

BY JEFFREY BRAGMAN

Sag Harbor Future Shock

The Village of Sag Harbor has managed to preserve its architecture and undeniable charm. But historic preservation, and a Main Street anchored with nostalgic uses like a Five and Dime, the independent movie theatre, a local pharmacy and the elegant American Hotel may prove to be less enduring as the village becomes a magnet for development.

Despite its somewhat cantankerous reputation, Sag Harbor is in the midst of some glamorous real estate make-overs. Recent projects include new condos, the overdue Bulova reconstruction, and extensive changes to Harbor Heights gas station. Whether development should be cheered or jeered seems to be a matter of perspective and contentious debate.

So why mess with success? And who has the right to stop free-market forces which drive changes on Main Street?

In truth, the appeal of the village is deeper than its building facades. There is still a tangible community fabric on Main Street, long gone from the larger neighboring towns. Sag Harbor shops and stores have an authentic vitality and collectively create a quirky local personality. The Kramoris Gallery, Sage Street Antiques, the shell store and stylish Ruby Beets tell you that Sag Harbor is unique. Restaurants range unpredictably from the American Hotel, Page and Paradise to the pizza store, the Corner Bar and Murphs, which still runs darts tournaments. The streetscape is an interesting place to be because it reflects a local economy. Sag Harbor conveys a sense of location, like no other place. Its community character, embodied in an economy of small stores, is undoubtedly more fragile than the appearance of its buildings.

Sag Harbor would not be the same place if local shops and small town uses were gradually erased by the sleek sameness of uniform, national formula stores. Without community will, a vigilant press and an alert local government, Main Street could easily morph into SoHo or Rodeo Drive, or any of a thousand upscale, featureless shopping streets visible across modern homogenized America.

Environmental protection is good for business. People and businesses are drawn to places which preserve their historic and aesthetic roots. Most people concede that it is wise to protect historic buildings and spaces from damaging physical changes. But progressive New York State environmental laws go considerably farther. Modern environmental protection includes less obvious and tangible aspects of the environment. Not only do

we evaluate traffic and noise impacts, but also impacts on the quality of historic and neighborhood character. Aesthetic resources, too, are recognized for environmental protection. Even economic displacement resulting from development can be considered. A diverse local economy is a critical component of Sag Harbor's character.

Those who claim that real estate development cannot be checked without tampering with the "free market," place no economic value on the intangible parts of the environment. Instead, they exalt in the juggernaut, and smugly dismiss the inevitable loss of local stores and shops. "Good-bye cranky service, hello Starbucks and the Gap. Get over it." Yet Main Street diversity creates Sag Harbor's appealing character and personality. It contributes to appreciating real estate value. It deserves protection.

Protecting a diverse, authentic local economy is not impossible. It is not socialism or the elimination of competition. It just means that the planning process can legitimately review economic impacts on community character resulting from the intrusion on Main Street of national formula stores. For example, developers can lawfully be required to analyze economic impacts on Sag Harbor's merchants and shops before decisions are made.

We would not permit a developer to damage a historic building in the interest of progress and profit. We should be equally unwilling to permit large uniform stores from damaging the array of small local businesses, which define Main Street.

Political power can balance the power of money and development. Strict planning requires community support. Residents must attend and speak out at public hearings. Political involvement is essential. Elected officials have to absorb the message that rigorous and expansive environmental review is the key to Sag Harbor's preservation. The village must fairly and rigorously apply existing zoning rules. It must fight litigation brought by well-heeled developers. Eventually, the Sag Harbor will earn a reputation for mandating objective and meticulous environmental review. It is the only way it can chart a future based on local needs, not development dollars.

JEFFREY BRAGMAN is an attorney handling real estate, environmental and zoning and planning matters on the East end of Long Island for more than 20 years. He has also been counsel to town and village zoning and planning boards.