

DEVENS UPDATE: Boards hope to resolve Devens question in 1 year

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Harvard — The Joint Boards of Selectmen hope to resolve the Devens question by this time next year.

Selectmen from the towns of Devens, Ayer and Harvard met Thursday, Oct. 16 to further their discussion and review of the success criteria that has been submitted by the town of Devens, Ayer and Harvard. Selectmen from Shirley were not present and as of Oct. 16, the town had not contributed criteria. Devens Committee Chairman Tom Kinch pointed out that full participation is crucial and that the selectmen “must bring people along every step of the way.”

Lucy Wallace, Harvard selectman, described the next criteria step as “comparing and contrasting for commonalities and differences.”

The board voted to submit a proposal to the Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission, asking for a quote on the cost to integrate all of the town’s criteria data into usable information, “comparing and contrasting for commonalities and differences.”

In a follow-up conversation, Harvard’s Leo Blair, acting chairman of the joint boards, said that he has been in contact with Shirley Board of Selectmen Enrico Cappucci, who said that Shirley representatives will attend meetings after they pass their budget on Nov. 4.

Communication outward

Selectmen discussed the ongoing need for “transparency” and voter awareness. Blair observed that the joint boards are “working well together, momentum is good.” Board members agreed to draft and approve press releases designed “for people who have little time and little interest.”

Additionally, meetings are open to the public, televised, and written about in local papers. Information is also reported and discussed in the Harvard selectmen’s meetings.

The board agreed that they must engage townspeople and that, simultaneously, townspeople must reach out for information to make an informed choice on the Devens disposition.

Housing cap controversy averted

The controversial question of a housing cap for Devens was revisited throughout the meeting. Devens selectmen were adamant that it would “not be fair to the towns and to the state of Massachusetts to set a housing cap for Devens.”

Blair commented that Harvard residential growth is less than 1 percent without some kind of Devens housing limitation, “if I’m a buyer, I’m buying in Devens and sending my kids to school in Harvard.”

Selectman Tim Clark, Harvard, pointed out that Devens is not an island, it is part of a region and it affects the surrounding communities, thus giving opening for Blair to observe that “the island becomes Maui the second you give it Harvard schools.”

Devens Committee member Phil Crosby said that “statistically we know the rate of job growth in Devens and that 25 percent of people like to live very near to work. The population needs housing, building should start now.”

Blair offered assurance that Harvard is “not trying to box the Devens community in” and clarified that while “the main cost driver has to be identified and quantified; it doesn’t have to be a housing cap.”

Ayer selectman Carolyn McCreary, commented that “projected job growth should be the driver for housing growth,” further noting that “Ayer can absorb more students.”

Greater community

Rick Gilles, Ayer selectman, described “a greater community of Devens, Harvard, Ayer and Shirley,” and asked “How do we make our local economy grow and flourish?”

Blair expressed interest in Gilles “collective approach,” responding that while the people of Harvard may view the Devens Disposition with “skepticism and trepidation, they are interested and intrigued with the possibilities.”

The next meeting of the Joint Boards of Selectmen will be held Thursday, Oct. 30, in the Town Hall in Harvard.