

September 4, 2003 – Webster Street Development Actions

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.
- Michael Greene Norwalk Planning and Zoning
- Kathryn Hebert Norwalk DPW
- Alanna Kabel Norwalk Office of the Mayor
- Alex Knopp Mayor of Norwalk
- 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
- Judith Rivas Norwalk Common Council
- Robert Koch The Hour Newspapers
- Munro Johnson Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- Amy Jimenez Norwalk Parking Authority
- Sanders Davies The Maritime Aquarium

Subject: Workshop No. 2 with Webster Street Block Development Committee and the SEA Consulting team.

1. Introduction

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 the results of Phase I of the study effort.

2. Process and Schedule

Oliver Gillham reviewed the planning process and the project schedule. The process and schedule have been revised so that draft reports will now be delivered after the Development Committee Workshops and the public gatherings in each phase. This has been done in order to allow incorporation of input from the Development Committee and the public into the reports.

3. Phase I Results

Oliver Gillham presented the following preliminary findings from Phase I of the Webster Street Planning and Urban Design Study:

A. Project Context

Project Location: The Study Area is located at the gateway to South Norwalk, forming a critical juncture between the SoNo historic district and major urban revitalization zones to the north and south.

Project Site: The study area is made up of three blocks created by the 1960's South Norwalk Urban Renewal Plan. These include the Webster Street Superblock, the Madison Block immediately to the south, and the Clay Block, across Martin Luther King Drive from the Madison Block.

Land Use and Zoning: The Study Area forms a predominantly commercial seam between the mixed-use waterfront district containing SoNo to the east, and a series of residential neighborhoods to the west. The Study Area is currently zoned SNBD (South Norwalk Business District).

Site Considerations: The Webster Block is crossed by a major sanitary sewer and an active telephone duct bank. These utilities will have to be accommodated or relocated. Property ownership patterns together with obligations created by the South Norwalk Urban Renewal Plan and subsequent agreements will also affect plans for the site. These obligations and agreements are currently under study.

Vehicular Access: The Study Area is marked by heavy peak hour traffic volumes and average to low levels of service at major intersections. No data is presently available for the intersection at Martin Luther King Drive and Washington Street. Existing entry/exit points to/from the Webster Lot are probably more or less fixed due to queuing at existing intersections. A detailed traffic analysis of streets and intersections in the Study Area will be needed at some point. The City may choose to do this work in parallel with or following the Webster Block study.

Pedestrian and Transit Access: The Study Area is served by the Wheels system and the South Norwalk Train Station. Pedestrian access problems exist in the alleyways next to 17 Washington Street and Avrick Furniture and at the intersection of Washington Street and Martin Luther King Drive.

Wayfinding: no unified parking or pedestrian signage system was observed either in the Study Area or in surrounding districts.

User Experience: the existing Webster Lot appears confusing, feels "unsafe" in places, presents pedestrian and auto conflicts, has a generally poor image and provides uneven access to the surrounding district.

Historic Context: the study area is bordered on the east by the Washington Street Historic District, which contains many fine examples of commercial and industrial architecture and transportation structures from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The aesthetics of this era are a strong influence throughout South Norwalk.

Parking

B. Existing Parking

Inventory: An inventory of existing parking in the Study Area performed by SEA on July 29, 2003 counted 612 parking spaces in the Webster Lot. Of these, 35 are private, 81 are reserved, 357 are permit, 94 are two-hour meter and 45 are 10-hour meter. Including other blocks in the Study Area and on street parking in the count yields a total of 867 total parking spaces. Of these, 124 are private, 81 are reserved, 445 are permit, 9 are 15 minute unmetered, 138 are two-hour meter, 45 are 10-hour meter, and 25 are unstriped and unmetered.

Existing Parking Rates: Meters currently charge \$0.25 per hour. Passes for permit spaces, which are “first come/first serve” can be purchased for \$240 per year. Passes for reserved spaces can be purchased for \$480 per year.

Phase II Analysis: Brian Bartholomew of Desman Associates summarized the work that will be carried out in the next phase of the study. The South Norwalk Parking Study, completed in 1999 by Allan Davis Associates, Inc. is being used as the principal source of information on parking for the Webster Street Block Planning and Urban Design Study. During Phase II of the current project, the SEA team will develop an update of The South Norwalk Parking Study that will revisit previous estimates of parking demand for the Study Area, analyze the potential for shared parking use on the Webster Block, and develop a range of parking programs to be based on future development scenarios for the Study Area.

Market

C. Market Conditions

Dick Paik of Bonz & Company, Inc. summarized the results of market research conducted to date:

Economic Context: Given Norwalk’s strategic location for business and transportation, new development properties in the City and the Study Area offer opportunities to capture significant shares of the region’s employment and potentially exceed projected demographic growth.

Market-Rate Housing: In general, the Study Area offers potentially viable opportunities for the development of new market-rate apartments as well as condominiums in mid-rise, multi-family configurations. Overall, the local apartment

and condominium market benefits from the Study Area's strategic location, the South Norwalk environment, and a market characterized by price appreciation and a growing number of affluent empty nester households.

Affordable Housing: Relatively high median income levels combined with increasing home prices in the region makes provision of affordable housing a critical priority in Norwalk. Affordable housing is needed to accommodate large segments of the local labor force and key sectors of the Norwalk community that are being priced out of the local housing market. Mixed-income projects have proven beneficial to virtually all parties, including: low- and moderate-income residents, market-rate residents, developers and communities.

Retail Market: Overall, while the Study Area is not likely to support large-scale shopping-center-style retail development, well-situated spaces with high visibility and convenient access to parking should be able to support a general increase in the smaller-scale specialty retail tenancies that characterize SoNo.

Office Market: Given prevailing market weakness and the volume of likely competition from Reed/Putnam, large-scale office development does not offer a likely development opportunity for the Study Area. Smaller professional office and other types of similar space will continue to offer opportunities in the Webster Block area.

4. Next Steps

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During Phase II of The Webster Street Block Planning and Urban Design Study, the SEA team will prepare an update of Study Area parking demand using the findings of The South Norwalk Parking Study as a basis for new analysis. The consulting team will then work with the Development Committee and City Staff to determine the potential feasibility of a range of alternative parking, housing and mixed-use development scenarios for the Webster Block Study Area.

5. Discussion

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

What types of financing mechanisms will be investigated? While it is still too early to tell at this stage, the basic thrust of the study is likely to focus on the development value of the City-owned land on the Webster Block. Sale or lease of the land along the edge of Martin Luther King (MLK) Drive to a housing developer could help to generate cash for the construction of parking on the site. This could reduce the amount of financing needed to build a garage, and, in turn, the amount of revenue required for debt service. Another approach might be a developer agreement, whereby a developer agrees to build the garage for the Parking Authority in return for securing needed parking spaces for new development. Other components may include securing commitments for leased spaces in the garage from adjoining property owners sufficient to guarantee a revenue stream adequate to finance the construction of the garage.

Klaff's is an important magnet in the district, and could form the basis for attracting related home design stores in the area, if adequate floor plates (e.g., 20,000 square feet or higher) could be provided through new construction or combining existing smaller spaces. This might also be big enough to attract an apparel retailer like The Gap.

17 Washington Street, and the stores next to it were mentioned as possible candidates that could provide larger floor plates.

Greater turnover is needed at existing metered spaces. This could be achieved through better enforcement. Central multi-space meters are another alternative to be investigated. Such an approach could also help with parking rates in the district. Central meters could be programmed so that longer stays pay relatively higher hourly rates, while shorter stays pay less.

How much of the existing parking in the Webster Lot is taken up by 50 Washington Street? The answer is not clear-cut. Tenants in 50 Washington Street currently pay for 444 passes including both permit and reserved spaces. However, passes are oversold (a standard industry practice). There are also the permit spaces on the Clay Block across the street from the Webster Lot. Because of the building's relatively urban location, tenants at 50 Washington Street may also be more likely to use transit and/or walk to work than tenants at a more traditional suburban location like Merritt Seven.

Are any special transit funds available that might help this project? TEA-21 funds may be available in some form, but transit funding in general appears to be diminishing rather than increasing. The current transportation reauthorization bill under consideration in Congress is called T-3. Action on that bill is expected to begin in September. Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding was one source that might have been useful under TEA-21. It is not presently clear what will happen to this program in T-3. Transportation enhancement funds, which might also play a role, have so far been retained. Enhancement funds have been used to help build new trails, sidewalks and bike paths, and to restore existing transportation facilities including historic railroad stations. Enhancement funds have also been used to finance significant community-oriented transportation projects that provide more travel options while helping to stimulate local economies.

There should be a survey of passengers at the SoNo train station to see where they are coming from and going to. People are commuting between Stamford and Norwalk currently. Metro-North may have some information – at least on overall ridership at different stations.

How should people get to and from the South Norwalk train station? The police station and other improvements will help the existing route along Monroe and South Main Streets. Is another route needed – for example beside the westerly track embankment? There are different opinions on this issue.

6. Amended Meeting Schedule

The Webster Superblock Development Committee meeting schedule remains as follows:

Date Time Location

September 10, 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/Public Gathering 7:30 pm Norwalk City Hall,
Common Council Chambers

7. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:00 pm.