

DOING BUSINESS IN: SOUTHWICK

This Town Is About Much More Than Tourism

By DAN CHASE

It's safe to say that Russ Fox has an excellent perspective on his hometown of Southwick, and not just because his family business, Southwick Florist, sits squarely on the town's main commercial corridor.

He started out on the Finance Committee after graduating from Babson College, and then spent eight years on the Board of Selectmen. "Then they asked me to help out with the Economic Development Committee, and I did that for about 10 years," he told *BusinessWest* recently from his vantage point looking out over College Highway, a.k.a. Routes 10 and 202.

Currently chairman of the Board of Assessors, Fox said he went on that board to help out for a year, "and that was 10 years ago."

Like many people in town, Fox said that tourism dollars play an important part of the business community of this southernmost town of western Mass. But in addition to popular destinations like the Congamond Lakes, the national motocross track on Powder Mill Road, and three golf courses, including the Ranch, voted one of the 50 best public courses in the country by *Golfworld* magazine, the town is a draw for a few more domestic destinations.

With Connecticut — and its higher taxes — just over the town line, Southwick has long been a shopping site for its neighbors to the south. "Gas, alcohol, and groceries," Fox said. "There's a reason why Big Y built their store where they did. And Dan Scibelli's Mobil station on College Highway is one of the busiest in the state."

While those out-of-town dollars are an important resource for the services sectors, many here are quick to point out that it's not all just fun and games in Southwick.

"There's our agriculture," Fox noted. "The big money is tobacco, and that's all shipped out. But then there's Calabrese Farms, Ray's Farms — a number of people come for their produce. For bedding plants, there's no better place than Southwick come spring. You hear people in Boston talk about coming to Meadow View Farm, one of the biggest volume retail operations in the state. When you need police to direct traffic on the weekends, you know how busy it is."

Karl Steinhart is the town's chief administrative officer, and he and Board of Selectmen Chair Arthur Pinell stressed the importance



of agriculture for the town. "When people talk about industry, they tend to overlook agriculture. But that was a significant part of the town's historical commerce, and it is a part of our past that we like to remain viable. We have an agricultural commission that acts as an advocate for that industry in our community."

But Southwick is not without a small pocket of industry as well. And the word 'industry' could very well be a description of one man who has called this town home for the last 36 years. "Long enough to consider myself a native," John Whalley laughed.

In addition to Whalley Computer Associates, his first business venture launched over three decades ago, he has added Whalley Precision, Walt's Auto, the Southwick Inn, "and a couple of property-management companies."

For this latest installment of Doing Business In, *BusinessWest* asks these local civic leaders what makes Southwick a real draw, for both business and pleasure.

Karl Steinhart (left) and Arthur Pinell (with Cindy Pendleton, Board of Selectmen administrative assistant) say Southwick officials want balanced growth in town.

Water Works

In the selectmen's board room, Pinell and Steinhart summed up the shape of the business community in their town.

"We have a broad range in the size of businesses here," Pinell said. "We have a few large employers, not many of them. Mostly smaller businesses. I would consider them to be appropriate to a community of this size — shops, retail stores, some light manufacturing."

There are a few contractors, Steinhart added — "machine shops, things of that nature where they have contracts with the military or the aircraft industry."

For a town of just under 10,000, the scope of the business community is similar to many other communities in the region. Steinhart

said that about 10% of the tax levy comes from business.

Historically, agriculture has shaped the town and, as Fox mentioned, does continue to play a vital role in Southwick's reputation far outside the region. But tourism has long played a vital role in what business has taken hold. In the 19th century, grand Victorian hotels and dance halls were built along the Congamond Lakes, and while they might be long gone, the waterways continue to be an attraction.

There are two boat ramps on the Lakes, securing public access, and Southwick is host to one of the state's largest freshwater fishing tournaments.

"And when the national trials take place in the summer," Pinell said, referring to the motocross track, "That can draw up to 18,000 people on a given day."

Because of the environmentally sensitive nature of the Lakes, Pinell and Steinhart both emphasized the importance of economic growth that takes into consideration both the waterways, and the aquifer that supplies them.

"Water quality is beyond important," Pinell said. "Not only is that a defining area of this town, but there is a good percentage of the community that lies over two aquifers for many surrounding communities."

While both men agreed that this has historically presented a challenge to business development, they acknowledged the success of a sewer line that connects to Westfield's wastewater treatment, built within the last decade along College Highway.

But both men were in absolute agreement when it came time to look at what force such infrastructure might have on the shape of Southwick's business and commercial future.

"All the municipal boards are interested in balanced growth," Steinhart stated.

Nodding, Pinell said that "our EDC looks carefully at businesses coming in to explore Southwick. They are certainly scrutinized with regard to what they can bring to the town."

Prior to the recession, Southwick was growing, both in commercial and residential developments, and both Pinell and Steinhart said that Town Hall took measures to keep that growth in line with the character of the town. But, Steinhart said, with a single tax rate, and a multi-million-dollar project to enhance College Highway, with turning lanes

for busy curb cuts, the town is primed for business that is suitable for the community.

Talking Shop

Southwick Florist traces its roots back to the 1950s, Fox said. "After World War II, my father and mother started a variety store in Westfield—bait, tackle, all sorts of things," he remembered. "My father grew up in town, and he bought the farm on Davis Road he worked on as a child.

"After I got out of college in 1979," he continued, "we were still farming, but we took it to the next step, had a greenhouse, and sold fresh vegetables. We started selling poinsettias and Easter lilies. A lot of the florists we were selling to told us we were nuts. They said, 'you're selling these plants to us for \$5, and we're selling them for \$25.'"

From some family friends came some florist know-how, and as the family looked for something "to keep us busy during the winter season," he said, the present business began. "All of a sudden, we're retail florists. We've been doing this for 30 years."

Fox said that the tourist attractions are beneficial for all town businesses, including his own. "When the weather is nice and people are here for the lakes, or golf, or you name it, restaurants are full, package stores are busy."

"Even something like Mrs. Murphy's," he said, referring to the small coffee shop just down the road and its famous donuts. "Yankee magazine calls them one of the best places for donuts in New England, and it's something as little as that operation that brings people to Southwick."

He praised both his peers in Town Hall and members of the business community for their dedication to keeping the town both vital and aesthetically pleasing.

"Look at John Whalley," he said. "I remember when he first opened a store in Gristmill Plaza, part-time, because he was still a teacher. Now he's one of the wealthiest individuals in town. He's bought up a lot of land to preserve it, and he bought the Southwick Inn because he wanted to see it look nicer. He's putting millions of dollars into the town.

"As he was being honored by the Rotary Club," Fox added, "a member likened his work to the Beveridge family starting Stanley Park" in neighboring Westfield.

Free Parking

With a modesty that is disproportionate

to his business success, Whalley described his ventures in the town he calls home.

Whalley Computer Associates was famously started in the basement and a spare bedroom at his home, and today is ranked by industry analysts among the leaders for IT service. Dell, HP, IBM, and Lenovo have all credited WCA as one of the leading service providers in the nation.

Whalley Precision, a manufacturing plant for small-volume and prototype fabrication, is just across the street from the new headquarters of WCA, on Whalley Way. Its owner said that, despite the town's location, removed from major thoroughways, there isn't a better place he can think of for that shop.

"The support businesses might not be in Southwick," he said of the electroplaters or anodizers that the plant uses, "but they are in West Springfield or Holyoke, close by."

Commenting on Fox's assessment of the Southwick Inn property, he agreed that the landmark, in a high profile location near Town Hall, was in rough shape.

"We spent six years getting the permitting to make it nice and pretty," he said. "It used to be an absolute dump. The whole corner just looked bad. There were cars that had been there for 20 years, an old Quonset hut in the back. It was awful. Inside wasn't much better. But these days, it's actually rather nice."

It's clear that successful business to Whalley means more than just a profit margin, and he has made news again this past year for the park he is building in memory of his son who passed away in 2007. On 70 acres off Powder Mill Road, Whalley Park will have playing fields, public facilities, and a bandstand. When the \$8 million project is complete, Whalley will give the property over to the town, to be managed by the Parks and Recreation Department.

"In this area," he said, pointing at the architectural rendering of the park, "We're going to build a stage. I'm trying to make it so the town can generate revenue to not only maintain the property, but also run other Park and Rec programs.

"But these days," he said, gesturing to the pastures outside the door, "I consider myself to be a farmer." Raising grass-fed beef and other small animals, Whalley said that this is more relaxing than any of the other businesses.

And judging from his track record, it is another venture bound for continued success. ■