

Doris J. Bennett - Response to TUF Questions

1. **Taxes:** I wish the property tax issue were as simple as A, B, or C. The fact is lowering municipal taxes in the short term is very difficult to do. There are too many mechanisms already in place that drive them upward: collective-bargaining agreements, automatic annual property re-valuations, etc. Overall, property taxes are driven more by school taxes than anything else, and this must be addressed at the state level. Schools should not be funded through property taxes. It places too great a burden on lower income and fixed income residents, such as seniors, who have a disproportionate share of their wealth invested in their homes. There is a tremendous amount of waste in the school systems statewide due to the absurd number of school districts – more than 600 – for the size of the state. Eliminating duplicate positions through regionalization of school systems would produce real savings.

Holding taxes at the current level is a realistic goal with some careful examination of the budget. Bonding costs should be examined. Where possible, we should seek corporate sponsorship to offset some costs - for example, the quarterly township newspaper. New businesses in town should not be given sweetheart tax deals that burden the taxpayer for 20 or 30 years into the future. Collective bargaining agreements should be aggressively negotiated to minimize healthcare cost increases and inflation-related components. A greater reliance on technological advances can reduce manpower needs in some departments. Redeployment of underutilized staff can increase services without increasing costs.

If we don't control tax increases by controlling spending, we are going to lose many of our citizens who won't be able to afford to live here. It's happening now and will only get worse if taxes continue to increase at the same rates – well over 10% annually over the past three years, and for some, much higher than that.

2. **Development:** Franklin is clearly being developed much too rapidly and one can argue is being overdeveloped. Very large development projects built too rapidly put a strain on our infrastructure which cannot maintain pace. Demands for roads, water, sewer and schools all come with development. Unfortunately, much of this growth over the past ten years has come without good long-term planning. Projects in some areas have been built piecemeal without adequate consideration for the effects on the environment and carrying capacity of the land. This is particularly true where we have flooding and drainage problems. Too much impervious coverage results in flooding and wetlands downstream. We need enough vacant land to allow water to recharge naturally before it reaches the bodies of water used for drinking. Unfortunately, current design standards focus on stabilizing rates of flow and don't recognize the effect of higher volumes of water on land downstream.

So what can we do to slow down development? First, we must make sure our Master Plan lays out a reasonable pattern of development. The Master Plan is being reviewed this year and everyone should attend the public hearings. It is one of the most important documents we have. Zoning flows from the Master Plan. The zoning should reflect the environmental constraints and carrying capacity of the land. Open space and parks should be part of the planning process.

If the people agree with the town's Master Plan, then it is the responsibility of the Planning Board and the Council to carry it out. The Council should not change zoning because a developer wants it changed for his next big project. Buildings to be built for speculation should not be approved when we already have others standing vacant. The municipal land use standards should be strengthened. Stream and wetland setbacks should be increased where appropriate to protect the environment. Small parks should be part of urban-area planning rather than building out every available building lot. Open space monies should be used for this purpose as well as large parcel acquisitions. Hardship variances should only be granted for true hardships that don't compromise the vision of the Master Plan. If the people and the township officials agree on this vision, then it is the responsibility of the officials to carry it out.

3. **Traffic:** Traffic has become a severe problem in many parts of Franklin. This is directly related to the overdevelopment issue. We don't have the road infrastructure to accommodate the rapid development. Rush hours are a nightmare. This is exacerbated by flooding when certain roads are closed. I see it first hand because traffic backs up for hours on Bennetts Lane when this happens. Route 27 is controlled by the state. The proposed improvements will do very little to alleviate traffic congestion. Even though traffic is a development problem, I learned from my 9 years on the Planning Board that an applicant cannot be turned down due to traffic concerns. Every time we denied an application for that reason, particularly on Route 27, the applicant went to court and won.

So controlling development is the key. But how? See #2. Design a well-thought-out Master Plan. Enforce zoning and strengthen land use standards. And so on. In the more urban parts of Franklin, greater use should be made of public transportation to keep some cars off the road. In some cases this means introducing public transportation where there is none. Also, to the extent possible, jobs should be located closer to the population centers or more transportation provided to workers in the area. Unfortunately, Franklin is used by many people as a means to get from one place to another. We should initiate discussions with officials in neighboring towns to address this problem and identify joint solutions, e.g., constructing bypasses in some problem areas.

4. **Eminent Domain:** Eminent Domain should only be used for public projects, such as building a school, hospital, park, road, etc. It should not be used to take land from one private individual to give to another, such as a private developer. It should not be used simply to generate more tax revenue for the township. Eminent domain needs to be addressed at the state level by strengthening our state constitution to prohibit the taking of land for private development. Offering "just compensation" in most cases is not adequate to make the property-owner whole. This issue, above all, is the one that motivates me to participate in government. As my property was threatened last year by the greed of a developer who would not take no for an answer when numerous property-owners told him that they did not want to sell their land, I know first hand the fear of losing one's home and property rights. No one should feel this threat to their property for someone else's financial gain.