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NEW BYLAW PROTECTS YOUTH FROM DRUG CULTURE

WEATHERSFIELD —Select Board members approved a new Zoning Bylaw at their meeting on Tuesday, February 16th, that restricts drug and tobacco paraphernalia establishments from locating within ½ mile radius of schools, libraries, recreational fields and licensed childcare centers. In addition, these outlets will be prohibited from operating within a 1,000 foot radius of another outlet selling similar products.

The bylaw, a result of a growing concern among engaged citizens, is a piece of a multi-year process where Weathersfield residents, including youth, participated in shaping the community for a better future. In early 2013, residents gathered to speak out to oppose a drug and tobacco paraphernalia, or “head shop” operating in Ascutney. The following September, a petition to limit the expansion of such establishments was circulated, where 78 signatures were gathered and the petition was submitted to the town.

Prior to the work on the bylaw, community members began envisioning the design and values of the town and how to support having a healthy community for citizens of all ages. What rose to the surface was a desire to keep the rural beauty of the towns. Another step contributing to this vision, Weathersfield youth engaged in the civic process to approve a tobacco-free parks and recreation policy.

The development of the zoning bylaw was a working collaboration between the Weathersfield Planning Commission, the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission, and the Mt. Ascutney Prevention Partnership (MAPP).

Of the new bylaw, Melanie Sheehan, Chair of MAPP states “The actions by the town of Weathersfield are a wonderful example of proactive, best practice substance abuse prevention policy. By restricting the location of drug and tobacco paraphernalia outlets, the town is taking an active role in protecting future generations from the proliferation of retail environments that promote a culture of drug use.”

Youth that participated in the early stages of the community dialogue around the “head shop” interviewed the police chief, town manager, school staff, and other students. They created a presentation whereby comments summarized that they thought Weathersfield to be a wonderful town but the store wasn’t a good fit. Comments included that the store “made kids think drug use is cool”; “makes it easier to get ahold of substances and drug use products”; and “makes drug use seem normal, more common.”

A copy of the September 2013 petition and the Bylaw are available by request or can be viewed at the town office located in Ascutney. For more information on prevention policy resources, contact MAPP by emailing cho@mahhc.org or calling 674-7450.

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