

Ashe: A rush to vote bodes ill for Harvard

By **Bill Ashe**/ Thinking Aloud
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The Jan. 27 Harvard Post reported that "the Devens Disposition Board (DDEB) coordinating committee presented a report to the full board, proposing that it approve the Scenario 2B disposition model." Scenario 2B would create a new town of Devens and return governance of certain outlying parcels to Ayer, Harvard and Shirley. DDEB, the Post article stated, voted to endorse the report, with two dissentions, with the intent of forwarding it to the stakeholders for further input and approval. I, by the way, was one of the two dissenters.

There are several reasons for my dissenting vote. First and foremost - and overriding - is that it is not in the best interest of Harvard. And, as an elected official of this town of mine, I have this strange notion that it is my obligation to work and act in its best interest. Scenario 2B, or any disposition decision at this stage of Devens redevelopment would, in my judgment, have serious and adverse implications to our town's economy, to our social and natural environment. Too many issues have been poorly examined; too many problems remain unsolved.

Chapter 498 of the Acts of 1993, which is the guiding state legislation for the redevelopment of Devens, provided for a period of up to 40 years for intelligent, effective redevelopment. On or before July 1, 2033, Chapter 498 states, Mass Development, the Devens Enterprise Commission and the three towns are to submit a report to the legislature and the governor "recommending a permanent government structure. . . ." Planners and legislation drafters in the early 1990s understood the complexities and time-consuming nature of the issues and problems to be solved.

In spite of the above, Mass Development has worked to put disposition on a fast track and has come up with a study, if one can call it that, with two governmental structure options: Scenario 1A, which would return governance to Ayer, Harvard and Shirley; or Scenario 2B, which creates the new town of Devens. From the get-go, and for obvious reasons, Mass Development has favored Scenario 2B, and to get its way it uses all the tools of a powerful, well-financed real estate developer: financial deals, intimidation, ego stimulation, political end-runs, whatever it takes. And they are good at it.

Shirley gets all its land back. (They come out exactly the same under either scenario.) Ayer negotiates major concessions, e.g., North Post Pond and major improvements on MacPherson Road. Devens residents get a variety of goodies. But Harvard, the town with the most land by far, and the best land by far - and maybe that tells the story - gets the proverbial shaft. Who are our ineffective negotiators? And why are Harvard negotiators so ineffective?

A primary reason for Harvard's poor position is the chaotic, confused and self-serving disposition planning process Mass Development and a few - very few - local officials have put into play. Chaos and confusion enables Mass Development to reach its objectives, whereas it discourages and/or limits interest and participation by the average resident. Unlike the active, organized, intelligent Devens planning process in the mid-1990s, current disposition planning lacks cohesion, defined goals and objectives, and specificity.

A good example of what I am saying is to look at the "Disposition Elements" shown in the Jan. 27 Harvard Post, sourced from the "Stakeholder Working Group of the DDEB's Coordinating Committee," and make sense of it. I defy you.

I was approached by one active citizen participant in the current disposition planning process, and told that we have: a communication subcommittee that doesn't communicate; a coordination subcommittee that can't coordinate; a housing and transportation subcommittee that has trouble locating, locating, locating or knowing what road it's on; and we have a DDEB, controlled by Mass Development and a few local officials, whose apparent objective is to keep everyone, and all things important, in the dark until they decide. All this suits Mass Development fine. While the Harvard bus is going in circles, Mass Development knows its direction, what road it's on, and its destination point.

And why a November 2006 disposition vote? It is clearly not to Harvard's benefit, so why work toward it? Before Harvard votes on disposition, we need a much clearer picture, understanding and agreement on housing, transportation and traffic, water use and protection, contamination cleanup, landscape impacts, recreation, permanent open space delineation and a host of other important issues. Otherwise, Harvard faces serious - and adverse - impacts in the future. And any agreements with Mass Development must be legal, written and air-tight, for they have shown a talent for not following through on promises.

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The clear winner in an early November 2006 vote is Mass Development. Signs are clear. They get out of the strictures of Chapter 498 and the Re-Use Plan. They get the towns, especially Harvard, out of their hair. They have a clear line-of-sight to develop Devens as they see fit. Under Scenario 2B, what's to stop them? Devens is their company town for the next 20 years, which as the major landowner, is great for their bottom line. The clear loser in an early November 2006 vote? It's Harvard, of course.

Bill Ashe is a member of the Harvard Planning Board and the DDEB.

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