

Smithtown says rezoning may help fill empty storefronts

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Unnerved by vacant car dealerships along Middle Country Road in St. James, Smithtown officials have started discussions to redefine some zoning categories ahead of the release of the town's comprehensive master plan.

Changing zoning codes to allow more kinds of businesses would help energize the local economy by letting other types of companies move into the empty car dealerships, town officials say, as well as into other vacancies elsewhere on Middle Country Road.

Making changes to the area's zoning category, Wholesale and Service Industry, to permit more uses would update an antiquated list of businesses - which still includes, for instance, burlap and cabbage product manufacturing.

At this week's town board work session, Supervisor Patrick Vecchio underscored the importance of moving forward on the matter, noting that many properties are lying vacant. "It seems to me it should be expedited," he said.

"Businesses evolve and opportunities arise," said assistant planning director David Flynn.

"It's not like a Bible where it's written once and never changed . . . We should always be examining it."

Some of the planning department's preliminary suggestions for expanding use in the zone include beverage stores, small counter service restaurants, spas, marine sales, billiard halls and furniture stores.

The new uses should not compete with downtown businesses or shopping centers, said a memo to town board members by planning department director Frank DeRubeis.

Eventually, a public hearing would be held on proposed changes and an environmental impact study might be necessary, which officials say could take up to a year.

Other changes proposed in the memo included relaxing zoning standards where there are historic preservation and workforce housing needs, permitting multistory buildings in the Hauppauge Industrial Park area, and allowing underground parking in the industrial park and downtowns.