

**NORWALK REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY
REDEVELOPMENT AREA PLAN UPDATE
WORKING GROUP MEETING #9
JULY 17, 2018**

GROUP MEMBERS: Tami Strauss, Director of Planning and Community Development; Sabrina Church, Redevelopment Agency; Melissa Kaplan-Macey, RPA; Christine Bradley, Director Norwalk Library, Carol Solheim, Cornerstone Community Church; Dennis O'Connor, Norwalk Transit District; Kathryn Hebert, Norwalk Parking Authority and Public Works; Steve Kleppin, P&Z; Morris Gross, Norwalk Hospital; Timothy Sheehan, Norwalk Redevelopment Agency

1. Welcome and Introductions. Ms. Strauss called the 9th Working Group Meeting to order at 10:35 AM, and thanked everyone for coming. She said it has been a long process, but that is because we want to deliver the best plan possible that is the most realistic and something that is implementable. Today we are going to delve into the design guidelines. Zoning will dictate height, setbacks and land uses, but design is what we want the buildings to look like rather than the use of the building. Then we will talk about the concept of micro units and whether that is something the group wants to see in the area.

2. Market & financial analysis update.

Ms. Strauss said Connecticut Economic Resource Center (CERC) is working on the market and financial analysis of the recommendations that we have made thus far, and she expects to receive the first report from them by July 27th, and by the end of September/middle of October, we will have a final report.

3. Design Guidelines. Ms. Kaplan-Macy passed out a document entitled “Draft Design Guidelines for Working Group Discussion”, and said she would like to get feedback from the group on the areas that the Redevelopment Agency knows there may be questions or are hot buttons. She would also like them to talk about what the document should look like and what kind of presentation makes the most sense. We are trying to get away from a lot of words that we have in the TOD design guidelines and have more of a handbook you can flip through and find information. The design guidelines will be applicable within the entire black dotted boundary. They are companion to the plan, but are not integrated within the plan. They will be an appendix to the plan.

Ms. Strauss said any project that is proposed in this area has to go to the Agency for design review, and these guidelines would need to be incorporated into any project that comes forth.

- Site design specifications. The design specifications address building orientation, access to the site, parking, green infrastructure and the space in front of the building that relates to the public realm. They also apply to public infrastructure projects within the plan area. A building should be sited to create a strong relationship with the street, conceal parking and loading areas, and create a pedestrian friendly place that really generates activity, so the orientation of the building on the site is extremely important. Placement of the parking is also important, as well as the landscaping and how that all plays out together.

Mr. Gross said most of that area has existing buildings, so how does implementation really happen. Does it happen one building at a time, which could take 25 to 30 years. Plus the issue of eminent domain plays a role at some point, and we have seen other areas that are in need of revitalization where they take it down and start fresh. With the practicality of Wall Street and the way it is set up with the buildings attached, implementation becomes a real challenge. Ms. Kaplan-Macy said we don't want to be so specific that we say this is what this street, Wall Street, is going to look like and what each building is going to look like, but we want to show some kind of massing that indicates new buildings and old buildings and how those are relating together.

Mr. Sheehan said you are basically stating that this is what new construction ultimately should look like and you come up with a great picture of what the street should look like, but that new construction could be in a block that has three other existing projects that aren't going to change, so it could take 40 to 50 years for that to occur. The plan is only a ten-year plan, so you are painting a picture that is unrealistic in the short term.

Ms. Kaplan-Macy said the question has come up in this group a couple of times of what the relationship between an older building and a newer building might look like. Mr. Sheehan said he thinks you have to go back to what the plan is looking at as the primary potential development sites, and then how those sites ultimately are going to integrate with what is around it, but we're kind of saying in the ten year plan, the expectation is that a vast majority of the sites we have identified as primary development sites are going to change.

Ms. Kaplan-Macy said we talked about front facades, we talked about the building should be uniformly located at the end of the sidewalk to create an uninterrupted street wall, and then there was a question are there any exceptions you want to consider, or are there things that we're not thinking of that we want to provide some sort of caveat on.

Ms. Solheim noted that in NYC everything is butted up against everything else which makes a very dense feeling. Chicago, on the other hand, has built buildings with space in between, so you have a sense of openness, and she would hate for us to lose some of that, especially along West Avenue.

Ms. Kaplan-Macy said as to site access, parking and loading, clear and legible routes connecting all modes of transportation to the site must be provided, including pedestrians, bicycles, transit, on-demand transportation, and owner-occupied vehicles. Providing some direction about loading zones and places for drop off and pickup is important. We have always been designing around vehicles and then people are an after thought, and an idea RPA has been exploring is to flip that around, really design spaces for people while also making sure that it works for cars. Off-street parking and loading zones ideally ought to be behind the building or to the side and screened properly. Obviously you don't want large swathes of pavement without trees.

Mr. Gross said the practicality of implementation is what he is really concerned with. South Norwalk is old buildings and parking structures and apartments. In communities like Long Branch, NJ, they took out whole sections along the beach and put in really nice stores and it has brought in all kinds of business. Unless we deal with that, this won't be able to be implemented in any realistic timeframe, particularly as you have a mall coming in, which he thinks is going to hurt all of downtown. It did in Danbury when the big mall came in there, so how would implementation of the guidelines really happen and what is likely to happen in the next 5, 10 or 20 years or more.

Mr. Sheehan said the communities that have chosen not to exercise eminent domain have really reverted to zoning to spur that development. In terms of the policy objectives of the City, if there are issues, and there clearly are in terms of space being inadequate for the type of development you're looking for, there needs to be an understanding that the market is not accepting of this as a traditional business deal. If the municipality is saying this is a driving need within the community and we want to see this type of development happen, then the City needs to participate in some way, shape or form in that development effort. And obviously the tool of eminent domain still remains a municipal power and the question is, is there a political will to utilize it.

Ms. Kaplan-Macy said she personally thinks the hospital has the potential to be a major driver of what happens in this neighborhood in terms of uses and generation of foot traffic and housing and the amenities that people might want who are going to work at the hospital or coming there for service. She sees that as a tremendous catalyst, and the opportunity to grow the local economy around eds and meds institutions is very promising.

She said green infrastructure is an important element, and is something different from what was in the plan ten years ago where these ideas weren't as commonly practiced, and there is a real opportunity here where we don't have a lot of green space in the neighborhood to make it feel much more green and a comfortable place. We would like to put together a palette in this design guideline book that shows good examples of sidewalks and crosswalks and lights and landscaping and street art, and she would look to all of you and particularly to the Redevelopment Agency and Planning and Zoning to help with different styles and different types of these elements and decide if there is a certain look and feel that we want to see in this neighborhood. We have talked about a more historic feel on Wall Street and maybe something a little more modern on West Avenue.

Mr. Ferguson said where you have the corner of 16 River connected to Wall Street, you need some greenery there and some landscaping, because that is like a gateway to different connected roads. Macy-Kaplan said she thinks the idea of gateways is really important. She is not going to spend time on lighting and signage only because she thinks the City has a lot of say in its zoning code about signage and there are certain standards that are standard with DPW.

Mr. Gross noted that sidewalks, lighting and signage really do tie everything else. Ms. Kaplan-Macy said absolutely. The TOD design guidelines on signage are really specific and get into a lot of detail. You also have your zoning regulations that talk about signage, and her sense for this plan is we'll probably want to come somewhere in between where we're providing more general guidance, more relying on the zoning, and maybe not being quite as prescriptive.

Mr. Gross said from the hospital down Maple and all the way to the Y, to the extent that we are able to, they would like to make some brick sidewalks and interesting lighting and signage which carries the feel that it's part of the hospital, that sense of place that shortens up visual distance and makes it feel closer, and it looks closer when you do those things.

Ms. Bradley said the stretch of sidewalk on West Avenue under the bridge where that sculpture is is filthy. She walks there everyday, and there are dead birds and all kinds of debris along that stretch. She likes the art work. That has helped to break it up, but the sidewalks are disgusting,

and she thinks it is important to make sure that whoever is supposed to maintain them is cleaning them.

Mr. Sheehan said the City is basically looking at it from a snowplowing and clearance issue so that it becomes passable, but clearly there needs to be ongoing maintenance, like anything else. Ms. Hebert that's a policy decision and a budget decision. It's also funding a policy.

Ms. Kaplan-Macy said one way that we tried to address it in the design guidelines is to talk about low maintenance materials that are high quality but low maintenance. You want design elements that can be maintained. Ms. Strauss said garbage is there because there are no garbage cans. Mr. Sheehan said there are no garbage cans in that whole corridor.

- Building/architectural design specifications. Ms. Kaplan-Macy said you want to have harmony with your existing character and you want things that are within scale while also providing some flexibility in design so that you have some interesting new innovative buildings. You want to preserve the properties you have. You don't want to say that all new buildings must be the exact same material and style as the historic buildings, but they need to compliment them and respect them and make them shine. Obviously rehabilitation of historic structures must comply with all state, local and federal regulations. They need to be very clear that historic elements are very important to us and that is really the fabric of the neighborhood particularly in the Wall Street area that we want to see maintained and to build from essentially as redevelopment occurs.

We are suggesting that at least 75% of the ground floor street facing facades are of transparent materials, which is a pretty standard number these days. Not open, but glass or you can see through them, which goes to the idea of activating the street, so when you are walking by something you can see the people inside. It is very different than when you see the concrete and it has a different effect. It is more inviting and it also creates street activity without people being on the street. You see people reading or doing things right by the sidewalk, and that influences how you feel on the street. You feel like you're participating in that. Mr. Sheehan said the guideline would not be requiring a historic facade to be altered so that it would require 75% to be transparent.

Ms. Strauss said, on a parallel track, we are thinking about zoning and what we would like to see in the redevelopment area, and we are going to come back to you when we are done with the zoning proposal to review that, and where we are going is to a six story building with a setback at the fifth story that has architectural elements that blend in with the rest of the streetscape so that there is some context and some texture to the building. Mr. Sheehan said so that it is not so vertical and you are not getting that shading onto the street, which also impacts the pedestrian experience. Your exposure on the street is really a five story building as opposed to a six story building. Ms. Strauss said for a reference point, that is where Waypointe is now without the setback. Ms. Bradley said the Berkeley has a setback and it looks attractive from the street.

Ms. Kaplan-Macy said the idea with the plan is that we have these overarching guidelines that apply to everything, but we also want to give guidance for building owners, redevelopers, and capital improvements, but there are corridors in this neighborhood that have a different character. You have your primary corridors, which are commercial corridors shown in red, and then you have connecting corridors and there are certain elements we want to emphasize on those different types of streets, so the third section of the design guidelines is specific about what that emphasis

should look like in terms of buildings and also in terms of the streetscape and really pulls out and highlights the pieces that need to be looked at very carefully in those areas as redevelopment happens.

4. Micro Units. Ms. Kaplan-Macy said the Urban Land Institute had done some decent research on this in 2014, and she pulled out some of the statistics that they came up with and then she has a final slide with considerations for us to think about in a Norwalk context. A micro unit is generally a small studio apartment, generally it does have a fully functioning and accessible and compliant kitchen and bathroom. You might see a murphy bed to save space. From a market perspective, they lease at a lower monthly rent than conventional units, however it's at a higher value ratio because you have higher rent per square foot because you have more units.

Ms. Strauss said we have been asked to consider these smaller units to be allowable in zoning in Norwalk. Right now the minimum unit size is 500SF, and these are typically less than 400SF, which means increased density. We wanted to get feedback as to whether you think these are a good idea in the redevelopment area. If we allowed these, do we want the amenities internal to the building, maybe require them on the ground floor so that anybody can use those amenities. We also have to think about what is the associated parking requirement; does each unit need a dedicated parking space, and we need to talk about whether we want to tie these units to historic preservation or new construction. Do we want to maybe allow these blanketly or say as a pilot we'll allow 50 of these units in the redevelopment area just to test it to and see if that works. Jason Milligan, who is on the phone, is going to say that should be up to the developer, whether that's the risk that they want to take.

Ms. Kaplan-Macy said you are seeing more micro units in very strong markets, such as New York, Boston and San Francisco where the housing prices are so high that it's pushing a new envelope and people are thinking about different options, and we may be there in Norwalk. Some of the considerations in choosing a micro unit over a conventional unit are lower rents, desirable location, ability to live alone without roommates, shorter commute to work and minimal upkeep. We have to start thinking if these things apply in a Norwalk context and do they apply in the context of this particular neighborhood. Do we have the amenities here that folks who are looking for micro units are looking for, such as a grocery store, restaurants and bars and entertainment, cafes, recreation, public transit, and to a certain extent she would say we do have a lot of those things, but how much of it is available and how strong is the draw, and that is obviously a market question. Findings from the ULI study show that the target market for micro units is young professionals and singles. Your secondary segments are younger couples, older downsizing singles, and pied-a-terre users. The most important factor driving the interest in micro units is the desire to live in walkable locations in urban cores, but in a relatively expensive apartment market we have to ask ourselves do we think the price points for our traditional units are such that there will be high demand for this, and the second bullet is the willingness to trade off the smaller unit for a lower monthly rent to be in a highly desirable location. If we put more people in this neighborhood and there is more activity, does that create more safety. On the other hand is it successful in a place where you don't necessarily have quite that high desirability yet. That is a question for Norwalk to really consider.

Mr. Milligan said he has a very small test market of about four or five likely units. If you do allow for them, that doesn't mean you're going to get zillions of them. You have to put in place the rule that would allow a developer to build them comfortably. Right now there is so much incentive to build larger units because of the rule that is in place, so most developers don't want

to take a risk. You get more rent per square foot, but micro units also cost you a lot more per square foot to build. You have to use smaller appliances, which are more expensive, and you are building bathrooms and kitchens in that tight space, but the main point about these micro units is that you will get more foot traffic, you'll get more people, and you'll get the kind of people that won't have a big drain on the system, and also are most willing to walk a little bit because they don't have anything to do in the building, and just by design they will be a lower rent. He has a few of these that go for \$995 a month right near Wall Street and they are not vacant more than two days.

Mr. Gross said he supports them. You need business downtown, and having people living there obviously is prerequisite to that. Having people not have to spend \$2,000 or more for an apartment will also bring in younger people, not just millennials but others. His daughter lived at Waypointe, and she enjoyed Waypointe, but she is a nurse in Manhattan and she wanted something different, and she would not have been able to move to Manhattan without having a micro unit. It has really nice amenities in the building and a place for people to gather and study and she really enjoys it, so he would say he thinks it is a great idea.

Ms. Solheim said having been in a lot of these apartments, she knows what these spaces look like, and if you are going to do a micro unit, there should be a minimum as well as a maximum. Do you want to see 90SF or 100SF apartments, because you find those in Manhattan and they're like living in a car bed. Ms. Strauss said she thinks we would certainly set a minimum.

Ms. Solheim said being the mother of daughters, she thinks the safety issue is really important. She thinks the idea is great in terms of livability. She would like to see micro units put in places like Waypointe.

Ms. Strauss said another question is do we want to see buildings of just micro units or would we want to see them mixed in with other unit types as part of a larger development.

Ms. Bradley said she likes the idea of the amenity being on the ground floor with maybe a Starbucks.

5. Next Steps.

Draft zoning completed in September. Market analysis completed (CERC) in October. Plan approval process November – February 2019. Zoning approval process February – May 2019.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:05PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Pacchiana

NORWALK DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

REDEVELOPMENT PLAN WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

July 17, 2018 at 10:30am

Room 231
125 East Avenue

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