

WHITE PAPER – HARTLAND BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Date: February 13, 2024

Subj: PROPOSAL PREVIOUSLY MADE TO THE TOWNSHIP MANAGER

PROPOSAL: Based on discussion with you during your time in office, we believe the Township should take action to a) become significantly more business friendly, and b) to be perceived by the business community in Hartland and elsewhere to actually want to become a better place for them to do business.

WHY? Because a strong and profitable business community is a necessary component of the entire Hartland Community, because our business community has become weaker, less profitable, and is providing fewer opportunities for employment

- Pre-pandemic
 - Weakness was dramatically demonstrated by the abrupt departure of Walmart, and by Ramco-Gershenson’s failure (over ten years) to land even a second retail store.
 - Length of time to fill existing structures such as Foodland and the 2nd half of Walmart
 - Parting comments left by Menards – after having pursued a Hartland location for over eight years
 - Comments by professional advisors regarding business locations that the process in Hartland is long, uncertain, and costly – much easier just to go elsewhere
 - Business surveys spanning 2012 thru 2019 that consistently demonstrate concern that Hartland was failing to create a positive regulatory climate for them in Hartland.
- Post-Pandemic – Whatever the problems before the pandemic – those problems and new ones are amplified:
 - The need for actual brick and mortar has been dramatically reduced – both for office and retail
 - Online alternatives (most dramatically Amazon) makes it harder for local business to survive
 - Costs and process in the Township continue as before – any relief proposed was temporary, not permanent. Underlying regulations are as complex as ever.

IS THIS TRUE? Importantly, the business community believes it to be true. One thing the Chamber and the HBA agree on is that Hartland has acquired a reputation for being a difficult place to do business, from initially obtaining approval and continuing right on thru operations and marketing. Many believe they cannot do what they must do to succeed.

Businesses perceive that the Township is in denial. It’s declaration that it is already “Business Ready, Business Friendly” rings hollow in the ears of those within this community, and to those who learn the difficulties they will experience from those already here, or those who previously tried and went elsewhere. The real life experience is one of permanently closed stores and restaurants, laid off workers and even worse a shortage of workers who continue to earn more from unemployment and relief checks than from actually working.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

I - Acknowledge that this is a real problem, that Hartland is not nearly as business friendly as it says it is, and commit to becoming TRULY business friendly. Some say this is the most important step.

Unless a majority of either this or a new board will so commit, the business community will: continue to hurt; there will be more empty storefronts and restaurants; opportunity for employment may further decline; and Hartland will become a measurably less desirable place to live.

Some have advised that we should not even begin this change unless a solid majority or board members are so committed.

II – If Hartland commits, commit to what?

1. Regulatory and Process Reform – with an end in mind. Regulations have steadily expanded from 0 pages to an estimated 2000 (estimated because the pages are not numbered, and it is so voluminous that it is rarely printed).
2. Objective of Such Change – Slashing of cost and time to get into business in Hartland. Including the continuing cost of requirements that continue for the life of the business, but negatively impact profits. Get out of the way and let businesses be competitive again. Instead of an approval process of months and even years, cut it to a month or two.
3. Ask businesses what they need to succeed, and if possible grant what they need! Or help them get it!
4. Regulatory review – by the persons that should be tasked with making the process and regulations more business friendly – quicker and less costly: **the Planning Commission**

III – MEASURE PROGRESS – That should be the purpose of conducting Surveys and Assembling Statistics.

1. Resume Surveys of Business Community, including
 - a. Developers who have attempted and/or succeeded in developing new commercial developments,
 - b. Applicants planning to open new retail/restaurant/office/processing operations in existing buildings – by rent or purchase
 - c. All business that leave Hartland, by closure or by leaving to a new location
2. Recordkeeping/Statistics – The Hartland Board, as well as Businesses interested in coming to Hartland are entitled to information – or data (clearly for different reasons). Information based on real information including
 - a. Type of business including description of project size (including square footage), Dollars to be invested, and potential employment.
 - b. Length of time from initial contact to receive necessary approvals.
 - c. Result: Approved/Rejected; Chose Hartland or Elsewhere
 - d. Reasons: Developer and Township stated reasons for the result
 - e. Cost burden on prospective business/developer, including
 - Costs of documentation, studies and fees paid by business, and
 - Cost of review by Township imposed on business/developer.

IV – COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY – Meetings are the Township’s opportunity to interface with the public. Of course, there are informal meetings, one on one and usually not documented. And then there are the formal required meetings with the Township’s Planning Commission and Board – required by regulations. Two areas provide opportunities to become more business friendly.

1. Tele-viewing – The Township has an opportunity to provide live streaming of meetings (internet and via Comcast). While progress has been made, live streaming has been unreliable. However, the Township has decided that sometimes important meetings, or portions of them, will neither be televised and/or recorded for later viewing. The public’s view of this is that the Township has something to hide – by having remote meetings, by recording only a portion of meeting and then adjourning to the side room, and by not recording Special Meetings. Progress in each of these exceptions would result in an improved perception by the business community (often too busy to attend in person).

This Board should commit to recording all meetings and to recording the complete meeting (except for legally exempt portions where the public is excluded). If a remote meeting is held, it should be recorded by video camera and posted as if in the Township facilities.

2. A common complaint is that the Call to the Public is sometimes viewed as an inconvenient interruption. Board policy is that the Township will neither provide a response at the time of the Call, nor commit to provide a response at a later time. Hence it has involved as a one-way process that only allows a speaker to let off steam.. Calls to the Public are the Township’s version of a press conference – critical and potentially embarrassing questions must be expected.
3. Legal Exposure – While specifics of lawsuits, including negotiating strategies, are privileged information, the exposure in terms of dollars should be shared with the public, who will bear the end result of the litigation. Many believe that a venue should be provided to at least disclose existence of the lawsuits and the potential exposure.