

**CITY OF NORWALK
PLANNING COMMISSION AND
THE PLANNING COMMITTEE OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
SPECIAL MEETING
JANUARY 26, 2017**

ATTENDANCE: Planning Commission:

Frances DiMeglio, Chair; David Davison, William Dunne,
Steve Ferguson, Nora King, Walter McLaughlin, George
Tsiraniades

Planning Committee of the Common Council:

John Kydes, Chair; Faye Bowman, John Ignieri, Tom Livingston,
Shannon O'Toole-Giandurco, Travis Simms

OTHERS:

Steven Kleppin, P & Z Director; Michael Wrinn, Planning and
Zoning; Timothy Sheehan, Redevelopment Agency Director;
Tami Strauss, Community Development Planning Director;
Council Member Bruce Kimmel; Council Member Eloisa
Melendez, Dr. Steven Adamowski, Superintendent of Schools;
Mr. Thomas Hamilton, Norwalk Schools Finance Director;
Mr. Mike Barbis, BOE Vice Chair; John Ireland, Silver Petrucelli;
Michael Zuba, Milone & MacBroom.

CALL TO ORDER.

Mr. Wrinn came forward and called the Planning Commission to order. He called the roll and announced that there were seven Commissioners present.

Mr. Kydes called the Planning Committee of the Common Council to order at 7:10 p.m. and called the roll. He announced there were five Committee members present.

Norwalk Redevelopment Agency

Ms. Strauss came forward and gave a brief overview of the various TOD projects underway.

Ms. DiMeglio asked about information on page 25, which Ms. Strauss reviewed with her. Ms. King had several questions about the matching funds and the details of the upgrades. Mr. Sheehan spoke about the fiber optics for the traffic lights and the areas where the

improvements had already been made. He reminded everyone that there had been significant improvements made with the Theater project and the POKO projects.

Ms. DiMeglio asked about the status of the POKO project. Mr. Sheehan said that the Agency was working on understanding the schedule for the POKO project and that it would be important to get the infrastructure in when it is needed. The sidewalk improvement and street improvement plans are all directly related to the project.

Regarding the Affordable Housing program, Ms. Strauss said that the Agency was working on identifying vacant or under utilized residences and providing capital funding. Once the residence is rehabilitated, then it is sold to low income families. One house has already been completed and one is currently undergoing renovations. Mr. Sheehan spoke about the details of a program that has been started to help homeowners come into code compliance.

Ms. King asked about the purchase price for the houses and what they had sold the houses for. Ms. Strauss gave the figures. Mr. Sheehan pointed out that this was only one aspect of the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority (CHFA) program. While the State would like to have the Redevelopment Agency do more of these, there is only so many that the Agency can handle at one time. Discussion followed about the details of the residences, whether it counts towards the affordable housing and how it fits into the TOD plan.

The discussion then moved to 50 Washington Street. The City owns the plaza at 50 Washington Street. Ms. Strauss said that the owner of 50 Washington Street is involved in a major renovation of the lobby area. Mr. Sheehan reminded everyone that the plaza is a public park and it has been neglected for a long time. Plans are underway to landscape the area and revitalize it.

Ms. Bowman left the meeting at 7:35 p.m. to chair another meeting.

Ms. King had concerns about the condition of the building and the difficulty of parking at Webster Street. Mr. Sheehan said that the City has been in discussions about Webster Street lot and reminded everyone that the City does not own 50 Washington Street.

Ms. DiMeglio asked who was responsible for the plaza. Mr. Sheehan said that it would be under the control of the Recreation and Parks Department. He pointed out that Mr. Moccia had a limited budget to maintain all of the public parks. A brief discussion followed.

Mr. Ferguson had questions about the improvements to all the sidewalks. Mr. Sheehan said that there would be some trees planted along the section of West Washington Street, and some of the wires will be put underground.

Mr. Kydes asked about the grant funding. Mr. Sheehan said that right now, Ryan Park was a priority. Ms. O'Toole-Giandurco asked about the grant funding for this. Mr. Sheehan reviewed the details of the park and the requirements.

Ms. Strauss then presented the Art Fund In the City project funding request. There are over 100 pieces of art around the City that have been sponsored by this funding.

Mr. Dunn asked about the role of public art. Mr. Sheehan said that public art was critical to development and gives a sense of vibrancy in the area. The City has a strong history of having public art in the City and it is a key component in urban development.

Mr. Dunn wished to know who was selecting the pieces. Mr. Sheehan said that the pieces that the Agency has worked on has been done through a jury process. The majority of the funding comes from the National Endowment of the Arts.

Mr. Livingston asked if the Agency has worked with the Arts Commission. Mr. Sheehan said that he had worked with them and now there is a much more defined process.

Ms. Melendez left the meeting at 7:34 p.m.

Mr. Sheehan pointed out that there was an Art Park but there is only one piece of art in the park. The pieces that were there were removed because they were falling apart and had not been maintained.

Mr. Tsiranides asked who had decided to put the yellow tape on the wall along West Avenue. Ms. Strauss said that there had been a request for submission and the submissions were presented to a jury. Mr. Davidson asked where the money came from. Ms. Strauss explained that the funding was mostly from the National Endowment of the Arts. That group has specific criteria on how they had to choose the art. Ms. King had several detailed questions about the funding for that piece. Mr. Wrinn asked Mr. Sheehan to provide them with a spreadsheet showing the costs to the City.

Ms. DiMeglio asked if there was a photo of the West Avenue Wall artwork. Mr. Sheehan said that he believed that a photo of the artwork was on the Arts Commission website.

BOE Presentation

Dr. Adamowski, Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Barbis, Mr. Ireland, and Mr. Zuba came forward to narrate their presentation. Copies of the PowerPoint presentation were distributed. Mr. Hamilton spoke about the Plan of Conservation and Development and what it requires from the Board of Education. Mr. Hamilton said their presentation is focused on the Nathaniel Ely and Ponus Ridge projects.

Mr. Barbis said that in 2007 the student enrollment had started to increase and the schools were currently operating over capacity.

Mr. Zuba spoke about the demographic and how what was happening now made for more accurate projections. It is important to know what kind of developments were being planned and to factor in the external factors. He spoke about an enrollment bubble that is currently in the elementary schools and reminded everyone that will move into the middle school and finally the high school in the coming years. He reviewed the data listed on enrollment charts shown on page 9 of the PowerPoint presentation.

Mr. Ireland then spoke about focus areas where the schools could potentially expand and the City owned properties.

Dr. Adamowski then spoke about the Program Recommendations as outlined on pages 21-28.

Mr. McLaughlin said that while these plans look great, right now, the schools need 900 seats. Dr. Adamowski said that opening the Norwalk Early Childhood Center's six classes provided a little relief, that extra space has now been filled. The schools are holding classes on school stages and any other available space they can find. Virtually every city in the State has a declining population but Norwalk's enrollment is increasing. Norwalk wants to be a place for families and young professionals. Norwalk wants to maintain their diversity. Mr. McLaughlin said that he remembered when the City was closing schools and selling them off. He reiterated his concern about current space.

Ms. O'Toole-Giandurco said that the former Superintendent, Dr. Rivera, had spoken about bringing out of district students back into District. She asked for a status update on what. Dr. Adamowski said that students had been brought back into the District from High Roads. However there are some services the District just does not offer now.

Mr. Ferguson pointed out the new developments that were transitional developments rather than homes for families. Mr. Zuba said that they did look at the details of the number of bedrooms and the costs of the units. They also factored in the Certificate of Occupancy, and a number of other factors. Discussion followed.

Dr. Adamowski said that the biggest driver of enrollment was the birth rate and immigration ranked somewhere in the middle and the housing availability was the third factor.

Mr. Ireland spoke about the site plans and the floor plan for the Nathaniel Ely and Ponus parcels as show on pages 29- 39.

Ms. O'Toole-Giandurco left the meeting at 8:43 p.m.

Mr. Hamilton then reviewed the costs as outline on pages 45-50. He said that the costs would be refined as the projects moved through the process. The project will be managed by the School Building Committee and Mr. Alan Lo.

Mr. Ireland gave a quick summary of the difference between the costs for alternations, renovations and extension including additions on the City's database. The estimates are based on \$100 a foot. He said that there was a higher than average cost for construction in Fairfield County. The goal is to have construction underway on unoccupied schools, but Norwalk does not have any unoccupied schools. Once Ely is up and running, there will be more swing space.

Mr. Kimmel pointed out that the difference between the original estimates and the November estimates is almost a doubling of the cost. Dr. Adamowski said that currently Ponus has the lowest math and science scores in the City. He said that the addition would also refresh the current school. Mr. Ireland said that the figures he had presented were adjusted after the PowerPoint presentation was compiled.

Ms. King said that this was the first time she had heard the Ponus presentation and was very impressed.

She said that she was impressed with the International Baccalaureate Program (IB) program and wanted to know if the rest of the schools would be able to participate. Dr. Adamowski said that the IB program requires two years of intense training for the staff. The students at Concord Street would be moved to Roton MS and BMHS IB programs. This would be the District on a course to achieve a very high standard.

Ms. King asked about the field at Ely. Mr. Ireland explained that the field would be appropriate for middle school and tennis, but competition fields are usually found at the high schools. She had several questions about the basketball courts, which Mr. Ireland and Mr. Zuba answered.

Ms. King asked if there were any concerns about overcrowding at the high schools. Dr. Adamowski said that BMHS is full now and there will need to be more development at NHS.

Ms. King asked whether the schools would have air conditioning. Dr. Adamowski said that the District was very committed to summer learning and that it is believed that the achievement gap is due to the summer vacation. This will require year round use of the schools and that will require air conditioning.

Ms. DiMeglio pointed out that last year there were days when the schools had to be closed because it was too hot. Dr. Adamowski said that just under half of the schools have AC. When the temperatures are up in the 80's, the second floors are often in the 90's requiring the schools to be closed. He pointed out that the schools needed more electrical power in order to run the units.

Ms. DiMeglio said that there was no request for portable air conditioning units. Mr. Barbis reminded everyone that there was a major disagreement during the Moccia administration regarding the air conditioning.

Mr. Simms said he was very excited about the new school but had an issue about the location. He said that he had spoken with Mr. Ireland about the topography and the original recommendation not to build on the site. Mr. Simms wanted to know how the City could spend money on a consultant who originally recommended that there be no building on the site because of the wet lands.

Mr. Ireland explained that the consultant had been asked what the worse case scenario was for the site considering the wetlands. The consultant said that the worst case scenario would be to not build on that site. Since then, much work has been done on the wetlands. Ely was always on the list and has made its way to the top of the list. There is a large, flat space for the school and there is an existing school on the site that the City could use.

Mr. Simms said that this is the only green open space and park that is available for the South Norwalk area. The Grassroots Tennis partnership is moving forward with their tennis courts project. Mr. Simms said that this was not a great location for the school. He said that this should be taken into consideration as taking away the park would be like taking away Cranbury Park or Marvin Farm. Mr. Ireland said that there was a portion of the park that was overgrown and not usable. The plan will be to open that up and have recreational space that would be shared by two schools. Mr. Simms said that the students who will be attending school there will not have any space to go outside to enjoy the outdoors.

Ms. DiMeglio asked if there was any incentive to consider Ben Franklin. Mr. Ireland said that the site was too small. Ms. DiMeglio said that there was a gym and a theater there. Dr. Adamowski said that there was an agreement with the State to use the building for the Head Start preschool program. The State requires that PreK, K, and first grade be on grade level. They also would prefer second grade at ground level if possible.

Ms. DiMeglio said that it was not a sufficient answer. Mr. Ireland pointed out that it was a three acre site and there is no area for a bus turn around. He added that the City would have to supply another building for the Head Start classes. Renovating the building would be cost prohibitive.

Ms. DiMeglio asked how the City intended to provide an exceptional education. Dr. Adamowski said that providing a STEM school or a Banks Street program would be a step in the right direction. Having an International Baccalaureate program is yet another move in the right direction.

Mr. Ferguson said that one of his children was at Columbus and asked if he would have a choice about which school his children would attend. Dr. Adamowski said that South Norwalk was largely an unassigned area. Having another school in the area would allow the parents to have some choice.

Mr. Ferguson asked if there had been a traffic study done. Dr. Adamowski explained that the traffic study is done during the design phase.

Mr. Kydes said that while he understood that it was not the BOE's job to worry about the tax payers financial cost, he asked Mr. Hamilton if that had been factored into the costs. Dr. Adamowski said that the BOE had moved to a student based budgeted system and that the money follows the student. A school needs a minimum 350 students to be viable.

Mr. Kydes said that he remembers the City selling off a school. Dr. Adamowski said that if the BOE stops utilizing a school, according to the State of Connecticut, the property reverts back to the City.

Mr. Livingston asked what formula they use to decide the square footage when they calculate the costs. Mr. Ireland said that there was a minimum square footage that is based on the highest potential student enrollment.

Mr. Davidson said that the original study had certain objectives, which is 21st century learning, which indicates a cost of 22 million, but the study indicates a range between 45 million to 71 million. He asked what would be involved in providing an analysis accounting for the major cost increases. Mr. Hamilton said that Mr. Ireland could email the spreadsheets to the Commissioners, but what it comes down to is the square footage cost, and the other items listed on page 46. Mr. Davidson asked what the justification was for these costs. He said that he could not support the magnitude of the costs.

Mr. Kimmel pointed out that no Capital budget would be approved that did not include the cost of debt service. BET sets the cap and all the Capital budgets have been done in a responsible way. There are many factors that are considered. If the Council finds that they cannot afford this magnitude of spending, then it will not be approved. He said that he has questions about the reasons why the costs have increased. But he would like to take a look at the figures and analyze them.

Mr. McLaughlin said that the design phase would take a year. Dr. Adamowski agreed and said that the State determines the cost because they reimburse the City for about 30% of applicable costs. He said that an itemized listing of the cost estimates could be sent to the Commissioners in about a week. Dr. Adamowski cautioned everyone that this was just an estimate and until the design phase was done and the State approves it, there are no firm numbers.

Ms. DiMeglio said that there would be a public hearing for the Planning Commission on February 1st. She said that she would like to have the itemized list so that the public would have a chance to review it also.

Mr. Kimmel asked if the Planning Commission votes without the financial figures. Ms. DiMeglio said that Mr. Barron shows up that night and the Commission is expected to vote on the item that night. Mr. Wrinn said that the Planning Commission could have another meeting to discuss the item with the recommendations, but it would push back the timeline. Discussion followed about the details regarding the recommendations.

RECESS.

Ms. DiMeglio announced a recess for the Planning Commission at 9:45 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT.

**** MR. LIVINGSTON MOVED TO ADJOURN
** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The Planning Committee of the Common Council adjourned at 9:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services