

## **July 24, 2003 Actions – Webster Street Development**

Location: Norwalk City Hall Community Room

Present:

- Brian Bartholomew Desman Associates
- Keith Brown Condron-Brown Builders
- Jack Burritt Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- Oliver Gillham SEA Consultants, Inc.
- Kathryn Hebert Norwalk DPW
- Alanna Kabel Norwalk Office of the Mayor
- Nicolas Pacella South Norwalk Business Association
- Dick Paik Bonz & Company, Inc.
- Ed Schmidt Norwalk Office of the Mayor
- Timothy Sheehan Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- Burton Shatz Norwalk Parking Authority
- Michael Wrinn Norwalk Planning and Zoning
- Judith Rivas Norwalk Common Council
- Chris Perone Norwalk Common Council
- Amy Jimenez Norwalk Parking Authority
- Munro Johnson Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- Michael Moore Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- John Nickerson The Advocate Newspapers
- Robert Koch The Hour Newspapers

Subject: Workshop No. 1 with Webster Street Block Development Committee and the SEA Consulting team.

### 1. Introductions

Alanna Kabel opened the meeting, introduced the consulting team, the members of the Development Committee, and turned the meeting over to Oliver Gillham, the SEA team's Project Manager, for a presentation of consulting team's mission and their initial views on the project.

### 2. Study Area & Project Scope

Oliver Gillham described study area and project scope.

Study area: The study area is bounded roughly by Madison Street, Martin Luther King (MLK) Drive, North Main Street, and the Northeast Corridor Rail right-of-way. The study area also includes a part of a block bounded by Flax Hill Road, West Washington Street, MLK Drive and Clay Street (see attached map). The principal focus of the study is the so-called Webster Street Block – a “superblock” formed by the South Norwalk Urban

Renewal Plan that consolidated three blocks formerly separated by Webster and Franklin Streets. Both streets were vacated in the process.

Scope of the study: Parking in the study area is presently inadequate. The SEA team is charged with studying the feasibility of developing a parking garage of approximately 800 spaces on the Webster Street Block. That number is based on a previous study by Allan Davis Associates completed in 2000, and may be modified by the work of the new study. The team is also to examine the feasibility of new mixed-use development along the MLK Drive edge of the Webster Block. This development is to be principally housing - including both market rate and affordable units - with some minor amounts of retail and, possibly, office use. It is intended by the City that the new development (through leveraging City-owned land) be capable of assisting in financials of building the new parking facility. The main mission of the consulting team is to create a consensus-based master plan for the study area that includes the above elements, and that is based on sound financials.

### 3. Planning Process

Oliver Gillham presented the planning process that the team expects to undergo with the Development Committee and the public at large (see attached chart). The process is organized around four workshops with the Development Committee (of which this meeting is the first) and three public gatherings. The study effort is grouped basically into three phases as follows:

Phase I – Data Gathering and Inventory - information gathering and interviews with key project stakeholders

Phase II – Programming – work up of alternate parking and development programs for the site that meet preliminary urban planning and financial screening criteria.

Phase III – Plan Alternatives - development and testing of three conceptual plans for the study area.

### 4. Project Schedule

The project started July 21 and will end on December 30, with the delivery of a draft report. Development Committee Workshops are scheduled for July 24, September 4, October 9 and November 20. Public Gatherings are scheduled for September 11, October 16 and December 4. The attached Project Schedule provides a graphic description of study tasks and project timeline.

### 5. Site Issues

Oliver Gillham presented a diagram of SEA's current understanding of the site issues affecting the study area (see attached plan).

- The Webster Street lot is the main parking reservoir for SoNo.
- The Webster Block is SoNo's main visual gateway from I-95 and Route 7 via West and Fairfield Avenues. It is also the functional gateway to the district if you park there.
- The image of the block is not consistent with the neighboring historic district.
- All the principal visual corners of the Webster Block are underutilized or lack appropriate activity.
- The parking lot itself presents a bleak and littered introduction to SoNo.
- Parking is confusing with the present mix of metered, permit and reserved spaces
- The urban renewal Plan and subsequent leases and agreements cloud the Webster Block. Issues include parking commitments and rights of utility easements. The redevelopment Agency is working with their counsel to summarize these issues.
- Pedestrian access to and from the lot varies from good (old Webster Street) to poor (way next to Avrick's and the access way from Washington Street).
- The block immediately to the south of the Webster Block containing Klaff's, the Post Office, the Library and SNET may offer a solution for some of the parking demand if the Postal service site can be used for public parking.

#### 6. Selected Questions to be Studied

Some of the key questions to be studied in the process will include the number and type of parking spaces to be provided and what they will cost to build and operate. This will affect what the customer or tenant must be charged. Currently, new parking garages must charge between \$1,300 and 1,500 per year per space to be feasible to construct. This is a considerable change from what is being charged at the Webster Street lot today. That raises the question as to whether the housing and mixed-use development, using the leverage provided by City-owned land, can help to subsidize parking construction, bringing costs down. These key questions and others are summarized in the attached figure "Selected Issues to be Studied."

#### 7. Discussion

Following the presentation, the following points were raised and discussed:

Will the SEA team be investigating possible pedestrian connections to the train station? The answer is yes, both along MLK Drive, Madison Street, Monroe/South Main and possibly making recommendations as to future access beside the rail right-of-way as well.

The team should also be making recommendations about short-term quick fixes to the existing lot that might be made. Brian Bartholomew mentioned the idea of going to a gated system with magnetic cards for a designated permit holder area. Existing locations of short and long-term parking might also be investigated, as well as signage, identity, appearance, enforcement and security. The City has an RFP out for a consolidated parking operator, which may address some of these issues. The operator is expected to be on board in October.

The number of metered, or public use spaces, versus leased or permit/reserved spaces needs to be investigated as part of the parking program for the site. A certain number of leased spaces may be necessary for bonding.

The Library was discussed. It was agreed that the library is an important community center in this location, and will become only more so as new housing is built in the area. An addition is being considered.

Could the SNET facility be addressed? Does it need to stay where it is? The answer is that their facility is a main switching operation and would be extremely costly to move – especially given all the lines feeding into that location. However, the team might explore whether it is possible to build something next to it, or around it. Any such recommendation would require negotiations with SNET.

There is currently no convenient parking for the post office. There is a 15-minute zone right outside their building, but people are always double parking, or parking in illegal spaces.

Back versus front entrances. U.S. Boat currently is closed to Washington Street and opens onto the parking lot. What should the future condition of retail on the block be? If the street is busy enough, than the shops facing it are likely to provide both front and back entrances for fear of losing traffic. Right now the west end of Washington (where U.S. Boat is) is not particularly busy. Perhaps parking could be put back on the north side of the street in this location.

Public Space. Several people suggested that some sort of public square or plaza space in the middle of the block could make sense – especially with restaurants and stores opening onto it. This idea needs to be addressed in the context of how much can fit on the site, and which direction the retail faces. One idea that was suggested is to consider making a new public street between the Washington Street and MLK Drive entrances to the lot. This might be the public space with new retail fronting along the new street. Such an idea would help to break up the “superblock” and might hearken back to the old street pattern that existed before urban renewal.

Emergency access will have to be accommodated in any case from Washington and North Main Streets and MLK Drive.

The Washington Street access point is presently too narrow to permit two-way traffic and a sidewalk. That is because about half of the access way is owned by the building at 17 Washington Street. It is currently used for parking and may eventually be built upon.

## 8. Amended Meeting Schedule

Committee members present and voting approved an amended Webster Superblock Development Committee meeting schedule as follows:

Date Time Location

September 4, 2003 5:30 pm Norwalk City Hall, Room 231

September 11, 2003/Public Gathering 7:30 pm Norwalk City Hall,  
Community Room

October 9, 2003 5:30 pm Norwalk City Hall, Room 231

October 16, 2003/Public Gathering 7:30 pm Norwalk City Hall,  
Community Room

November 20, 2003 5:30 pm Norwalk City Hall, Room 231

December 4, 2003 7:30 pm Norwalk City Hall,  
Common Council Chambers

9. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:00 pm.