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HEADLINE: MASTER PLAN SEEN AS STIMULUS TO REVIVAL OF BUSINESS
DISTRICT

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BODY:

Driving through Randolph's empty and drab downtown, Selectman James Burgess saw lots of room for improvement. He pointed to too many sandwich shops, stores so far from the sidewalk that their windows can't be seen from the road, and, especially, the lack of foot traffic.

"You want to bring people back into your downtown," Burgess said, as he cruised slowly along Main Street.

But Burgess has hope. With several other town officials, he is pushing a dormant master plan he says can help shape redevelopment in Randolph, especially its business district. The 150-plus-page document, adopted by the Planning Board in 2001 but never implemented, is also a priority for Paul Fernandes, the town's newest selectman.

"It defines where we want to go," said Fernandes, the only new board member elected in the town's April 6 balloting. He hopes the panel will begin by appointing an implementation committee at its meeting tomorrow.

"We have been floundering" without an overall plan tomorrow, Fernandes said, adding that selectmen must "set a guideline with what we want to do with our town."

If selectmen appoint a committee to implement the master plan, many of its policies would have to be approved by Town Meeting.

The plan, prepared by an outside consultant at a cost of about \$98,000, is meant to serve as a guide for town development for the next 10 to 20 years or even longer. It establishes goals in several areas, such as land use, economic development, housing, the environment, public facilities, and transportation.

While shopping at the Sudbury Plaza in downtown Randolph recently, resident Danielle Neil said a lack of clear zoning was obvious, judging from the eclectic mix of businesses dotting Main Street. "It's no zoning, as far as I can see," she said.

Another shopper, Ilene Cloutier, said she didn't like the location of several businesses outside of the central business district on North Main Street, because of their proximity to homes and the traffic they produce. She said she generally prefers not to shop downtown because of the slim variety of stores and the number of "kids hanging around." Besides, she said, "there's no parking whatsoever."

Burgess said improving the town's business climate is a major goal, given the recent loss of several high-profile companies, including Allied Domecq Quick Service Restaurants (the parent company of Dunkin' Donuts) and Sealy Mattress Corp. Allied Domecq closed its operations in Randolph and moved to Canton; Sealy Mattress closed its Randolph manufacturing plant and moved to a new facility in Albany, N.Y.

Burgess said he especially wants the town to diversify its tax base by attracting high tech companies. "Let's plan now for what we want to attract" to several industrial parks outside Randolph's downtown business area, he said.

Bringing the master plan to the top of the town's agenda, however, has been a slow process. An implementation committee was established in 2001, shortly after the Planning Board approved the document, but a lack of interest by Town Meeting members hindered the board from making appointments to the committee, said Burgess. The board has since opened the committee to any resident who is interested.

Selectmen chairman Dan Lam said the plan's momentum also may have been slowed by the slumping economy. "At the time when it was developed, we were in an economic boom," he said. Lam said town officials may have been reluctant to implement the plan because of uncertainty over whether enacting some of the policies would cost money.

The most substantial changes involve defining zoning more clearly throughout Randolph. For example, zoning changes could designate certain business types for specific areas, such as restricting the number of fast-food restaurants allowed in the

downtown.

Burgess has been working with the South Shore Chamber of Commerce on an additional proposal to attract businesses by lifting certain zoning restrictions, like building height, and increasing the number of parking spaces allotted for buildings.

Ron Cogliano, community development manager for the South Shore Chamber of Commerce, said such changes can have an enormous impact on the decision of business owners to set up shop in a community.

"If you limit the opportunity to expand, you are limiting the opportunity to grow your local economy and create jobs," he said. "These are the small things that more towns and cities should be looking at."

Burgess said it was crucial for the town to shape future development now rather than reacting to development when it comes. A master plan implementation committee would be a good start, he said.

The committee "holds the economic health of our community in their hands, to a great extent, and the long-term viability of our town," he said.

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NOTES:
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