

City of Norwalk  
Redevelopment Agency  
Norwalk Center: West Avenue Corridor Municipal Development  
**November 10, 2004 Actions**

**Attendance:** Paul Jones, Chairman, Antoinette Cooper Blair, Felix Serrano, Emil Albanese

**Staff:** Tim Sheehan, Executive Director; Jack Burritt, Assistant Director, Michael Moore, Grant Writer; Munro Johnson, CDBG Program Manager

**Others:** Attorney Marc Grenier, Redevelopment Agency Counsel; Timothy Carney

Mr. Jones called the public hearing to order at 7:05 p.m. He welcomed all to the public meeting. He stated that he recognized some familiar faces from the last hearing. Mr. Jones then turned the meeting over to Mr. Sheehan, who announced that like the last meeting, their presentation wouldn't be long tonight, to allow for public feedback on the project. He said they would proceed with a half-hour presentation to present an outline of the project and then they would give an analysis, relative to the retail environment commands and requirements that Kate Colburn would address.

Mr. Sheehan gave some background on the project. He said that over the course of twenty years, the city was looking at the redevelopment of the West Avenue and Wall Street areas, to develop those areas to bring in more high-density development that would fit in with the content and character of the area. Also to address mass issues along the West Avenue corridor that is a mixed-use corridor with no rhyme or reason. He said the plan was to put forward a cohesive mix to add synergy to the corridor as well. He further noted that the retail market in Norwalk was very strong, and it was important to note that the area is blighted, but it is not easy to quantify that. However, the matter gets more into the economics of how this impacts the community. He said there are other areas that require much more per sq. ft., for instance, retail in Norwalk runs the gamut of \$90-120 per sq. ft., so these were issues to look at, but the issue is not how a house looks or who pays what taxes. There needs to be a determination of blight that is not determined by the Redevelopment Agency or a neighbor, this matter rests with the Common Council, so whether they agreed or disagree, the argument would be handled by them.

Mr. Sheehan went on to ask that anyone who makes comments or ask questions tonight, to please state their name and address for the record. He also asked those speaking to give specific feedback only, noting this would allow them to go back to look at any changes that might be necessary to the plan. He further pointed out that tonight's displays were concepts only and they were not approved yet. He said they were expected to hold a couple of more public hearings to address any issues further. And he noted that everyone's comments would be digested and their thought's were important and should be shared. He urged everyone to speak, but again, he asked each person to be specific.

Mr. Ken Narva- Streetworks, LLC gave highlights of the plan concepts. He reiterated what Mr. Sheehan said in that, the plan in reality is not a plan, but a methodology to set boundaries in the area for a series of multiple projects to be developed in phases. He pointed out that the

illustrations showed the maximum potential build out of those boundaries set, so he would outline the funding principles that govern development in the district, noting that public input was critical to designate that series of plans. He continued and said this was a great opportunity to help the gateway into Norwalk, i.e., it's a pearl connection between SoNo and activity that will help Wall Street. The principal to organize is that good urban development happens with adjoining uses that surround the area and has an impact on development. He said whatever happens in the final phases, a good development plan is critical to tie into any historical presence set. He expected this would overall help Wall Street's revitalization, but in the end, the market would drive the program and it tells what the potential could be and it's a good site plan that creates the frame of what it could be. He went on to say the program has 470,000 ft. of retail, 430 units of housing, a hotel and parking; so some of the principals dealt with are hierarchy of streets and that's why new streets were being proposed, because this will help create more of a scale of what's happening. Also, street retail is key to activate the base of all good development to give a sense of safety and security.

Mr. Narva further stated that on-street parking was key, but they are trying to consolidate the garage to accommodate the retail. He explained what will happen is, that they would see a 2-story commercial environment, noting that a 1-story doesn't value the mix of uses and for commercial, it might result in an interaction of person and product. However, residential was critical to support the retail base, and as to the mix, that's up to the development process. He stated it's important that parking be internalized, so the parking would be put underground with the top level left open, thus, this preserves the open spaces areas. They also need to anchor the retail with retail stores, but they do not put them on the street if it's found to be too valuable, so they believed that anchor retail should be in block-C that was denoted in orange on the plan. He indicated that was a potential store with a level of retail at grade and on the other side of Merwin Avenue would be 2-story retail. He said it was important to bring parking on the street, but they need to gentrify to the pedestrian, i.e., if the sidewalk was 2 ft. wide, they would go in the interest of the pedestrian, but if it's a vehicle bias street, this assures that a bus would be comfortable and vice versa for a pedestrian bias street, i.e., it would be comfortable for a pedestrian. They will see a multi-story use and a parking structure and connection of retail and the parking garage, so everyone comes to the street before they go into any structure and all is anchored together by creation of place, consisting of outdoor dining, great lighting etc. And in the middle, they would see public open space, so all the principles apply to any good development. Overall, all happens in phases and this is the key to gauge opinion. He said the market was apparent if all is approved and the market is definitely in demand, noting this would be a critical element. Mr. Sheehan followed up on this comment and he said the purpose was to create good urban development.

Ms. Kate Coburn, Principal of ERA reviewed the floor plates that she said were important to effectuate the type of retail that attracts people to the area. She noted they might be of the opinion that smaller retail is better, but all is driven by the market. She went on and stated that ERA was an international research firm that specialized in real estate. She said she works nationally with a lot of cities and towns to revitalize the urban core, noting that the type of stores that were apparent in the past have now changed and people are now interested in relocation downtown and "new urbanism" is the current trend. She said to attract residents, projects have to be anchored by a generator and that is driven by retail that is interesting to everyone, so they

looked to this project to see how it fit into development throughout the country and they found there is a hierarchy of retail, and to attract that, they need an anchor of destination, i.e., an attraction to bring people to the area, such as large department stores that accomplish that. She continued and said as these places attract, this is a stimulus to attract businesses to fit in with the changing times, but these places need adequate space. She further reviewed the large format of tenants that want to be on one level and in an urban environment, they need to be sure that tenants have a place to load and unload, so parking is critical to allow people to get to stores. It's also important to be able to park and run in, thus retailers are successful in providing for their customers. She relayed a situation that created an extremely successful project in Pasadena, CA. She said what they found was that having people downtown, spurs opportunities for other developers. She concluded that what was critical is that there is enough retail to have mass and an atmosphere for people to enjoy the district.

Mr. Sheehan asked the comparison between a mall and on street stores. Ms. Coburn said this would be a mixed-use project and a mall is enclosed; but this is not an enclosed project. Also, it's not linear, it's a neighborhood that is meandering with a number of different components, so it's considered an urban retail district.

Mr. Sheehan asked in terms of the square footage proposed from a retail standpoint, was this project considered to be large, small or in between. Ms. Coburn said it was not considered to be a large project. She relayed that a project in New Rochelle was much larger, but again, this project is not large, however, they need the space proposed to allow anchors and they need enough in place to prevent another situation that she dubbed the "Bradlees effect".

Mr. Sheehan asked where they fell off in square footage on the radar screen. Ms. Coburn said it would be less square footage involved than say it would be for banks and 50% of the space would be pre-leased, so there would be fewer larger tenants that are preferred with smaller tenants mixed in.

Public Comments – please note that all comments and written statements have been summarized.

Mr. Leigh Levy, stated he was an architect. He said he has been an 18 year resident of Norwalk. He read a statement into the record highlighting the urban renewal concept that was developed post WWII. He said the mindset was to clean up cities. He further relayed how key projects became successful, but other attempts to revive cities have met with limited success and ended in complete economic failure. He stressed that the mall in Bridgeport failed and the parking structure is still part of the skyline. Overall, he read statistics of other cities that failed with such a project and he felt what has been dubbed an urban project is in actuality just a mall. He further felt this would contribute little to the city and it could be the death of other retail centers, so he urged them to consider the real definition of the project. He therefore requested rejection of the project as it stands.

o Mr. Sheehan asked Mr. Levy about his statement regarding them turning their backs on West Avenue. Mr. Levy pointed out the areas that are real retail centers. He further pointed out where he didn't see access for people to walk across and he felt to redevelop that area, there should be a boulevard from the museums up to Wall Street to encourage people to stroll the area to enjoy what was already there. Mr. Sheehan responded that there was nothing to stroll through. Mr.

Levy explained that visitors and users to the retail would enter and use the retail cluster, get back in their car and leave and there would be nothing to entice them up to SoNo to utilize other retail. Thus, they are creating a world within itself, which is an urban mall. However, the potential to develop is there, but not all of the area proposed is necessary.

Mr. Sheehan announced that he would call people first who didn't have the opportunity to speak at the last meeting.

Ms. Beth Church, Highland Avenue, Norwalk said she was here because her family has property on West Avenue that she manages. She mentioned that her father bought a CVS store there. However, she was here to support the project, due to the fact that she recalled downtown was a lively area in the past, but it hasn't been that way for years and she felt the plan would attract businesses and people, noting that change is inevitable!

Mike McGuire, 8 Oakley Court, Norwalk said he was speaking as a resident with two kids in school. He was also a property owner who has invested in Norwalk and sees a bright future here. He has a commitment to the city and was very much in support of the project for the following reasons:

- \$3.5 million in tax revenue that the city will see and are sorely in need of
- the 1,700 new jobs
- 2,000 construction jobs

He further noted there were some high quality buildings in the area that are successful, pointing out that change is a fact of life and those opposed should remember their neighborhood is a result of the "good change", but now is the time for Wall Street. He emphasized that the Mayor spent \$150k of taxpayer's money to have the plans done, so he felt he was going for significant changes. However, he expressed that the Mayor needed to step up to secure those changes. He therefore asked for support of the project.

Ms. Jill Montasanto, 20 Sunnybrook Road, Norwalk said she was opposed to the project due to more distinctive space being taken away by development. She said she would hate to see working class families disregarded for more retail franchise stores. She further questioned why it was being done, noting that to tear down homes to put up a large-scale development was the wrong place to do the project.

o Mr. Sheehan asked the number of residential properties that would be affected. Ms. Sweitzer, the Economic Development Program Manager replied that twenty-three (23) homes would be affected.

Mr. Jeff Shapiro said he owned a café in Roman Plaza. He said he invested a lot of money in the restaurant with hopes to grow. He said he didn't understand why there was opposition to a project that would draw from SoNo and he felt that new development would draw to SoNo. Overall, he thought it was a great area and he noted that he moved here for that purpose. He said that downtown was packed with people and overall, it was a phenomenal project.

Mr. Larry Grutchman, 33 Meadow Wood Drive, Norwalk said he was in support of Mr. Seligson. He noted that he owned real estate and had a significant investment in Norwalk with

numerous properties and the willingness to invest was due to the dream in Norwalk to look to the future to assure tenants remain successful. He further felt there needed to be a partnership between the City of Norwalk and the people looking to invest in Norwalk.

o Mr. Sheehan asked about the perception that if the development was done, that all traffic would go inward. Mr. Grutchman said that due to his investment, he felt it was viable to walk across the street more than one way, noting the development would bring traffic, although this may not, but traffic generates money also.

o Mr. Sheehan said so traffic would increase retail rents. Mr. Grutchman said yes.

Mr. Barry Lordanally said he was in support of the project due to the opening of Norwalk Bank & Trust. He said the key thing in doing this, was looking at what would come down the pike. He noted that SoNo in South Norwalk was doing fine now, as far as drawing people to the area and he felt the development would draw even more people.

Mr. Bill Krummel, 21 Littlefox Lane, Norwalk said he heard many positive remarks. However, he said at the outset, as far as the improvement of the West Avenue Corridor, he was not in favor of the plan for the following reasons:

- the name being Norwalk Center, noting he doesn't see it as a center, but sees it more of a distraction

- there is no connection to South Norwalk and Washington Street and he thought any new development needs to tie into the larger community, but he saw none.

He further noted that the river becomes more and more important, but there was nothing in the plan that would lead people there. And as far as open space, the parking lot is not considered open space; they need trees and real space to rejuvenate the area. As for issue of affordable housing, he said he didn't hear anything at all about this being provided, stressing that it is extremely important.

Mr. Krummel further questioned the retail value cost that was quoted. Mr. Sheehan said it was an appraised value that was done within the last three months.

Ms. Jennifer Herring, Ann Street, Norwalk said he was in favor of the project. She thought they were doing a great job trying to turn around Norwalk and the project will thwart vibrancy in the area to make the fabric of the city work.

Mr. Jake \_\_\_\_\_ of Madison & Marquet, Norwalk said he felt like a Norwalk resident, but he was here to point out that they planned on being a resident owner and was looking forward to improving the retail on Wall Street.

Mr. Mark Blitzer, 625 West Avenue, Norwalk said he was here to address the commission and to applaud their efforts on West Avenue. He said they needed to be carefully directed. He spoke to the purpose of reducing blight and advancing economic development, noting that the plan doesn't accomplish that. He stressed that the project can be successful without destroying his business and he felt the decision lies with the commission as to whether his property would be included in the MVP. He further questioned why his property was included in those boundaries. Mr. Sheehan replied that they would continue dialogue on this matter at a later date.

Mr. Russell Cross stated he has been a long time resident of Norwalk. He felt the plan addressed many problems seen over the years. He further noted how Norwalk was filled with a lot of smaller properties, but a larger piece of property was easier to develop. He further stated that he didn't want out of town developers coming in and he felt that having a local man spearheading the project, was due to the personal pride that person has to do something for Norwalk. He felt that overall, they would be in better shape after. He ended in saying it was a good project and a good plan to start out with.

Mr. San O'Connor, 73 Newtown Avenue, Norwalk said he was in support due to the plan being a great improvement and a great addition to Norwalk, as well as a great draw to bring people to Norwalk Center. He also thought it would be user friendly for shoppers and tenants. He pointed out that Mr. Seligson has proven to be a good and dedicated developer and he was known for the quality of projects and tenants, so overall, it's a good idea.

Mr. Larry Church said he was a long time resident of Norwalk. He expressed that the plans were indicative of what can be done, but he felt the redevelopment as proposed didn't have to be done. He spoke to the plan that contemplates housing and he urged the Redevelopment Agency in approving the concept, to not forget the neighbors. He further stressed the need to tie Wall Street and South Norwalk together, noting that to do so, they must have a vibrant street. He therefore asked them to keep housing and the residents in mind.

Mr. Dennis Beekin, 520 West Avenue, Norwalk said he was not a retailer, but his profession was as a doctor that has been in the area for eleven years. He said it's the ideal location being close to the hospital. He noted that the neighborhood was tired and this reflected on his practice, and although the development would improve the stature, as well as that of the retail already there, he hoped to see more medical space.

Lindsey Curtis, Pastor of Grace Baptist Church, Norwalk said he sat in on a number of discussions regarding this project, and they had the support of the NAACP and his congregation. He was in support primarily due to Mr. Seligson taking the time to talk to the public. He stated that affordable housing was key and he felt this project had a lot to do with the minority population and the people that live in the proposed area of the project. He further stressed that notably in other cities, urban renewal is usually only accomplished by moving out the minority population, but in this case, they like what they see developing. He further felt those working on this project, could work with the minority community closer, expressing that he thought they "were not doing something to, but they were working with"!

A resident of 104 Wall Street stated that she was a Valley School instructor who provides classes and education for students studying dance. She asked about what was happening now, because when students parent's drop off their kids, there is nowhere to buy food or shop. She said she also wondered if they truly have an interim client. Mr. Sheehan replied that they could set a separate meeting to talk about Wall Street initiatives and he suggested she contact Susan Sweitzer on that.

Ms. Marie Bryant said there was a lot invested in the plan, but she had three concerns:

1. the connection between South Norwalk - noting that she thought it was unlikely and she felt it

would only connect Connecticut Avenue and those problems with Wall Street.

2. the design – she had a concern of long stretches of dead zone and she pointed out the area of concern on the plan

3. there is not a lot of integration within a very good and vibrant neighborhood in the area that she pointed out on the plan.

Mr. Narva answered to her comments. He said the center of connection was of perception and no one would be walking say three miles, but the perception activated three key nodes, i.e., take an area underutilized and bring in people and business to create motion and liveliness. And as for what integrates a street, the goal was to separate the two and have activity between them and make the sidewalks as user friendly as possible. He further stated that during seasonal issues, the city was investing almost \$1 million to provide walkways from Lockwood Mathews Mansion to the Children’s Museum to the retail area.

Mr. Pete Johnson stated this project was a catalyst for the Wall Street area and the retail is an actual to compliment the Reed Putnam area, so he was in support of the project.

Mr. Bob Wagner, 36 Morehouse Lane, Norwalk said he volunteered at the Maritime Aquarium for many years. He expressed however, that in selecting those to speak first that hadn’t spoken before wasn’t right, because he thought this implied that those that spoke before, didn’t have anything more important to say. He went on to address issues of concern such as:

1. the tax revenue – he felt that although \$2.6 million figure was a good number, it’s less than 10% of the city’s budget

2. the mega project undermines the city’s character

3. for financing the garage - a retail owner not doing well can generally revise his plan, but for a garage, they can’t do that, so they need to reconsider this, pointing out the risk of failure in the example of what happened in Bridgeport

4. there is an overload concern – and he cautioned that they shouldn’t ignore West Avenue and should consider the residents

He further pointed out the headlines in the Norwalk Hour and Advocate that highlighted the matter of saving the pond. He pointed out the city’s master plan isn’t out yet to address that.

Overall, he thanked the commission for the opportunity to allow everyone to speak, but again, they need to look at all the possibilities.

Mr. Tony Lalaylly asked the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency to live up to the title. He mentioned that in view of the current traffic and levels–C service in that area, there would be thousands of visitors daily according to Dick Linnartz, i.e., this would cause serious traffic problems and would distract from the West Norwalk retailers. And as for blight, there is no clear definition. He gave an example of a building on Orchard Street that was in good condition per the Tax Assessor, but under the plan, this building and others would be impacted.

o Mr. Sheehan asked about the West Avenue Corridor and if Mr. Lalaylly was advocating that the area should stay the way it is. Mr. Lalaylly said he was advocating that there be no city intervention and that they should leave it to market forces.

Mr. Gordon Tully, 6 Walnut Avenue, Norwalk stated that he has lived in Norwalk for eight years. He noted that he was an architect and how he gave his perspective as an architect at the last meeting. He further noted that as a lifelong Democrat he was holding out for free enterprise

against Republicans, because they all want to interfere with the market in areas of agriculture and other areas. He said they need the city to guide and develop as best they can; however, it is not a question if the developer will make money, but it's a question of whether or not it will be profitable. He was adamant that his project "elephant" would be arbitrarily inserted into the planning process in Norwalk and it does nothing for West Avenue.

o Mr. Sheehan asked him why it does nothing. Mr. Tully said because it doesn't address West Avenue as an element by itself. He urged the Redevelopment Agency not to approve the project until they see a physical model or walk through of the plan.

o Mr. Sheehan asked what height he had in mind that would be appropriate. Mr. Tully pointed out buildings that were 75 ft. high. Mr. Sheehan replied that current zoning allows for up to 8-stories.

Mr. Tully further stated the Mr. Seligson was a critical player, but he questioned what would happen if they got rid of the development, noting they would then have a well-funded program for Wall Street and the natural end is Merwin Street that is ¼ mile from the end of Wall Street where he indicated on the plan. He ended in saying that he was desperate to get back to traditional cities, but Norwalk is a gem and the onus is to get people to Norwalk, so it is a destination. However, it should be done in small pieces, so he suggested they develop the smallest piece first to satisfy the function at hand, stressing there is no reason to do a mega-plex.

Ms. Laurel Lindstrom, 20 Raymond Terrace said her concerns involved getting more detail in a sense of what the project would look like. She stated that the plan felt wrong due to the mass scale and she thought it was out of sync with businesses and residents. She also had a problem with the massive garage that will increase traffic and change the uniqueness of the current shops already there. And as for the name Norwalk Center, this denoted continued development for Norwalk and the master plan should include all sections of Norwalk. Furthermore, they need more details on how the project will revitalize the area. She said it would be a prefabricated mass comprised of anchor and chain stores and the other buildings already in existence, would be dwarfed by them. Overall, she preferred to see gradual development that is well integrated and there should be a true link between SoNo and Wall Street. She further noted that in the past months, she met with Mr. Sheehan and other key people to discuss alternatives and she has done some research for other options. However, she felt they needed to shelve the present plan to move forward and be open to other possibilities and she would like the opportunity to share other ideas.

o Mr. Sheehan said they intended to drill down the issues on record and then invite people back to discuss further.

Mr. Richard Fuller said he was here to talk about the "man", because Mr. Seligson having done community development for over thirty years, knows the needs of the community. He stressed that the area has been dying for thirty years and they need new development. He further felt that Mr. Seligson was the man to do that, pointing out that he is receptive to ideas and has been responsible for many noted improvements in the area. They also needed to understand the needs of the neighborhood, but again, Mr. Seligson has proven to be receptive to the communities needs, relating to jobs, retail and food establishments. Overall, he felt it was the right direction to go and he (Mr. Seligson) was the right man to do it!

Mr. Anthony Kasaris asked to address the issue of the twenty-three residences and businesses that would be adversely impacted. He stated that there was also a lot going on about eminent domain (he had articles regarding this that were submitted into the record). He ended in stressing that he didn't like what was going on.

Mr. Toddy Bryant said a lot of good things were said tonight, but he had questions on the following:

- examples of building materials
- the impact on Wall Street
- getting people onto the street and how they would accomplish this on West Avenue and Wall Street
- is there a transport plan?
- the cost to the people of Norwalk and the State of Connecticut, is there an analysis available of this for review?

Mr. Sheehan announced this concluded the public hearing. He apologized for not going in order of the speakers that signed up, but he said he felt it was important to get new opinions and he apologized to all the people that spoke at the previous meeting, who didn't get to speak first this time.

§ Someone from the audience asked if all the comments and information presented tonight was transcribed and sent with the SWERPA information. Mr. Sheehan said yes.

§ Mr. Sheehan noted there were two letters submitted in support of the project from: Albert Phelps and Michael DiScala.

§ Mr. Wagner asked to speak again. He shared that he visited Bethel AME Church and he pointed out that members of the congregation were assured their building wouldn't be touched by this project. However, there are twenty-three (23) houses that will be affected amounting to six (6) families that will ultimately be affected. Mr. Sheehan said the number of families was incorrect. Mr. Wagner replied then it would be more than 23 people affected, pointing out they need consideration for the church members.

§ Mr. Lalaylly asked of the \$1.5 million spent, was any spent on workshops to brainstorm all ideas, or was the plan just formulated among the planner and commission people. Mr. Sheehan said there were quite a few planners and meetings over a six-year period, and tonight was a conclusion of those meetings. He said the development went out to the community to gauge opinion, but it wasn't done specifically in a workshop format.

The public hearing adjourned at 9:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Diane Graham  
Telesco Secretarial Services