

IT'S A DONE DEAL

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Christine Czarnik has been going about her business unaware that she is on a collision course with town council. She spent the better part of the last decade rehabbing two different homes in the historic district. Now, town council has unveiled a vision plan that will radically change the face of downtown. Czarnik immediately got involved, attending meetings, and making her voice heard, but council ignored her appeals. She only has one option left, but it will be a costly one. They say you can't fight city hall. Should she even try? What does a concerned citizen do when government is unresponsive?

AT THE MEETING...

"They are going to do what?"

Heyward Hudson, head of the Summerville Preservation Society, patiently explained the town's new vision plan. The mayor called it a "done deal." Christine Czarnik was just hearing about it now. The town's newly announced vision plan included a boutique hotel in the heart of the historic downtown district. The hotel would be an immense 4-story structure that would cover an entire block. It would dwarf the other buildings in Summerville's quaint downtown area. The project would consist of 65 rooms, 27 condos, a conference center, retail shops and a 157-space parking garage. The Dorchester hotel would also have a rooftop bar where bands could play at night. Czarnik lives just four blocks from the site, and she was shocked by what she was hearing.

CHRISTINE CZARNIK

Czarnik was born in upstate New York, but her family moved to Mount Pleasant, South Carolina in 1980. She completed high school there, and then earned a business degree at the College of Charleston in 1986. She worked for her father for a number of years before she started her first business in 1993. In 1998, she moved to the historic district of Summerville where she has resided ever since. In 2013,

she established her own accounting firm, *Carolina First Tax and Accounting*, in Summerville.

SUMMERVILLE

Summerville is a sleepy little suburb of Charleston, South Carolina. When she moved to Summerville, the town had a population of just over 24,000. The population has since doubled. The locals are proud of their small community. Summerville is recognized as the official “birthplace of sweet tea,” and they hold an annual sweet tea festival, where vendors compete to produce award-winning sweet tea. On June 10, 2015, Summerville earned the Guinness World Record for the World’s Largest Sweet Iced Tea. The fifteen-foot cup of sweet tea contained 1,425 gallons of tea using 120 pounds of locally sourced tea leaves.

Summerville’s nickname is “Flowertown,” and the annual Flowertown festival is now on its 42nd year in operation. Local residents appreciate the charm of their community. Nowhere is this truer than in the historic district.

When Czarnik moved to Summerville in 1998, she bought a house in the historic district and began renovating it. It was a labor of love. Czarnik then restored a second house. It was an older home that was going to be torn down, but she had it moved from the property and she restored it. She even received an award from the preservation society for restoring the home.

The house had issues including termites and a sagging front porch, but she found joy in restoring it. She explained, “I poured blood, sweat, and tears, and lots of money into that house, and consequently, into the neighborhood, and into the historic district. Everybody who restores those houses—they are doing the same thing. They are not just restoring a house. They are preserving the neighborhood.”

THE VISION PLAN

In 2013, the Summerville town council entered into an agreement with the Lawrence group, an urban design firm, to create the town vision plan. The town had never created such a document. Meetings were held in February 2014 to generate a vision for what Summerville might be in the years to come.

At the time, most of the participants felt that the vision plan was a dream list. But the mayor began calling it a “road map” for the town, and it was named the Outstanding Planning project by the South Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association.

Roughly 500 citizens either participated in these meetings or contributed their thoughts using an online response form. Yet, when the vision plan was made public

in June, not everyone agreed with the direction of the town's vision plan. Moreover, most of the population was simply unaware of the process. Czarnik was one of them.

Large crowds of citizens attended town council meetings to oppose various elements of the vision plan, but the Dorchester hotel received the most attention. Opponents lined up against the hotel for various reasons. Some didn't like the design. Others felt that there was not enough room for such an immense structure downtown.

Some of the more vehement foes opposed it for fiscal reasons. They did not like that the conference center and adjacent parking garage would be supported by tax dollars as a public-private partnership. A few even argued that council had not engaged the public, making shady agreements behind closed doors. The reality was more nuanced. Council had been thinking about this for over a year, but it was new to most of the residents. Czarnik agreed with all of these complaints, but for her, such a structure just didn't fit in the historic district.

FROM VISION TO LAW

When the vision plan was created, most citizens thought it was just a wish list. But in July 2014 council officially adopted the new vision plan as part of the comprehensive plan by a vote of 5-2.

Councilman Bailey sought to amend the vote so that the vision plan would be approved as a discretionary document, but he failed. In short, the wish list became taxable.

Supporters of the plan believed the Dorchester hotel would bring more foot-traffic to downtown shops; opponents believed it would just bring more traffic.

By now, Czarnik was regularly attending town council meetings and the town's Board of Architectural Review (BAR) meetings. The BAR had to approve the design of the hotel before council could move forward. These meetings were drawn out for months, but Czarnik attended every one of them. When citizens spoke to oppose the hotel project, council members didn't even thank them for sharing their comments. They just sat there stone-faced. As Czarnik explained, "It was introduced as a 'done deal,' so we already had the feeling that this was something being imposed upon us, and then no matter how much we fought, nothing changed."

The hotel finally gained BAR approval with a 4-1 vote in April of 2015. This, in spite of the protesters who were still attending these meetings nearly a year after the project was introduced.

The local paper carried Czarnick's final plea to the BAR before the vote: 'We're counting on you to protect our neighborhood,' resident Christine Czarnik said to board members. 'We need you to honor the mission under which this board was created, and you need to demand better than this – for us, and for the generations that are going to follow us.'

Town council voted just a few days later, approving the final plan for the hotel, apparently sealing the fate of the historic district. It truly was a done deal.

RUNNING OUT OF OPTIONS

They say you can't fight city hall, but Wiley Johnson, one of the plan's leading opponents, was thinking about doing just that. Neither council nor the BAR would listen to protesters. Now Johnson was contemplating a run for mayor. Johnson's opposition to the hotel stemmed more from the structure of the project than the aesthetic design of the building. Johnson was from the faction that believed that many of the decisions were made behind closed doors and he was particularly opposed to tax dollars being used to fund it. Over time, Czarnik and Johnson began to see themselves as being on the same team.

About the same time, Heyward Hudson began urging Czarnik to run for town council because she was a leading voice of the preservation society. She was articulate in making the case. She also had the flexibility to run because as a small business owner, she set her own hours. She was already attending all of the meetings, but she did not have the ability to vote. She reasoned, "I can stand at the podium and rail all day long, but if I couldn't convince someone to vote, clearly that wasn't working." If Czarnik and Johnson could win, they might be able to undo this thing.

Czarnik had never thought about running for office before. Now, this seemed like the only option. But, could she win? She had no political experience and running would be quite a commitment. Moreover, time spent on public matters would be time she could not dedicate to her business. She is tired, but she does not want to back down from this fight. Should she run?