



**OFFICE OF THE
TOWN ADMINISTRATOR**

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Town Administrator: *Timothy P. McInerney*

Business Forum: Questions and Insights

As you may know, on December 9, 2010 the town held its first business forum to hear from people on the business climate in Grafton. There were more than 50 people in attendance. We started the discussion with a brief presentation by the Mass office of Business Development. Then we ask attendees to write down questions so we could discuss the issues without any fear of retribution. Some questions we verbalized as well. We took note of these and outlined them below with answers and other ideas for making things better.

I took away that we have fundamentally a good and helpful staff and that our bylaws don't always allow us flexibility people think we need to serve them better. We will continue to serve the citizens as customers within the context of the law.

Upon sharing these questions with staff, we brainstormed on ideas to improve customer service. These are illustrated below.

- 1. What can we do to improve redundancy and communication between boards and committees?**
 - The best way to improve any redundancy is related to the applicants due diligence before the process begins. Having an early conversation about zoning qualifications will help determine what materials will be needed. Many times department permits can be submitted simultaneously which will help shorten the timeline of the process.

- 2. Will the Town consider creating a position to lead business owners through the permit process? The process is very confusing.**
 - Yes we would consider it depending on the cost associated with the position. However, in discussion with department heads, a short term solution would be holding a monthly meeting with BOH, ZBA, Conservation and Planning where people can come in with a prescheduled time and the departments can advise and answer questions that you may have about the process. Overview questions, timeline and what the applicant should budget could be answered in these meetings. All departments are available to serve the public during normal business hours. Most of the time the most important step in the process is the zoning determination process which can be handled in the building inspector's office. Before submitting a proposal for a special permit requirement, it is best to start the development process in the building inspector's office and ask for zoning determination or land use determination.

- 3. I am aware that we have a sign by law but if a business can't put out a sign specials etc how does the Town of Grafton expect businesses to open in Grafton or stay in Grafton if they can't advertise their business? The sign bylaw has to be change.**

 - There is currently a committee that is assessing the sign bylaws and a survey online to get input from the residents of Grafton. We encourage you to participate in this process if you would like to change the by-law. The Town only enforces the laws that are in place by the legislative body – Town Meeting. We cannot encourage people enough to get involved in the process and positively contribute to the town's vision.

 - 4. Is there a way to expedite? Other towns have a permit in on the same day certain times a year for projects that don't need to be embellished. There should be different process for different project types.**

 - We do not have the staff capacity to expedite permits. In a small community there needs to be a level of consistency for the same process. In situations where information can be expedited, this leaves room for no diligence and can equal violations. Within the Planning Board for example, the laws state that permits have 65 days to hold a public hearing, 90 days to render a decision, and 14 days to appeal the decision in the Town Clerk's office. On average, most permits are issued under two months.

 - 5. There should be a survey on the website for additional feedback on issues like signs and permits.**

 - The sign bylaw study committee had a survey to help guide them when looking at current sign bylaw. We may set up a link on web site. In the meantime, we encourage people to email any suggestions or comments anytime by clicking on "Send Us Comments" and selecting "General Comments to the Town".

 - 6. Is it possible to have only one set of plans go through conservation commission and planning board? It may help streamline plans and better communication instead of two sets of plans and two sets of details under review.**

 - It is not possible to have one set of plans go through the Conservation Commission and one sent to the Planning Board. If these plans have modifications, they would have to be duplicated. 20 sets of plans are sent to the Conservation Commission and Planning and the outcome of plans depend on modifications done by each Board.

 - 7. Why can't the Town pick up commercial trash?**

 - The Town is not in contract with our trash vendor to pick up commercial trash and recycling. Municipalities generally only engage in contracts with residential pickup. Having a commercial trash contract would cost taxpayers approximately \$1,000,000.00 additional funding per year.
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- There was discussion about businesses who mostly dispose paper and are looking to cut their trash costs. www.Paperretriever.com is a popular option for other local communities. The program is a simple and free service for communities to use for paper recycling. Distinctive green and yellow Paper Retriever bins are provided to interested parties and are encouraged to bring their paper and put it into a convenient drop off location. Customers are not charged for the bins or the pick-up of paper. In fact, Paper Retriever pays its partners for the paper collected in each bin. The Town supports business owners use this program to help defray costs and for better environmental practices.

8. There should be a list of expectations for business owners such as a timeline, what departments are needed, a cost upfront so the business owner can plan and budget appropriately.

- In order to assist in helping make the process less complicated for business owners, we encourage applicants to engage in early conversation with departments in order to understand the expectations of the process. The due diligence of the applicant will allow for an appropriate timeline and cost to be provided. The first step is in the zoning determination or development process, so the Building Inspector's office is the starting point in order to determine the rest of the planning process. Once the zoning is determined, you can provide documentation to the appropriated departments.

9. Building Inspector sees a box for a toilet out for trash and he tells the plumbing inspector to stop by and see if the homeowner is doing work without a permit. Why is this allowed?

- We want to know that construction is done in a safe manner consistent with state construction code. If people decided to break the law and we know about it we are duty bound to take action.

10. How does BOH agent close down church supper with church and if so- WHY?

- This point was discussed with the Health Agent and we learned that a church supper was not "closed down". One of the goals of the board of Health is to insure the health of the general public. Food borne illness is not something to be taken lightly. In 1999 an estimated 5,000 deaths, 325,000 hospitalizations and 76 million illnesses were caused by food borne illnesses within the US. While we do not want to take any adverse action towards those helping others, we must work to ensure that we don't cause more problems than those we are trying to help.

11. Customer service is terrible – "tax collector needs a copy of an excise bill and we have 10 days to do this" Building inspector – permit gets passed in 'we have 30 days" I would be out of business with that attitude. What are you going to do to work on

- There was a candid level of concern of customer service in departments, and its obstruction on our town's business practice. The process to this matter will be handled as a two prong approach; the solutions will be handled both through individual discussions with specific Department Heads and through a group informative approach which will offer scenarios on how to better problem solve in their department.
- Some of the points brought up in the meeting were specific examples of what was being done by managers and not how they were addressed. For example, it is the job of the Board of Health to keep our public safe and follow regulations pertaining to this safety. It is the job of the Building office to approach home owners who are doing work without a permit. It is the job of the Tax Collector to collect our taxes. And so forth. "Not renewing business permits refusing to issue license when taxes aren't paid" and "closing down a church supper" are examples of these statements.
- The justification to ask these departments to not fulfill their duties assigned is not considered a customer service complaint. It is the question of how these issues are being handled that will be addressed.

In summary, we are committed to serving our citizens responsible and effectively. Many will want us to say yes to every request but we cannot. Through this process we can and may institute the following:

- As done in private business, we may "secretly shop" departments to evaluate our customer service levels
- I may randomly call applicants to inquire how the process is going
- We may send surveys to applicants
- We will have training on customer service interaction
- We will hold more meeting like this business forum
- We may have monthly meetings where anyone with questions can meet with department heads collectively to discuss a project that needs permitting

Always call or email me if you feel your treatment was less than expected. Your input will make this organization better.

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