

Webster Street Development Meeting Minutes

October 9, 2003

Location: Norwalk City Hall – Room 231

Present:

- Jose Bermudez Planning Commission, UHAN
- Albert Bisacky SEA Consultants, Inc.
- Keith Brown Raymond Brown Associates
- John Burritt Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- Armando Gallardo South Norwalk Business Association
- Oliver Gillham SEA Consultants, Inc.
- Michael Greene Norwalk Planning and Zoning
- Tom Hamilton Norwalk Department of Finance
- Kathryn Hebert Norwalk DPW
- Munro Johnson Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- Alanna Kabel Norwalk Office of the Mayor
- Alex Knopp Mayor of Norwalk
- Bruce Morris Norwalk Board of Education
- Edmund Schmidt Norwalk Office of the Mayor
- Burton Shatz Norwalk Parking Authority
- Timothy Sheehan Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- Robert Koch The Hour Newspapers

Subject: Workshop No. 3 with Webster Street Block Development Committee and the SEA Consulting team.

1. Introduction

Ed Schmidt opened the meeting and turned the floor over to Oliver Gillham, the SEA team's Project Manager, for a presentation of the results of Phase II of the study effort.

2. Process and Schedule

Oliver Gillham reviewed the planning process and the project schedule. The team is concluding Phase II - Preliminary Concepts - and will proceed to Phase III - Proposed Plan - following the public gathering on October 16.

3. Phase II Results

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

A. Parking Demand Analysis

Analysis of existing weekday and weekend parking demand for the Webster Block carried out by SEA Consultants and Desman Associates shows that peak weekday demand governs, exceeding supply by 162 spaces. This means that 774 spaces are needed to satisfy existing demand on the Webster Lot, compared to the 612 spaces available on the lot today. This is less than the 200 spaces identified by the 1999 Allan Davis Associates Study. This may be due to the fact that 88 public permit spaces on the Clay Block were added to the total study area supply following the 1999 study.

B. Preliminary Development Concepts

Oliver Gillham presented the Phase II development concept diagram for the Webster Study Area:

- A new street for both automobiles and pedestrians will bisect the Webster Superblock. The new street will serve two new parking garages.
 - The Webster Street pedestrian way will be extended all the way to Martin Luther King (MLK) Drive.
 - New housing and retail development will be brought into the interior of the block along the new street.
 - The new circulation system will restore the traditional downtown organization of buildings fronting on streets that predominates in the adjacent SoNo Historic District.
 - The new circulation system will also break down the scale of the superblock – restoring a pattern that was abandoned in the 1960's.
 - This new configuration will result in a more rational pedestrian and vehicular circulation hierarchy that carries the scale and pattern of SoNo into the Webster Block.
 - It is recommended that these proposals be accompanied by a new, uniform vehicular and pedestrian sign and information system.
 - New housing will be three to four stories in height, with possible higher elements at significant gateway sites such as at the corner of MLK Drive and Washington Street and the corner of MLK and West Avenue.
 - The plan should also look to leverage new housing and retail development over existing one-story buildings sites.
 - Finally, new glass kiosks with light food service and movable tables and chairs should be considered for the Washington Street public plaza, possibly with new restaurant uses in part of the first floor of Avrick Furniture. Seasonal programming should also be considered to activate this space.

C. Preliminary Sketch Plans

Oliver Gillham presented two preliminary sketch plans for the Webster Street Block: Sketch Plan A and Sketch Plan B. The following elements are common to both schemes:

- A new two-way street with sidewalks on both sides running from MLK Drive through to Washington Street
- A new pedestrian walkway along old Webster Street alignment running from North Main Street to MLK Drive.
- Two parking garages of between 500 and 600 plus cars - one west of the new street and one to the west.
- The westerly garage has an expanded ground floor footprint, taking advantage of the 10-foot grade change across the site.
- Three housing sites along MLK Drive on City-owned land comprising over 200 units, including affordable housing.
- Retail on the ground floor of both garages.
- New housing development over one-story retail buildings at privately owned sites 9 and 11 Washington Street and at 64-84 North Main Street.
- Revitalization of the Washington Street Public Plaza.
- A clear hierarchy of vehicular and pedestrian flows. Pedestrians are directed onto streets and pedestrian ways from parking garages.

The main differences between the two schemes are:

- One housing complex in Scheme A presents a courtyard to MLK Drive.
- In Scheme B the courtyard is turned toward the interior pedestrian way.
- Scheme B also has housing as well as retail along the edges of both garages where they front the new street.

Both Schemes have a proposed first phase that would build the three residential buildings on City-owned land together with the westerly garage (Garage No. 1). About 180 spaces would remain on the easterly surface lot, together with 50 new spaces that would be created along Washington Street and Madison Street. Development of the residential buildings would utilize the value of existing City-owned land to help finance the new parking garage.

4. **Next Steps**

During Phase III of *The Webster Street Block Planning and Urban Design Study*, the SEA team will use input from the Phase II Development Committee Workshop and the following Public Gathering to prepare a final proposed plan. That plan will then be subjected to more detailed cost and feasibility analysis to be presented at the final Development Committee Workshop and at a final Public Gathering. Input from those meetings will then be used to prepare a final draft report for the project

5. **Discussion**

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

- Committee members expressed excitement about the flexibility inherent in the proposed plan phasing.
 - How many parking spaces will be in the two garages? The two garages will contain about 1,200 spaces total, with between 600 and 700 spaces in the westerly garage. These numbers are preliminary and subject to change.
 - What will become of the pedestrian alleyway at Avrick Furniture? Under the current development concept, the passageway at Avrick Furniture might be abandoned as a pedestrian passageway. The fire escapes for the store will be difficult to reconfigure, and the new concept places emphasis on directing visitors from garages directly onto streets or major pedestrian ways – the superblock having been divided into smaller blocks with street fronts.
 - What will be the character of the service areas behind 50 Washington Street and 17 Washington Street? This has not yet been established. These service areas are clearly needed to provide service to the buildings that front on Washington Street. However, since some pedestrians will also use them, they could have high quality landscaping and paving – like the alleyways in Newburyport, MA. The character of these ways may depend in part on cost and financing as well as on the needs and desires of abutting properties.
 - Will the new street be windy or in shadow? The new street has a southerly axis for part of its length, which means that at least part of the street will receive sun during part of the day even in winter. Since most of the new buildings will be relatively low, there should be little wind generated by any of the new development.
 - The team should consider making the garage entrances clearly visible from the street.
 - Several committee members suggested that a plaza should be introduced at the intersection of the new street and the pedestrian way – perhaps the buildings could be cut back in this location to create a special place at this key crossing. People arriving at different times and parking in different garages could say they would "meet at the plaza." Perhaps there should be retail/restaurant uses on all four corners of the plaza.
 - Will the SEA team be conducting a traffic study? No. The City may elect to do a traffic study of the proposed plan beginning now or after the plan is completed.
 - Will the existing retail buildings at 9 and 11 Washington Street or at 64-84 North Main be preserved? Possibly, but it is more likely that they would be demolished and rebuilt as part of a new complex, should they be redeveloped as shown in the sketch plans.
 - How high are the buildings? The buildings shown along MLK Drive are four stories tall (excluding any parking levels). The buildings at the corners might be higher: in the six-story range – or

possibly slightly higher. This issue will be studied in more detail in the next phase.

- The main width constraint for the new street is posed by property ownership at 17 Washington Street, where the property line extends into the travel way. If this strip of land is not acquired, then either a two-way street with no sidewalks could be built, or a one-way street with a sidewalk. The existing electrical equipment will have to be moved in any case.
- The new "street" may not actually be a formal City street.
- The team should consider breaking Phase 1 into additional phases: the first action might be the construction of Garage No. 1 together with the two buildings at the southerly end of the MLK Drive edge of the block. This would allow surface parking to remain behind the Crown Cinema until the first garage is completed.

6. **Adjournment**

Meeting adjourned at 7:00 pm.