or call the office: 518-861-6500.