

Guilderland restricts growth on Route 20

By Daniel Gold

Staff writer

GUILDERLAND — Heralding what town Supervisor Kevin Moss termed a "golden era of growth," the town board rezoned the first of a series of parcels along Route 20 Saturday with the intent of reducing the choices for future development of the plots.

"Growth should continue, but not in a way that affects the residents' quality of life here," Moss said, shortly after the end of the special board meeting, in which 19 of 23 plots were zoned down from high-traffic retail to less-traffic office and residential areas.

"People have moved here from the cities to live in the suburbs," Moss said. "They don't want to find the city has come out here with them."

The actions were the first steps taken in line with a 1984 traffic and growth study commissioned by the board in response to the opening of the Crossgates Mall.

The study, by a consultant based outside the Capital District, indicated "we have much more zoning for retail space than we'll ever need," board member John Smircich said.

Even before the mall opened, Smircich said, "we'd observed a lot of strip commercial development occur along Western Avenue (Rt. 20)."

With such retail — or B-2, for general business — zones generating five times more traffic than office or residential zones, "we got a clear direction from the planner to go in another direction" than what Western Avenue planning had previously been, Smircich said.

"The intent is to get off the track of



ROUTE 20 — View of Western Avenue west from Albany city line.

retail development" that would threaten residential communities, he said.

Moss added that the rezoning would "stabilize" current business and redirect future business development to the north side of Western Avenue, away from Guilderland neighborhoods.

In separate votes on each parcel Saturday morning, several parcels were shifted from B-2 status, which permits up to 35 different types of retail services, to B-1, which allows 22 types of use. Other lots were downgraded from B-1 to RNB — "residential/neighborhood business"— which excludes all but a handful of businesses to operate in the zone.

The area considered by the board Saturday constitutes primarily the one-mile stretch of Western Avenue that runs from the Albany city line through the Guilderland neighborhood of McKownville. In future sessions, the board will tackle rezoning further western sections of the avenue, and nearby off roads. Tuesday, the board will have a work session reviewing the zoning of Western Avenue between Schoolhouse Road and Route 155.

The rezoning does not force the closing of any establishment currently operating along the strip, nor does it

affect the sale of those businesses to new owners who would maintain the same level of operation. "What we are eliminating is the potential for future, more intensive use of the properties," Smircich said.

Even so, the rezoning of four small plots between Brookwood Lane and Westlyn Court were hotly contested by member James Cleary, who succeeded in halting any change on the four sites.

Cleary and member Richard Murray voted against the rezoning of the properties, including two owned by Richard Esmay, a local doctor who uses the sites as office space and student housing rentals.

Though Moss, Smircich and member Anne Rose voted to rezone the properties, such an action required a "super-majority" of at least four votes. The properties remain zoned B-1 as a result of the 3-2 decisions.

Cleary said he felt the developers of the four lots "had done a nice job" and

noted the properties had been the subject of rezoning discussions "at least twice before."

"I don't see why we have to change them," he said.

Murray echoed those sentiments, saying he had voted against rezoning the lots before "and didn't see any need to change."

Rose said that rationale was specious and not germane to the argument the board was now attempting to institute. "Past history is not pertinent," she said.

Smircich said he was "very upset with the vote" on the four lots. "If you're going to make a policy statement, you make it all the way or else it becomes a political matter, with some people thinking they can get around the policy."