



SOUTH NORWALK
RAILROAD STATION AREA TRANSIT
ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY
FINAL REPORT



Prepared for:
The City of Norwalk

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Executive Summary

This initiative has been undertaken to unlock the next steps in the economic revitalization and redevelopment of portions of South Norwalk that are within easy walking distance of the South Norwalk Railroad Station (Rail Station). In an era of economic recession and real estate reversals, excellent regional access by commuter rail to and from jobs and homes in Norwalk is a fundamental competitive advantage. This planning process has identified specific pragmatic strategies that the City can apply to enhance private sector redevelopment that will – incrementally – result in many positive changes.

This final report describes actions the City can take to attract coordinated development and convert a neighborhood that is an “underperforming asset” which has persisted as a patchwork pattern of deteriorated and underused buildings and land. Norwalk will directly benefit from a more complete, compact neighborhood that draws new residents and businesses within a socially and economically diverse district. Attracting coordinated private investment will bring jobs, enhance real estate values, and improve the quality of life for the entire community.

Due to the access benefits associated with proximity to a rail station and transit center, this type of real estate investment is called Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). TOD refers to land uses and activities that have an economic advantage because they are very close to transit hubs. Their benefit is directly associated with excellent access to a much larger region. For commuter rail stations like South Norwalk’s, TOD normally emerges within about a ½ mile radius. This walking distance provides valued commuting options for residents and employees for whom transit connections are more convenient, fast, or affordable than using an automobile. TOD is associated with the ability to reach the station along a safe, convenient and attractive path, bikeway or by using a direct shuttle service. Developers are increasingly seeking sites and undertaking TOD projects – if the municipality is supportive, and if the conditions of the neighborhood and its network of sidewalks, bikeways and shuttles are appropriate.

Process

The Norwalk Redevelopment Agency has undertaken this initiative to evaluate the potential for TOD to help meet City and neighborhood goals. A consultant team has provided planning, development and economic advice, and transportation recommendations. The process has included the participation and advice of a Steering Committee composed of community members, residents, property owners and business leaders. Interviews and briefings were undertaken with key stakeholders in the area. City and Transit District staff participated in a municipal Coordination Committee to provide additional input. Several public workshops were held, in concert with outreach and multi-lingual invitations to Latino and Haitian residents. This final report represents the summary and culmination of these efforts. Additional documentation that occurred through this planning process is found as appendices to this document.

Planning Area

The area of focus (TOD Study Area) consists of key blocks and streets near the station where pivotal changes could be made through redevelopment and infrastructure changes – assisted by specific City actions – that will reposition and improve the neighborhood using TOD as a catalyst. The TOD Study Area generally extends along the blocks that lie between the Rail Station and the Norwalk River, and extends northwards around the perimeter of the Webster Street Block.



Aerial image of the South Norwalk Railroad Station Area highlighting the Study Area in white and the South Norwalk Railroad Station with a star.

Goals and Objectives

The planning process identified the challenges and opportunities presented by the TOD Study Area and evaluated the potential of the neighborhood based upon a set of community goals and objectives identified through the planning process. This process and technical analysis of the existing conditions in terms of economic market, circulation, connectivity, urban design and development potential produced a series of strategic recommendations.

Among the challenges that were identified through this planning process were lower housing quality and lower income levels as compared to the City and region resulting in less housing choice. Over time, the TOD Study Area has become a patchwork of buildings, parking lots and vacancies resulting from patterns of use and disinvestment. Community fabric and public safety has contributed to a perception that the area is unsafe and unattractive, as have poor connections to the Rail Station for pedestrians. Commuter parking for the Rail Station removes cars from the street, but at a high cost and without otherwise benefiting the surrounding neighborhood.

Among the opportunities that were identified through this planning process were the strategic location advantages of the Rail Station and service and the benefits of access and connectivity that it offers. Historic buildings and the neighborhood fabric are well-suited to adaptive reuse. An active and interesting Norwalk River Waterfront is a major asset for public access and development opportunities in the area. A diverse community and long-term residents contribute to a vibrant and lively neighborhood community. The potential for significant reinvestment in Washington Village through the Choice Neighborhoods program that is currently underway has the potential to transform portions of the neighborhood. Redeveloping underutilized City-owned land can unlock change and serve as a catalyst for reinvestment and development.

Recommendations

The strategic recommendations that support TOD address the challenges, opportunities and goals of the TOD Study Area. Land use recommendations identify zoning changes that support TOD neighborhoods. Design Guidelines provide guidance for developers and the City in proposing and evaluating those projects. Circulation and transportation recommendations focus on improving pedestrian corridors and streetscaping, supporting bicycle use and improving circulation at the Rail Station for vehicular traffic. Parking recommendations suggest additional commuter parking near the Rail Station, the integration of new parking with on-street parking to support development, and fostering a “park once” district. Redevelopment recommendations identify moderate scale, mixed use development of key sites relatively close to the Rail Station. Housing and residential quality of life recommendations emphasize expanding housing opportunities for market rate units, and promoting a mixed-income, diverse neighborhood with adequate amenities, public safety programs and open space.

Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines

Land Use Plan

The TOD redevelopment vision resulting from the strategic recommendations calls for providing cohesive infill projects with improved streetscape and circulation networks that will create a far more continuous and higher quality environment. This vision includes the following: the key east/west corridor of Monroe Street and Hanford Place; the importance of streets at neighborhood scale and linking neighboring areas with pedestrian corridors; and filling in blank street edges and concealing parking with rehabilitation, reinvestment and/or new development.



Land use recommendations focus on extending mixed use zoning to allow residential and commercial uses within the TOD Study Area, with scales similar to existing zones that are adequate to allow reinvestment. Zoning changes include those that allow non-conforming office and commercial use to housing.

Circulation and Transportation

Norwalk's ability to leverage the economic advantages of the Rail Station depends upon a network of connections that are safe, clear and convenient for all modes of users. For TOD, the emphasis is on the pedestrian network of sidewalks and paths. Bicycle links

and bus and transit shuttle connections are also key components in extending the value of regional access that the rail system provides.

Vehicular traffic and congestion associated with large transit centers can conflict with other modes and detract from the quality of the neighborhoods that surround the station. For these reasons, the TOD Strategy recommendations include improvements to circulation around the Rail Station and improved access for pedestrians and bicycles throughout the TOD Study Area.

Design Guidelines

Design guidelines have been included in this report to highlight the components of redevelopment that are important to unlocking the benefits of TOD in the neighborhood. These Design Guidelines illustrate improvements and development associated with economic revitalization and redevelopment within the South Norwalk TOD Zoning Area and are to be followed by developers, property owners, architects, landscape architects, and others working with the City when advancing new projects in the TOD Zoning Area and will be used by the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency in the process of project review and approval.

Economic Development Strategy

This plan includes a review of the real estate market potential for uses that could benefit directly from proximity to the Rail Station or otherwise contribute to the revitalization of the area. Several specific redevelopment and reinvestment sites in the TOD Study Area have been identified as critical to the economic development strategy. The five target areas include the Railroad Station Area, Infill Development at Monroe, Hanford Place and other streets, Waterfront Redevelopment, the Webster Street Block and Washington Village.

- The Railroad Station Area development, parking and access could be unlocked by a public/private initiative that could transform underutilized parcels very near to the Rail Station along Chestnut Street.
- The Infill Development at Monroe, Hanford Place and other streets would include historic rehabilitation and/or new construction along street segments throughout the TOD Study Area.
- Waterfront Development is likely to be reconstructed with housing that accompanies some remaining water-dependent and commercial uses.
- The Webster Street Block could be adapted to provide an attractive border of low-scale, townhouse-type housing along the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive (MLK Drive) to support a more continuous, pleasant and valuable district.
- The Norwalk Housing Authority is sponsoring a planning study that may lead to the significant improvements and redevelopment of the Washington Village public housing site.



Waterfront Redevelopment Concept (illustration by Beinfield Architecture)

Fiscal Impact Analysis

The Norwalk Redevelopment Agency requested a fiscal impact analysis of potential development of four of the five target sites to determine the likely impact of development on the municipal budget. The analysis demonstrated that the redevelopment of the Railroad Station Area, the Waterfront Area and Webster Street Block and the infill development at Monroe and Hanford Place, according to the assumptions made in the analysis, could provide net revenue to the City of \$24 million over thirty years. The Waterfront Development was the key factor in this revenue stream, but the other developments are necessary to provide an incentive for the private funding that would be necessary to complete the Waterfront Development project. Other benefits to the City as a result of the successful completion of these developments include

- Per Capita Reduction in Property Taxes
- Increase in Private Investment
- Increased Quality of Life
- Increase in Federal Funding

The Choice Neighborhoods program, which was not factored into the fiscal impact analysis scenarios, if supported by the City could provide significant investment in the neighborhood from federal grants, estimated at about \$30 million.

Implementation

Implementation for the strategic recommendations and targeted reinvestment sites is discussed for each of the recommendations and include discussion of an action plan, schedule and funding strategy for improvements to the TOD Study Area. The action plan presents private and public actions and a suggested sequence of events that would likely result in the most positive impact to the neighborhood in taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the Rail Station.