

Opinion & Editorial

Seizing Orange's Opportunities

By Mark Moyher

The New Haven Register recently exposed a major problem facing residents of Orange – the dramatic changes in the retail market that have left many stores and shops empty, sometimes for years, and the lack of leadership to find innovative solutions.

The photograph of an empty store and the headline, “Orange working to fill vacant retail locations” with a giant red question mark at the end accurately conveys the truth about what has and continues to happen.

Yet, the man responsible for this crisis – First Selectman James Zeoli, who has been a virtual one-man show for nearly two decades – was given full reign to explain away why warehouses and truckers have taken over much of our town's greatest commercial asset, the Boston Post Road, which was once proudly called Orange's “Miracle Mile.”

I am among the many business and community leaders who believe it's time for a change,

time to bring the wide array of experiences and expertise of town residents to the task of securing Orange's future as a vibrant and healthy community.

In challenging Zeoli, who is seeking a 10th term as first selectman, I am bringing together the talents of people in business, finance, education, the arts and other fields to set an agenda for the future, not the past.

So much of the problem is that the public has so little information about what is going on at Town Hall, where Zeoli and people close to him keep a tight lid on decisions.

I intend to create an Office of Public Information to use modern tools available online to keep residents up to date on the facts and issues we're confronting before decisions are made.

A lot of the problems are the town's fiscal management policies, where the emphasis is to maintain a political advantage for Zeoli by tiny reductions in the mill rate while maintaining a massive reserve fund far beyond what other

towns are doing.

This is vital money that could be used to solve the problems of the business community, seeking smart solutions to the empty building crisis and promoting the enormous assets of Orange as a wonderful town with terrific schools, safe neighborhoods and open spaces. The Boston Post Road needs a facelift, which could include streetscape plantings, attractive banners and expansion of the lighting program that was begun by the Boston Post Road Committee.

From its origins 200 years ago, Orange has been known for its farms. That's still true today when there are six working farms where freshly harvested produce is being sold at stands.

Yet very little is done to promote our farmers outside Orange. We need to have a weekend public marketplace on Boston Post Road and get the word out to neighboring communities just a few minutes away.

Orange has an extraordinary array of restaurants and has long been known for its many fur-

niture stores. So much more can be done with smart efforts to sell Orange as the great place it is. One idea is to create an adult recreation complex in the now mostly vacant Christmas Tree Shops plaza. An indoor pickleball facility would be a great addition to the indoor golf lounge and the ax throwing center already located in that plaza.

As I speak with Orange residents I hear that it's time for a change, for new ways of thinking, for the public to be brought into the conversation, for new leadership.

Orange's future is slipping away and should not be left up to someone not up to the task or just too disinterested to care. We are seemingly stuck in neutral. It doesn't have to be that way. We will provide new leadership in order to propel Orange forward. Come November, the people of Orange can seize the opportunity.

Mark Moyher is the Democratic candidate for first selectman in Orange.