

Brunswick officials looking to revitalize Cook's Corner as area grows

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By Hannah LaClaire Times Record

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A shopper leaves the Cook's Corner Sears at 8 Gurnet Road in February. *Hannah LaClaire / The Times Record*

BRUNSWICK — With hundreds of housing units in the works at Brunswick Landing and more commercial real estate coming online, town officials are planning a facelift for Cook's Corner that they hope will bolster development in the town's commercial sector.

The details are still being worked out, but Sally Costello, the Brunswick's economic and community development director, hopes to create a sense of place that will draw businesses and visitors to the area while acting as a guide for future growth.

"There are several things happening to add growth and we want to manage that in a coordinated effort," Costello said, adding, "we want to make sure that our infrastructure is able to accommodate that growth."

This fall, town officials will meet to determine goals and engage with public and private partners like the Maine Department of Transportation and Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority.

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Much of the work, such as redoing some of the regulatory framework and development standards, will take time, Costello said. There are smaller changes, such as landscaping, lighting and sign upgrades that will help augment some of the larger alterations, such as road, stoplight and infrastructure changes.

For example, there might be signs designating the area or an official entrance to create a sense of "arriving" in Cook's Corner instead of just suddenly finding yourself in the middle of it. The area could be made more walkable and bike friendly, with more connections to Brunswick Landing. Some of the interior spaces are not well organized and are not tied together.

New standards might include setback requirements, no passive retail that faces the street, no mechanical equipment in view, Costello said. The goal is not to make Cook's Corner another Maine Street, but rather to enhance what it already offers. A market study will help determine what services and businesses would be a good fit.

"There will be more set expectations around certain kinds of development," Costello said. "If we don't set any mechanism, they won't happen."

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Some of these standards will help attract more high end and more diversified tenants, something the area, which has been struggling to retain businesses, could use.

In February, Sears announced its Brunswick location would be closing. While the company has not officially vacated, it will leave a roughly 82,000-square-foot hole in Brunswick's shopping landscape.

"We're going to work hard to get somebody there who's a really good addition to Brunswick, and not have a vacant building for too long," Costello said at the time.

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The space is owned by Katz Properties of New York, which purchased the mall for about \$13.25 million in 2016. The property at 8 Gurnet Road, encompassing Sears, Dollar Tree, Big Lots, TJ Maxx, Staples and soon-to-be a new, 50,000-square-foot Hannaford, is valued at just over \$17 million, according to property records. The entire stretch accounts for about \$341,000 in annual property tax revenue.

As people begin looking for more of a retail experience instead of traditional shopping, "a lot of these malls are becoming obsolete," Costello said. Sears' closure, while an unfortunate sign of the times, is also an opportunity for more development.

Sears still has an active lease on the property and likely will for some time, Costello said, so Katz officials will have to work with Sears to try to find a new tenant for the large space or perhaps break it up into multiple units.

"Our biggest fear is that they don't do anything with it," she said, "but (Katz) seemed very confident and is not afraid to take this on."

Sears joined Bath and Body Works, Olympia Sports, Kim's Hallmark, Book Land, Radio Shack and Lamey Wellehan in a long list of companies departing from the Cook's Corner mall during the past decade, something Costello attributes not only to the closure of the Brunswick Naval Air Station and the 2008 recession, but also to a lack of past investment in the site.

"We'd love to see some of these other retailers like Trader Joe's and Chipotle to bring in a different kind of tenant mix, but we have to provide them with places that are functional, and some of our existing spaces aren't functional for what they need," she said in February.

On the other end of the complex, the new 50,000 square foot Hannaford is taking shape.

Eric Blom, spokesperson, said in an email Thursday that construction is underway and officials are hoping to open in the third quarter of 2021. The downtown Hannaford location will remain open.

Around the same time, a new 56,000-square-foot medical office building for Martin's Point Health Care should also be completed between Bath Road and Allagash drive. The building is slated for opening by the summer of 2021 and will consolidate Brunswick's two existing Martin's Point offices on Baribeau Drive and Farley Road.

Costello called the new Martin's Point facility a "game-changer" and said it has the potential to be a stabilizer for development surrounding the site.

"That will make a big difference for the area," she said.

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