

City of Norwalk
Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
Norwalk Center: West Avenue
Municipal Development
OCTOBER 14, 2004 Actions

Attendance: Paul Jones, Chairman; Timothy Massad, Vice Chairman

Staff: Timothy Sheehan, Executive Director; Susan Sweitzer, Economic Development Program Manager; John L. Burritt, Jr., Assistant Director; Michael Program; Sally Johnson, Office Manager, Neil Rogan, Agency Counsel

Others: Steve Cecil, Cecil Group; Kate Coburn, Economic Research Associates; Dick Paik, Bonz and Company, Inc.; Tim Tracy, Desman Associates; Ken Narva, Street-Works

Public: 42 attended in total and out of the 42, 34 made public comments

Mr. Jones called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. He thanked Reverend Tucker for allowing the public hearing to be held at Bethel A.M.E. Church.

Mr. Jones stated that staff from the Redevelopment Agency as well as consultants would speak about the history and the West Avenue MDP plan. He said that the presentation would go on for about an hour and then the meeting would be opened up for public questions and comments. Mr. Jones informed those present that there is a sign up sheet for those who would like to speak as well as one for all present.

Mr. Sheehan referenced a handout incorporating an agenda, the Municipal Development Plan as well as the index plan of the MDP, the information relative to the Environmental Impact Evaluation regarding the impact on the local community with regard to this development, as well as related documentation within the EIE. Mr. Sheehan said that both of these documents are on file at the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency should any member of the public wish to view them.

Mr. Sheehan introduced the members of the panel as follows: Susan Sweitzer, Economic Development Project Manager for the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency who will review the MDP with regard to how it is legislatively enacted and the process that will be taken for review and public comment as the plan goes forward. Following Ms. Sweitzer, Mr. Steve Cecil would speak with regard to integration of this development and the overall economic development for the Wall Street area, Reed Street and SoNo. Following Mr. Cecil, Kate Coburn from Economic Research Associates would talk about the issue of today's research market place in terms of size and scale and how it relates to the existing market.

Dick Paik will be reviewing the local and statewide economic benefits associated with the project and finally, Tim Tracy will be speaking with regard to the public investment that will be put into the project, which is basically a parking structure at this point. Mr. Sheehan said that he would come back up after these speakers to highlight some of the impact issues of the EIE and

then turn it over to Ken Narva who will submit to the public the concepts of what a Municipal Development Plan could look like at full build out.

Mr. Jones introduced Mr. Tim Massad from the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency as well.

Mr. Sheehan said that the purpose of the meeting this evening is to discuss a planning document for an area of the city that the NRA has been contemplating development in for over 20 years. He said that while assessing what to do to restore economic vitality on West Avenue, the corridor has declined as a commercial and retail corridor due to suburban growth patterns. He said that many of the stores and businesses that anchored this district have long since closed and relocated. He said that the City of Norwalk has been left with an inconsistent mix of land uses in the area that are a direct result of depressed land values. Mr. Sheehan said that it is clear that the MDP plan area being discussed this evening has no economic focus and is indeed blighted. Mr. Sheehan referred the public to slides with regard to blighted areas. He said that these areas have caused the City, its Redevelopment Agency and the State of Connecticut to embark on a comprehensive planning process that lays out a carefully crafted vision to redevelop this area and restore its commercial viability. He said that the elements incorporated in this plan are similar to those used in every successful activated downtown urban corridor across America; retail, entertainment, residential and office.

Mr. Sheehan stated that the Redevelopment Agency started this process 6 years ago. He said it is a long process with the financial assistance of the State. He said the MDP triggered review under the Connecticut Environmental Policy Act (CEPA) and parts of this are in the packets distributed to the public this evening. Mr. Sheehan stated that this review requires the evaluation of the development's potential effects on the natural and build environments surrounding it. In addition, an Environmental Impact Evaluation (EIE) was also prepared in accordance with the CEPA regulations.

Mr. Sheehan said that the project did not start out as large as it is now. He said that there were no major impacts in the EIE and there were limited abatement measures to solve just about all of them. He said the findings and reports were made available to the public and discussion at a public hearing on November 28, 2001. The reports of the public meeting records were advanced to the Office of Policy and Management on March 13, 2002. The State then determined that no substantial impact existed related to this larger project. In the Spring of 2002, the Planning Committee of the Common Council held a public information meeting and site visits of approximately 80 residents and public officials to the site. Concerns were registered by the public and concurred by the Redevelopment Agency.

Mr. Sheehan said that public input has already dramatically changed the West Avenue Municipal Development Plan. Public Comment has been responsible for the following changes: plan has been downsized by 24%, reduced public financing by \$23 million dollars and restructured the municipal support. He said that the NRA has required that the public investments remain under public ownership and management. Mr. Sheehan stated that the Redevelopment Agency has heard the public's concern from two years ago and has spent the past two years making appropriate changes in the project to reflect those concerns.

Mr. Sheehan said that as they go forward from the public hearing this evening the public needs to understand that the MDP provides the community the framework from which to control the future development and character of West Avenue for a public improved plan. He said that the alternative is to allow development interest to continue to develop this critical corridor in a random piecemeal fashion without any sustainable impact.

Ms. Sweitzer stated that she is in attendance to present the Municipal Development Plan document, its context, legislative intent in being able to authorize activities, and the process in the next steps. She said no action would be taken on the document this evening. Ms. Sweitzer said that in 1986 Norwalk Redistricting Plan was reviewed as part of the Wall Street Project. She said the area was identified as an ideal location for retail development as well as office and residential use requiring public and private investment. She said the corridor was not attracting a critical mass of private investment. Ms. Sweitzer said that it became clear by 1998 that public intervention would be necessary to achieve any measure of the City's planning objectives for this area. She said that the NRA approached the Connecticut Department of Economic & Enhancement Development to discuss the application of Municipal Development Project Policy Guidelines for this project. Ms. Sweitzer referenced Chapter 132 of the guidelines with regards to funding for the project and planning grants. She said that the public has in their package a project overview and a table of contents for the planned document.

Ms. Sweitzer said that the MDP process is also outlined including the activities of the last six years. She said that after the State agencies have reviewed this plan, the plan will proceed to the Norwalk Planning Commission for review, the Southwestern Regional Planning Agency for review, back again to the NRA for review and a public hearing and then to the Planning Committee, Common Council and City Council for adoption of the plan and then to the DECD Department for approval of the project plan. Throughout this process there will be additional opportunities for the public to participate. Ms. Sweitzer said that the MDP is a work in progress and it is on the City website. She said that at the conclusion of this hearing, there would be additional changes made to the document.

Mr. Steve Cecil, an urban designer from the Cecil Group said that he has been involved in the physical planning of large district plans and mixed-use projects and he has worked with the NRA on previous projects. He said that the proposed area is a vital economic center. Mr. Cecil described the multiplicity of uses of the area. He said the important thing is to keep in mind that the area is a destination and that it is different from other city centers. He said that one of the goals of the MDP is to ensure that in the future what is planned is complementing the initiatives in the Wall Street area and in South Norwalk.

Mr. Cecil reviewed the urban sign guidelines, buffering and parking structures. He said that the advantage of a plan is that you get to manage the mix. He said that this is the key to success long-term. He said that Norwalk is really a unique place because there is a mixture of historic elements, of scale, of character and uses that is quite interesting.

Ms. Kate Coburn, Principal, Economic Research Associates said that they are an international consulting firm specializing in market analysis and economic feasibility studies. She said that of

particular interest to her firm is urban retail and it is the reason she is present to speak this evening. Ms. Coburn said that the Norwalk Center, West Avenue corridor is a mixed-use development that really creates a new neighborhood in Norwalk and helps unite the various districts in Norwalk. She said that the neighborhood would extend the SoNo visitor experience and become an activity center for some existing cultural institutions in the area such as the Maritime Aquarium, Lockwood Matthews Mansion and the Children's Museum. Ms. Coburn said that what makes a successful mixed-use project is the integration of a number of uses including residential, office, hotels and retail. She said that retail is really the lynchpin of any downtown urban development. She said that it is incumbent that this development fit in with the existing community. Ms. Coburn said that the role of retail in this project provides active uses and complements residential, office and hotel uses and creates a district that extends a stay in cultural institutions. She said that most importantly, retail makes a project financially feasible. She said that the banks look to know they have a creditworthy tenant that is going to assure that the project is financially feasible. Ms. Coburn said that in order to make this project successful there has to be enough retail to make it an interesting place. She said that national and regional tenants are needed in order for the project to be successful to create critical mass. Ms. Coburn stated that signage and visibility are also important as well as having enough parking and security. She said that this is what keeps people coming back. Ms. Coburn said that the West Avenue corridor would benefit SoNo and Wall Street because it will bring in many new workers and visitors to downtown and stabilize West Avenue.

Ms. Coburn said that urban retail is happening throughout the country. She said there are some basic principals that are keys to success. First, there has to be enough density in order for there to be a critical mass to make the place happen. Secondly, it has to be assessable with assessable parking. Ms. Coburn gave examples of retail projects that have worked in New York City and Bethesda, Maryland. She said that they keys to a successful downtown is that this project would activate downtown 24/7, generates jobs and tax revenues, and ensures long-term financial feasibility of a project. Ms. Coburn said that the project would succeed because it has easy access from I-95 and Route 7 and it is already known as a retail center, Loehmann's Plaza.

Mr. Dick Paik, stated that his firm, located in Boston, Massachusetts basically engages in projects relating to economic and real estate development and has been involved in a couple of projects in Norwalk. Mr. Paik reviewed slides with respect to the economic impacts of the project. He said that there are four impacts: 1) public revenues, 2) employment, 3) labor income and 4) output. Mr. Paik said that his firm uses software filled with data to get economic details to determine the impacts on communities. Mr. Paik continued to explain the impact of revenues for the project. He said that the project would be adding between 1 and 2% of Norwalk's tax revenue base. He said that there would be public revenues of \$2.7 million dollars a year as well as other positive annual impacts to the City of Norwalk.

Mr. Tim Tracy stated that his firm consists of architects, engineers and planners specializing in park improvements and have a long history in the City of Norwalk. He continued with a review of the City's investment of the project and the returns gained from that investment. Mr. Tracy said that his firm was asked to analyze the parking needs for this project. He said the City's participation in this project is through the public parking component. Mr. Tracy said the project would include a parking facility of approximately 1,700 to 1,800 spaces. He said that the firm

analyzed what the investment would entail to find out if the users parking fees would be enough to satisfy the debt service, operating and maintenance costs associated with the improvement. He said the State of Connecticut would be dedicating \$12.5 million dollars to the cost of the parking improvement, the City of Norwalk would have a match of about \$12.5 million dollars and any additional monies needed for improvement would come from private investment or cash flow financing. Mr. Tracy referred to slides regarding operating budget and cost of the project. He said the City's \$12.5 million dollars would be supported by the uses of this facility. He said that there would be a surplus of parking revenues generated by this project.

Mr. Sheehan said that public impacts of this development are rightfully a concern of this community. He said that in the packages are a number of impacts that would be a result of this project. Mr. Sheehan referenced the impact on the school system. He said that a market study indicates that the project would have no impact on the schools system. Mr. Sheehan said that with regard to traffic, the impact did indicate one area of congestion, a ramp at the intersection of traffic I-95 southbound and Route 7. He said that currently there is construction being done for major improvements to the ramp and intersection as a result of the Reed/Putnam project. He said that the City has responded to the congestion at the intersection at West Avenue and Wall Street and is in the process of issuing an RFP for a major traffic engineering study for this area.

Mr. Sheehan stated that the Redevelopment Agency entered into a contract with Seligson Properties, LLC on July 2, 1999. He said this was a private development agreement with Seligson Properties in which they were named the designated developer for the project. He said the purpose of the agreement was to demonstrate to the State that private interest existed in the plan area and to solidify the private sector's ability to carry the State-sponsored MDP in full development. He said the MDP is the communities planning document for the area.

Mr. Narva, Accounting Principal of Streetworks, a nationally known development consulting and Development Company headquartered in White Plains, N.Y. Mr. Narva said that his background is as an architect and designer. He said that Streetworks responsibility on this project is to facilitate the translation of principals into reality. He said that the projects that Ms. Coburn referenced in New York City are his company's projects. Mr. Narva said that he has been active in this field for over 30 years. He said that he has been working with the NRA and Seligson Properties to translate these important development principals for this district into an illustration of maximum build out potential of the Norwalk Center.

Mr. Narva said an important concept in good urban design is that any project or series of projects do not stand-alone they are always interconnected with what is around them.

Mr. Narva gave a walkthrough of the plans and 3-dimensional imagery representational of the components of the translation. He said that the Norwalk Center is a series of multiple projects, different uses on the same site next to each other. Mr. Narva said the potential project for this area is a mixture of uses that leads to long-term success. He said that retail is the driver that brings in the consumer and makes the streetscape a wonderful place. Mr. Narva said that his firm took urban design considerations and tried to put them together in a series of organization of blocks made up of major and minor streets. He said that the people are returning to the urban environment. He said that out of 8,000 malls in America 4,000 are currently being demelled and

there are no plans to build any malls in the United States today. All of the major development is in the urban environment. He said that the City of Norwalk sits in a very valuable location in Fairfield County. He said this particular area is a very important link to Wall Street and unless they are linked together Wall Street has no chance of surviving. Mr. Narva referenced different types of retail format and urban principals. He said that the goal in the coming months is to take those principals and translate them into a good site plan that is market driven and then take that through to complete approval.

Mr. Sheehan thanked everyone on the panel and the public for coming this evening. Mr. Jones suggested that the people that signed up on the list to speak be taken in order.

Mr. Savas said that he has a building in the area of the proposed project and some concerns with it. He said referenced the condominiums across the street being sold for \$350,000.00 per unit. He said that he was on the Conservation Commission for 7 years and he never saw one impact, whether environmental or traffic that ever affected anything. He said that everything was always going to be better than it was before and it never happens. He asked if the City was going to guarantee housing at the same kind of rent he is giving them. He said that he is concerned about where these people are supposed to go. He said the value of the developer's property is going to go way up. He said that he bought his building so that when it was paid off he could supplement his social security. He is concerned that he will have to look at buying a new building. Mr. Savas said that there is no comparison to Norwalk and New York City or Bethesda, Maryland where the other projects were successful.

Mr. David Sklar, Director of Finance and operations with Stepping Stones Museum for Children said that the reason he is here tonight because they have been part of the redevelopment in the City of Norwalk. He said that Stepping Stones continues to support redevelopment in Norwalk and desires to continue to move forward with Norwalk's future.

Mr. Richard Fuller said that he is really anxious to see some development in this area. He said the most important thing is the human element. He said that the developers are concerned with this aspect. Mr. Fuller stated that there would be many more hearings and some of the concerns voiced can be worked out. He said it has been difficult for young people to get jobs in this area and that the retail stores would help with this issue.

Mr. McLaughlin said that he is in favor of this project. He asked what percentage of the 430 apartments would be sold. Mr. Sheehan said that this is basically a concept plan and that the percentages would come later on in the development process.

Ms. Lindstrom said that she is part of the Coalition of Norwalk Neighborhood Association. She said that they have been following this project because it will have an impact on all of Norwalk, not just this area. Ms. Lindstrom said that she is also President of the East Norwalk Neighborhood Association and they do not support this project.

Mr. Nurick, Norwalk Hospital representative said that the hospital occupies the property adjacent to the proposed development. He said that Norwalk Hospital has the largest body of employees in the Norwalk area and that the hospital has had a very positive experience with Seligson

Properties in the past. He stated that the hospital is very supportive of the project and has the capacity to handle any additional volume that is associated with further development.

Mr. Howell, President and CEO of Patriot National Bank stated that he was born and raised in South Norwalk and has spent over 20 years of his adult life working on Wall Street. He said that he has seen the vacancy rate increase in the storefronts. He said that Patriot National Bank was expanded on Wall Street because of the future development. Mr. Howell stated that Mr. Seligson is a proven developer and that this is the right project, at the right time, and the right place.

Ms. Smith stated that she is a lifetime Norwalk resident, lifetime member of Bethel A.M.E. Church, former George Washington Carver Board member, and born and raised on Harbor Avenue and the Commissioner for Social Action for Bethel A.M.E. Church. Ms. Smith asked if there had been discussion with regard to moving Bethel from its location. She said that Bethel is the oldest church in the community and that it is losing parking on Merwin and Academy Streets. Ms. Smith asked if the parking garage would be open 7 days a week and whether there would be adequate space allocated for the parishioners on Sunday and during funerals, and if so, would the church be exempt from having to pay for that parking. Ms. Smith also asked if this information would be received in writing. She said that there is also housing across from the church and asked if there would be any funds available to help beautify that.

Mr. Sheehan said that there are no churches in the plan area that are a part of the potential takings relative to this plan. He said in regards to the other issue that is something that the NRA is willing to discuss with Ms. Smith and Bethel A.M.E. as the planning process moves forward.

Mr. Michael Devine, President of Devine Brothers, Inc. located on Commerce Street stated that his family has been in Norwalk for 150 years and has always been involved in community. He said that his family has enjoyed the neighborhood for many years and they do support this plan. He said that he feels that it will bring Norwalk brighter days and hopefully everyone will have an opportunity to see this and have more input as the project goes forward.

Mr. Joseph Passero, Chairman of the Board of Lockwood-Matthews Mansion Museum, Chairman of the Board of Klaffs, Inc. and a local Norwalk resident stated that the Mansion supports this plan. He said that Klaffs has been supporting South Norwalk for 85 years and has been a major driving force for the area. He said that this development would be a major benefit to Klaffs to bring other people to South Norwalk from other surrounding Fairfield County and Westchester County area. Mr. Passero said that as a Norwalk resident he feels that the added tax base would be a tremendous benefit to homeowners in the Norwalk area.

Ms. Diane Lauricella, Environmental Consultant said that she is a 21-year member of the City of Norwalk. She said that she looks forward to looking in more detail at the environmental impact evaluation and will withhold any comment on this. She said that she reviewed the initial concept of this plan in the 1990's under a different administration. She said that she thanked Mr. Seligson for rationing back the scale of the development although she thinks the scale is still too big. She said that although she does not always agree with what Mr. Seligson builds, he does do a good job. She stated that she does not agree that this project has to be done in full before Wall Street is affected. Ms. Lauricella said that she is willing to work with the developers to include the river

and harbor more. She encouraged the NRA to change the name of the project from the Norwalk Center to The West Avenue Project because the location is actually not the center of Norwalk.

Ms. Brescia, Chairman of the Y.M.C.A. Trustees said that they are property owners adjacent to this project on approximately 3 acres. She said that the Y.M.C.A. is very happy to see this project is coming to fruition. She said that she has lived in this community for 40 years and is confident that everyone can come together and satisfy the housing and commercial needs while creating something beautiful in Norwalk.

Mr. Doumlele, Norwalk resident stated that he protests the one-minute limit for speakers. Mr. Jones said that if Mr. Doumlele's comments are limited to 1 ½ to 2 minutes that would be fine and that any other public comments he has could be added to the record. Mr. Doumlele said that he visited Bethesda, Maryland, which had a Bethesda Road that was doing very well. He said that Bethesda had a center of town with older buildings and was dead. He said that all the shops were closed.

Mr. Summers said that he has lived in Norwalk for 63 years and a member of Bethel A.M.E. Church since 1941. He said that he is not too happy with the way things are going. He said that he is concerned with parking for his church. Mr. Summers said that he hopes that things turn out best for the church.

Mr. Wagman said that he has been a Norwalk resident for most of his 70 plus years. He graduated from Norwalk High School along with his siblings and his father had his business at 17 Butler Street for many years. Mr. Wagman said that he has chosen to live in Norwalk because of its diversity, recreational facilities and it is a small but not rural town. He said that Norwalk offers a lot of advantages of larger cities.

Mr. Wagman said that if he wants to go to a mall he can go to Stamford and that there is no use for one in Norwalk noting traffic problems, which he feels are inevitable. Mr. Wagman reviewed the plans for the project and suggested that the residents and business should be more involved in coming up with a more sensible project.

Mr. Musante, President of Norwalk Chamber of Commerce said that the Chamber of Commerce supports the redevelopment of Norwalk Center. He said that over time the planning process has made the plan better for the City of Norwalk. He said that the Chamber of Commerce looks forward to continuing to work with the City to make this as good a plan as possible. Mr. Musante, in response to comments referring to the project as a mall stated that it is anything but a mall. He said that it is an anti-mall. He said that something bold and imaginative is needed in this area and urged the continuation of the move forward with this project.

Attorney Jay Sanback said that he is representing Devon Acura on West Avenue. He stated that a tremendous amount of work has gone into this project and commended the Commissioners. Attorney Sanback said that the boundaries of this particular district are a very important issue and encouraged the NRA to hold a public hearing on this issue alone.

Mr. Todd Bryant, President of the Norwalk Preservation Trust said that he has been following this plan for some time and that it is a whole lot better than it ever was in the past. However, the NPT thinks that the development is still too large. He said that they are concerned with the traffic issue and the people who are displaced. Mr. Bryant noted the streets that would be impacted by this project and said that he would just like for this to be taken into consideration.

Mr. William Tully, member of the Norwalk ZBA and East Norwalk Neighborhood Association said that everyone present cares about the City of Norwalk but do not agree on how to take of it. He said that he thinks the City is healthy and others think it is sick and needs major surgery. He said that surgery is what ruined Wall Street after the flood. He said that the proposed plans for Norwalk Center are drastic surgery and the City does not need it. Mr. Tully said that he vigorously opposes it and that the project should be stopped. He said that stopping the project is not a vote against the project but a holding to give the citizens time to work out an alternative approach to development.

Ms. Abbott, resident of Chapel Street said that telling the residents that they have to have a meeting behind closed doors is not right. She said that the residents in the area whose housing will be affected should have a chance to speak publicly and to know what is going.

Mr. Sheehan said that the reason for the suggestion of a separate meeting was so that the public could get through the questions on the floor tonight.

Mr. Evans with European Auto Center said that he is concerned because the City of Norwalk is not giving out any more licenses to repair cars and his business might have to be relocated. He said that he wants to know where he is to go as a business owner.

Ms. Weldon said that her family has been residence of Orchard Street for 40 years and she is concerned about her mother who is a senior citizen. She said that if she has to be displaced she has no place to go. Ms. Weldon said that the business owners are concerned about being misplaced and she is concerned about the residence as well. She asked what the committee planned to do for the families that will be displaced by this project. She said it always seems like it is the inner-city that gets redeveloped by the surrounding areas are untouched. She said that the planners and builders don't live in the city, there homes are out in the areas that are untouched. She said this is totally unfair and she wanted to know how the City of Norwalk is going to subsidize the people who are going to be displaced by this project.

Mr. Sheehan said there is a relocation plan as a part of the MDP, which is available for review. He said it is clear that fair market value is determined by independent appraisers. He said that 40 Orchard Street is not in the project area.

Ms. Grant, President of Norwalk Association of Silvermine Home Owners said that she noticed that there is no housing for families in the West Avenue/Reed Putnam area. She said that the housing is all for singles. She said that it is normal for people to have families.

Mr. Jones asked if there was anyone else who would like to make public comment. Hearing no one, the public comment period was closed. Mr. Sheehan thanked everyone for coming this

evening. He said that this is the first of a series of discussions relative to this project and that there would be extensive opportunities for public comment.

Mr. Jones said all letters received will be attached to minutes.

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

Respectfully submitted,

Linda L. Custis
Telesco Secretarial Services