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Mixed use development - a rising tide lifts all boats - by Keith Singh

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Have you ever been at work and thought, “I would spend more time in the office—but only if we had a pool table?” Probably not, but that reality didn’t stop employers from rolling out the green felt and attempting to make the office somewhere you might want to hang out. Pre-pandemic employers wanted their offices to be more than just a place to work. They wanted to create a place where one could feel a sense of belonging, where convenient amenities would encourage employees to gather and brainstorm.

Post-pandemic, that sentiment was swapped out with conversations about increasing space between desks, cutting down commute times, and efficiently using office space. It’s safe to say that any talks of getting a kegerator for the office went out the door.

Yet companies still need a way to promote culture and entice workers to physically come in and collaborate, and there are more sustainable ways to do that beyond cramming Pelotons next to cubicle farms.

Instead of trying to bring in a variety of community amenities into the office, companies could be seeking office locations that already provide their employees with these amenities. These locations could also provide nearby housing options, along with public spaces for employees when they need some distance from the office. This solution happens to sound a lot like those mixed-use developments we hear about, doesn’t it?

It also happens to be that the South Shore is in a great situation to promote the development of mixed-use communities. With its abundance of historic town squares, proximity to transportation options, and its coastal charms, the South Shore has the potential to become a very desirable place for businesses and families alike.

Thankfully, the South Shore 2030 roadmap exists. The 2030 roadmap is focused on advancing the South Shore’s ability to attract the next generation’s workforce, and creating vibrant communities that people want to reside in.

The first few steps on the 2030 roadmap brought us the Housing and Infrastructure Reports, along with the South Shore Site Readiness Study of 2021. Major takeaways from the South Shore 2030 Housing and Infrastructure Reports point to antiquated zoning regulations, lengthy permitting processes, and an anti-growth mindset that hinders the advancement of mixed-use developments.

The South Shore Site Readiness Study from September 2021 examines the lack of water and waste-water systems that can service new mixed-use developments. The study concluded that municipalities need to work with one another to share infrastructure costs and benefits.

Studies like these are encouraging first steps into analyzing the South Shore’s infrastructure and the solutions that spur more mixed-use development.

Projects and zoning changes that are already underway also provide encouraging signs for future mixed-use development in the South Shore. The recently announced Columbian Square redesign project in Weymouth proposes to turn one of its most dangerous intersections into one that increases safety and walkability. The proposed redesign will alter crosswalks, add seating for gathering spaces, and alter the current flow of traffic.

Developers of the new mixed-use building called “The Vault” located on 88 Pleasant Street were delighted to learn about the redesign, and how it will benefit future residential and commercial tenants.

Weymouth also took steps to create commercial overlay zoning districts along Route 18 and Route 53 to incentive developers to build on consolidated lots.

With the reports presented by the South Shore 2030 project, and the commencement of redesign projects around the South Shore, we could see a future where downtowns aren’t solely reliant on offices and their employees.

We could see a future where companies can focus more on running their business, and less on providing gyms, cafes, and recreational areas on campus for their employees. A future where developers want to start projects here, and companies that want to move here. The pandemic has shown us that it is time to rethink the way the South Shore develops.

Strict zoning regulations that keep office parks, shops, and green spaces separate from residential development don’t make sense for the future of the South Shore. In a world where rising fuel costs, dwindling to non-existent housing inventory, and a greater demand for walkable neighborhoods exist, the benefits of mixed-use development cannot be ignored.

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