The Master Plan
For
West Norwalk

Submitted to The Norwalk Planning Commission
May 11, 2004
# The Master Plan for West Norwalk

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INTRODUCTION

The Master Plan for the city, formally defined as the "Plan for Development", is a State mandated requirement which must be updated every 10 years. The Norwalk Planning Commission is in the process of updating the current plan and which is important because it defines the "vision" of the city for the next decade and is a vehicle used to identify needed changes. The following mini-plan was developed in order to aid the Town Planners with their formulation of the Master Plan of Development for the city. While the previous Plan of Development (1991-2000) had many good ideas, some not yet completed, a changing environment has created new needs. The following plan cites the features in West Norwalk that really define the area and then proposes changes and controls that will assure retention of the quality of life that we have come to enjoy.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The West Norwalk Association (WNA), a non-profit, grass roots association, was created in 1947 to organize individual homeowners into a unified body able to address the many city and local issues arising from a mounting population and its subsequent growing pains. WNA has a Board of Directors which meets the first Monday of every month, and maintains a website at www.westnorwalk.org to keep residents informed, as well as mailing a newsletter. All residents are encouraged to contribute, as well as attend monthly Board of Directors meetings with any specific concerns, and the Annual Meeting in September, followed by the Annual Holiday Reception in December. Its objectives are:

- To retain as much as possible the rural character and natural terrain of the West Norwalk area.
- To preserve and maintain the property values of the area.
- To ensure a quality education and to provide for adequate school facilities.
- To provide safe, well-paved roads that enhance the traffic flow yet do not conflict with the West Norwalk countryside.
- To support development in the city which does not conflict with the above goals.
West Norwalk Boundaries

West Norwalk is defined by New Canaan Avenue (Route 123) to the North, West Cedar to the South and the town lines of Darien and New Canaan to the West. The eastern boundary is an irregular line generally defined by North Taylor Avenue, Steppingstone Road and Maher Drive.
LANDSCAPE HISTORY AND CHARACTER

Historic Summary

West Norwalk contains numerous old houses that are concentrated in that section from the intersection with West Cedar Street to the New Canaan town line. Within the area are the remaining elements of a rural village, including a chapel, general store, post office, and schoolhouse. Except for the chapel, this is an area of single-family homes. The oldest houses date from the mid-eighteenth century. According to the “Norwalk Historic Resources Inventory” there are 10 existing houses that were built between 1740 and 1800. The “Inventory” also cites 16 existing houses built between 1801 and 1850 and another 8 built in the last half of that century. In addition to historic houses, West Norwalk has miles of historic stone walls. The area is suburban living at its best and is well maintained.

Probably the building that is most closely recognized and identified with West Norwalk’s history is the chapel, now referred to as “the meeting house” located at 186 West Norwalk Road. It has been the center of community activities since it was built in 1868. The West Norwalk Meeting House Society is the primary caretaker of this historic landmark. Its members are concerned with the repair and upkeep and also manage rental activities.

The Community Guild of West Norwalk was formed as the Ladies Aid Society in 1868, an auxiliary of the meetinghouse. In 1950, the name was changed to The Community Guild of West Norwalk, an organization of women who sponsor and promote activities which provide opportunities for neighbors to meet one another and to work together on raising funds for the preservation of the meeting house and other worth-while community activities.
Fillow Street is a winding, narrow country road that stretches from West Norwalk Road on its west end all the way to West Norwalk's eastern boundary just past Hunter's Lane. In 2002, several of the residents on the western end of the road applied for and received "scenic road" status for that portion running from West Norwalk Road to about the intersection with Little Fox Lane. Scenic road status assures that, except for repaving if necessary, its current appearance and configuration can never be changed.

Almost at the center of West Norwalk is a modern complex of buildings on 60+ acres currently owned and operated by Dolce International. The facility is used strictly for training of business executives mostly from Fortune 500 companies. In the mid-1980's, the property was bought by GTE from the Holy Ghost Fathers, a religious order that occupied the facility for many years. A small cemetery and a display of the Stations of the Cross provide evidence of the property's religious past.

GTE built the facility and initiated operation as a training center. In the mid-1990's, the property was sold to Prudential who continued to operate it as a training center, and donated a 16 acre conservation easement along Weed Avenue. Prudential sold it to Dolce in 2003. The current and previous owners have always been very generous in allowing West Norwalk residents free access to the grounds for walking, bird watching, etc.

Also near the center of West Norwalk is the Oak Hills Park, a well-maintained and popular 18-hole golf course with tennis center. A recent proposal to build a 22 bay driving range was not acceptable to area residents on the basis that it would increase traffic and adversely impact current quality of life. The application was denied and the golf course, in its current configuration fits in very well with the rural nature of the community. Its usage will be further enhanced when a restaurant, approved by the city and currently in the planning stage, opens in 2005.
The area also benefits from having the Five Mile River along its western border where it flows into Rowayton and Darien before ultimately into Long Island Sound. As it flows through West Norwalk, it opens up into four major ponds, the Millard Pond to the North and then about ½ mile south into the Florsheim Pond then onto two other ponds bordering Morehouse Lane. These ponds are virtually wild life preserves with otters, turtles, ospreys, herons, ducks, geese and several species of fish and birds making their habitat in its waters and along its banks. In the spring and summer, children may be seen fishing from the banks and occasionally, children and adults operating small boats in these ponds. Preservation of these ponds is essential to preserving the way of life to which we have become accustomed.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Trees

Although the area can’t claim exotic or unique species of trees, there are over 27 species that are characteristic of the historic New England countryside and attest to the area’s rural environment. Among these are American Holly, Fir, Hemlock, Spruce, Cedar, Birch, Beech, Amelanchier (shad), Hickory, Redbud, Ash, Witch Hazel, Magnolia, Maple, Dogwood, Apple, Crabapple, Pear, Cherry, Wild Cherry, Willow, Sassafras, Arborvitae, Tulip, Chestnut, Elm and of course, the mighty Oak.

Wild life

Dense vegetation and the river provide support for many species of wild life. Almost at any given hour of the day, small groups of deer may be seen foraging for food or just gamboling through the woods or back yards. While the deer population has increased considerably (as it has elsewhere in the city), it does not seem to have created a significant annoyance or safety issue. Because deer are voracious eaters of leafy plants, many homeowners have opted to replace these plants with varieties that are not as attractive to the deer. Others have chosen chemical repellants. While each deterrent seems effective, the deer seem to have accepted these conditions and their numbers do not appear to have diminished.

The area also abounds in small wild life (squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, raccoons, skunks, wild turkeys, etc.) that can be found in most rural areas. The river supports other creatures not found in non-wet land areas, e.g., heron, ospreys, ducks, geese, hawks and several species of fish inhabit the Five Mile River. Possum, muskrats and otters are also frequently seen. A rare yellow spotted salamander has also been seen.
River

As mentioned earlier, the Five Mile River flows along the western border of West Norwalk before flowing into Rowayton, Darien and finally into Long Island Sound. At four locations, the river opens up into ponds, which are essential for support of the above-mentioned wild life. The river is a major natural resource that contributes to the rural aspect of the area.

ROADS

The roads are typically what you would expect in a rural area-narrow, paved and winding. While most roads are lightly traveled, several arterials, e.g., West Norwalk Road, Fillow Street, Richards Avenue and Weed Avenue have experienced increased traffic volumes in recent years with resulting safety concerns. While the recent addition of stop signs in some locations has improved access to these arterials and therefore improved safety, volume and speeding are still problems. Road maintenance is a concern because several of them, e.g., Nursery, Little Fox, Weed, Fox Run, Ponus, and Fillow are in serious need of repair.

A major concern is the volume of traffic on Connecticut Avenue, which borders on the southern end of West Norwalk. With its many high volume and big box retail stores, it is a significant contributor to traffic entering West Norwalk from the south. The arterials that bear the brunt of this volume are West Norwalk Road, Richards and Scribner Avenues.

RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

As might be expected in a community established over 250 years ago, there are several existing residential and other use buildings that were built in the 18th and 19th centuries. Clearly, some of these have been modified and upgraded but usually in a manner consistent with their original construction. As the West Norwalk area grew, new houses were constructed but in most cases, their architecture was consistent with that of the rural nature of the area. Late in the 20th century, housing construction accelerated and large plots developed but, again, their architecture continued to blend with the neighborhood.
Fortunately, the area has not seen the construction of many McMansions as are seen in other parts of the city but we must be concerned that as the society grows more affluent and desires larger homes, their design may not be consistent with the rural nature of the area.

An area of concern that has developed only within the last few years is that of condominium construction at the entryway to West Norwalk. These are not attractive and don't present a desirable first opinion to those entering what is otherwise a nice residential community. Little consideration has been given to architectural consistency.

SCHOOLS

Norwalk Community College's (NCC) two primary campuses are located in West Norwalk on Richards Avenue and provides a broad range of credit and non-credit liberal arts, sciences, career, technical, associate degree and certification programs leading to transfer, employment and lifelong learning. NCC builds community through the sponsorship of intellectual, cultural, social and recreational events and activities.

![Norwalk Community College Campus](image)

Fox Run Elementary School is located in West Norwalk on Fillow Street and is the primary learning center for approximately 530 students in grades pre-K through fifth. Fox Run provides for a number of other activities, such as athletics with a number of athletic fields and playgrounds.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Consistent with the diversity of ethnic backgrounds of West Norwalk residents, the diversity of religious preferences is demonstrated by the availability of three places of worship, a Congregational and Catholic Church and a Jewish synagogue.
CONVENIENCE

In addition to the many assets of living in West Norwalk, is the location and proximity to a variety of sites used almost daily. Within minutes of driving is the convenience of one-stop shopping in such stores as Costco, Stop & Shop, and Walmart. There are also many specialty stores like Home Depot, Frank’s Nursery, Sports Authority, Best Buy, and Home Goods. Of course in order to frequent these stores one will first have to retrieve cash from nearby well-know financial institutions such as Wachovia, CitiBank or Fairfield County Bank. Adjacent to the northern border of West Norwalk is the scenic Merritt Parkway and to the south is Interstate 95. Access to these main arteries is very easy and well directed. Metro North train stations are located right next door in New Canaan, Darien and Rowayton, with daily and weekly parking lots for all commuters. Above all is Norwalk Hospital, literally positioned atop a hill overlooking West Norwalk and all other communities.

RECREATION

West Norwalk has the privilege of housing the only public golf course in Norwalk. As its name entails, Oak Hills is full of peaks and valleys ready to challenge any seasoned golf enthusiast, but also friendly to its many newcomers with a relatively flat and forgiving back 9.

Recently approved for the near future is the building of a new Club House restaurant where golfers will be able to relive their triumphs in glory or agony of defeat. Oak Hills also offers a tennis club where matches are played on clay courts. Private lessons are also available. Families can always enjoy the public fields situated on the grounds of Fox Run Elementary School. There you will find paved tennis courts, basketball courts, swing sets, and a softball and soccer field. This quiet rural community is the perfect place for families to walk and enjoy the surrounding history, wild life, and natural resources previously mentioned.
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The history and the rural environment of what is West Norwalk is what allows its residents to enjoy a quality of life that is among the best in the city and the state and makes it a highly desirable location for those seeking to move into Norwalk, however, that quality of life is being attacked from the following four categories:

1. LAND USE- Authorized land use that allows building and development that is inconsistent with the rural aspects of the neighborhood.

2. ROADS- Road systems that are over-loaded, poorly monitored for speeding and inadequately maintained.

3. NATURAL RESOURCES-Natural resources that are decaying and will disappear if adequate regulations are not imposed.

4. ENCROACHING DEVELOPMENTS- Encroaching retail developments from the South.

1. Land Use

In order to preserve the character of West Norwalk and its property values we must, first of all, prevent further construction of homes whose architecture is incompatible with that of its immediate neighbors And prevent modification of existing homes that might have a similar adverse impact. In order to accomplish this, establishing regulations pertaining to architectural review as part of the building permit process must be considered. The Internet is replete with lists of cities that claim to exercise such control but we looked to our neighbor city of Westport for guidance. The following design objectives are excerpted from the "Westport Historic District and Properties Handbook" and are provided as an example of what other communities are doing to protect their heritage:

- New construction shall be made harmonious with its immediate historic environs by reflecting both the characteristic scale and building traditions of those environs.

- Additions to an historic structure shall be harmonious with the characteristic massing and architectural features of that structure, or of the characteristic structures of the immediate environs, and shall not destroy the main character defining elements of said structure....
· Alterations to an historic structure shall be consistent with the design of the original structure and of any later additions, which are architecturally significant....

· Additions and/or alterations to an existing structure, when such structure is not architecturally significant and is deemed in its present state to detract from the overall character of its environs, should mitigate such existing adverse impact through the design of new elements which will make the structure as a whole more harmonious with its environs.

· Demolition of structures, which contribute to the overall scale of an historic district, shall not be permitted unless there is no prudent alternative. Moving of historic structures should be considered only as a last resort.

· Exact replacement of original architectural elements is not prohibited. However, repair rather than replacement should be encouraged.

Other issues that might be considered would be setting neighborhood limits on roof heights or floor area ratios, and preventing further construction of condominiums, which would add more traffic to the area. Only by assuring that the construction of new homes and the modification of existing ones meet some standards of architectural consistency will we be able to preserve the character of West Norwalk.

Secondly, residential areas that abut commercial/industrial uses must be protected. These areas are the gateway to West Norwalk and if allowed to lose their appearance as prime residential property will cause depreciation of the entire West Norwalk community. In summary, we must:

· Protect the environment.

· Provide stability in land use and zoning.

· Prevent incompatible land uses by assuring that minimizing traffic impacts from surrounding uses has priority over development.

· Protect residential areas that abut commercial/industrial uses.

· Restrict further development of Connecticut Avenue to developments that will not further adversely impact the intense development caused by big box type stores.
2. Roads

At a traffic summit held on May 30, 2002 and sponsored by the mayor, West Norwalk residents cited 3 problem categories: dangerous intersections, speeding and through traffic. Although some specific issues have been ameliorated by the addition of STOP signs, several dangerous conditions still exist. Attachments to this plan are the minutes of the May 30, 2002 traffic summit and the actions included in DPW Director’s comments. The recommendations included therein fall into the following general categories:

- Improve traffic flow, without changing the character of the roads, on all arterials.
- Prevent truck through traffic on West Norwalk Road.
- Divert traffic from West Norwalk Road to State Routes 123 and 124.
- Implement speed reduction plans.
- Re-evaluate Connecticut Avenue traffic in light of recent and future commercial developments.
- Improve road maintenance. Sections of Nursery, Fillow Street and Weed Avenue, e.g., are in deplorable condition.
- Repair stone wall on river bridge at the west end of West Cedar Street.

3. Natural Resources

- Manage/monitor wetlands, rivers & watersheds. In this category is Millard Pond, which is in danger of being destroyed/disassembled. EPA has insisted that the dam creating the pond either be repaired or destroyed. The owner of the dam has been adamant against repairs and will opt for destruction, if required. The integrity of the dam must be maintained to assure that existing wild life is retained and that the entire community be allowed to enjoy the benefits of this great natural resource. Although the dam is on private property, local government intervention must be used if required.

- Establish controls to limit/prevent dumping of solid waste into an open stream.
- Preserve trees-identify/preserve historic trees.
4. **Encroaching Developments**

- Evaluate ways to improve the appearance of Connecticut Avenue. A significant opportunity may exist if Connecticut Avenue is chosen as the best site for the 315kv electric line being proposed by NU & CLP. Although this construction may cause serious traffic issues, it may present an opportunity to beautify the area by creating islands, planting greenery, statuary, etc. Whether the avenue is selected or not to be the most desirable route, efforts similar to the above must be taken to improve the appearance of a gateway to our city.

- Prevent further construction of retail stores, condominiums, etc. that detract from the rural/residential image that we wish to protect and that increase unwanted congestion and traffic.

**Attachments:**

A) May 30, 2002 Traffic Summit-Minutes

B) May 30, 2002 Traffic Summit-Comments, Director of the Department of Public Works
MEMO TO: Mayor Alex Knopp
FROM: BillGramman, DPW Director
DATE: June 12, 2002
RE: Traffic Summit—West Norwalk area and Rowayton area (attached) 5/30/02

30 attendees—Norwalk Community College

1. Specific Commentary—Larry Cafero
   - Parents driving to school—societal changes
   - Speeding to Connecticut Avenue stores—need stricter enforcement
   - Weekend traffic in neighborhoods
   - Prudential Center—expansion of services:
     Public Policy—Zoning, Traffic Study—agree to public improvements (walks, curbs, etc.—Weed Ave)

2. General Public
   a. West Norwalk Road—trucks & speeding—unanimous complaints
      - Stop signs (traffic counts underway)
      - Reflectors at sharp curves
      - Footpath renovations
      - Centerline and lane lines
      - More signage—better visibility
      - Repair ditch, 145 West Norwalk Road
   b. Fillow Street—sidewalk
      - Stop sign at Fox Run Road
   c. Weed Avenue—stop sign at Old Rock Lane
   d. North Taylor Ave—stop sign at Windward Rd
      - Speed—Southwind Drive
   e. Scribner Ave at Flax Hill Road—traffic signal (in reconstruction contract)
   f. Connecticut Ave at North Taylor Ave—left turn arrow

3. Government Action Request
   a. Police response on Route 1 during 195 tie-ups
   b. Public Safety education—schools and forums
TRAFFIC SUMMIT - WEST NORWALK NEIGHBORHOOD MEETING
THURSDAY MAY 30, 2002  7:30 PM
NORWALK COMMUNITY COLLEGE, ROOM 108

MODERATOR: BOB WAGMAN, WNA
SECRETARY: BILL KRUMMEL, COMMON COUNCIL
RESPONDER: BILL GRUMAN, DIRECTOR, DPW
ATTENDEES: ABOUT 31 NEIGHBORS

The meeting was opened at 7:40 PM by Peter O'Hara, President of the West Norwalk Association. Mr O'Hara gave general remarks summarizing some of the earlier sessions of the Traffic Summit Program.

Mr. Wagman continued with a general overview of some of the topics raised earlier. The following comments and suggestions made by the attendees are divided into two groups; general for the neighborhood and specific for identified streets in the neighborhood. Responses by Mr. Grumann are not included.

GENERAL:
1. Resistance to zoning changes requested by Prudential Management Training Center that will increase traffic.
2. Suggestion that if the city grants a zoning change, the city should exact some price for the change.
3. Don't want commercial development (conference center) in West Norwalk neighborhood.
4. Study should be conducted to find out where increased traffic is coming from. Assumption by many is that increased traffic is from outside neighborhood.
5. Stop signs are a no-brainer. Sidewalks are needed. Get more people to walk.
6. Have developers, business, contribute to building sidewalks in areas affected by increased traffic.
7. The City should be more friendly to cyclists, bike lanes should be added, share the road signs added.
8. Speed bumps are not the only answer, stricter enforcement is needed.
10. Parents afraid to send kids off to school by bike or walk

SPECIFIC:
1. WEST NORWALK ROAD - Don't even think about widening W. Norwalk Rd.
   Stop-through trucks using W. Norwalk Rd. Trucks should be redirected to Rt 123.
   Need speed measuring device. Need Stop signs at intersections. Better use and maintenance of reflectors at sharp curves. More enforcement needed to reduce speeding.

2. WEED AVENUE - Speeding a concern. Traffic from outside neighborhood, from New Canaan to Post Ave retail. Concern over proposed expanded use of Prudential Management Training Center. Stop sign on Weed needed at Old Rock Lane intersection.

3. CONN. AVE (POST AVE). - Because Conn Ave is clogged, even on Sat., drivers are
taking back roads through residential neighborhoods. Need better control at intersections, prevent grid lock. Traffic studies need to give more attention to retail attracting out of town traffic, e.g. Home Depot. Left turn lane/arrow needed for N. Taylor intersection (eastbound)

4. FOX RUN AND FILLOW- Need Stop sign on Fox Run to reduce traffic back-up on Fillow (west-bound). Need better traffic control for Fox Run School traffic.

5. NORTH TAYLOR - Speed humps needed for Windward, children playing in residential street leading off of busy N. Taylor.

Meeting adjourned at 9:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted
Bill Krummel.