

**CITY OF NORWALK
PLANNING COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING
JANUARY 2, 2020**

ATTENDANCE: Tom Livingston, Chair; Lisa Shanahan; Barbara Smyth; Tom Keegan; Darlene Young (7:10)

STAFF: Sabrina Church, Business, Development and Tourism; Jessica Casey, Economic & Community Development; Brian Bidolli, Redevelopment Agency

OTHERS: William Hennessey, Brookfield Properties; Paul Madden, Brookfield Properties; Diane Lauricella

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Livingston called the meeting to order at 7:01. A quorum was present.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Ms. Lauricella addressed the committee by welcoming its new members. She said that she had been at several town committee meetings and noted that the Planning Committee had significant influence on the City. She requested that the new committee make sure that public outreach efforts happen often and early. She asked for more sensitivity with regards to scheduling in the future, especially on Wednesdays, which conflict with Bible study. She explained that she is an environmental consultant based in Norwalk with experience in sustainable and green design. She said she will meet to discuss opportunities with council members and referred to the Pearl Street plans. She talked about an industrial zone study for future apartment buildings and encouraged the committee to “think outside the box” in order to attract new industry. She also encouraged connecting with the water quality committee on the matter, as well as engaging with other boards. She concluded by saying that the Planning Committee has more influence than other committees and wished them a lovely meeting ahead.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

****MR. KEEGAN MOVED FOR APPROVAL OF THE DECEMBER 5, 2019 MINUTES**

****MS. SHANAHAN SECONDED**

****MOTION PASSES UNANIMOUSLY.**

NEW BUSINESS

A. Introduction of Brian Bidolli, the Executive Director of the Redevelopment Agency

Mr. Bidolli appreciated the opportunity to be a part of the Redevelopment Agency. He said he has a background in planning and real estate development with the greater part of a decade support the Bridgeport region, supporting infrastructure, development, and planning in Bridgeport, Stratford, Easton, Trumbull, Fairfield and Monroe. He said he had experience in a private real estate company and running a software company for real estate developers. He is moving from Nyack, NY to Norwalk in the next 6 months. He said he is available as needed to the Planning Committee. He said that he is involved in a strategic planning effort in the next coming months, which currently involves a current discovery phase, a debriefing on ongoing projects, and 3 months of input from stakeholders to see what has worked in the past. After that, he said that the next phase would be to create design strategies for discussion from there. He mentioned that this area has a tremendous amount of potential for growth.

Mr. Livingston asked what attracted him to Norwalk and the Redevelopment Agency. Mr. Bidolli said, after being gone from Connecticut for 5 years, Norwalk has experienced a tremendous amount of growth. He said that he thinks that Norwalk stands to be a model for the State of Connecticut, addressing a lot of the issues that are facing the State. He said that it well positioned to be competitive. He said that he is impressed with the quality of staff in Norwalk. He said that Norwalk has a human capital base that other towns would kill for.

Mr. Livingston asked about any noticeable negatives in Norwalk. Mr. Bidolli said that there are budget constraints reaching all the way up to the State level for a long time, so it's about how Norwalk finds its way under those conditions. He said that they would have to be creative with the human capital base to transcend that.

Ms. Shanahan asked if Mr. Bidolli had any green infrastructure experience. Mr. Bidolli said that when he was an executive director for Metro COG, he had to develop a whole green infrastructure plan in connection with that on a regional level. He said he led the Regional Natural Hazard and Re-education Planning Process which is under the direction of FEMA, and that he enrolled both Stratford and Bridgeport in the Community Rating System program, which is rewarding communities that go beyond typical flight control through green infrastructure.

B. Update on the SoNo Collection

Mr. Hennessey and Mr. Madden of Brookfield Properties addressed the committee. Mr. Hennessey said that mall is open and began a summary timeline of the project. He explained that the Putnam project, containing 12 acres, sat for many years as a potential office/residential property. He said that Brookfield Properties purchased the site for retail use in 2013. He said that they first appeared before the Planning and Redevelopment Committees over 5 years ago to begin the changes to the LDA. He said it took about 2 years for the approvals. The approvals involved changing the Land Disposition Agreement, changing the zoning, changing the Urban Renewal Plan, and obtaining all the approvals from the Department of Transportation. He said there were many agencies involved at all different levels. They received final approval in 2017 and the building started right away. He said the mall opened on October 10, 2019 with 50% of its inline stores and 80-90% of its spaces leased.

Mr. Livingston asked if the mall was meeting expectations. Mr. Madden replied, saying that it is absolutely meeting expectations from a corporate perspective. He said that they knew in the spring that they ran the risk by staggering store openings. He said they developed a rolling opening concept starting with Nordstroms and then Bloomingdales, etc. He said that another 15% of stores will open in the next 6 weeks.

Ms. Young asked when they predicted 90% of stores open. Mr. Madden said that there were issues with construction pricing - some of the pricing quotes are 30% over the anticipated pricing. He said that 90% stores open should be there in late spring, and they should be stabilized at that point.

Mr. Livingston asked about the protocol for gangs and kids at the mall. Mr. Madden said that, from a national perspective, there have been some bad headlines for malls, including the recent incident that included someone shooting a gun inside an Atlanta mall. He said that the SoNo Collection has a first class security team and that they did not need to use the “parental guidance” protocol, which he explained as a rule that kids under 16 require a parental guardian on mall premises, which can minimize groupings. He said that the operations team is well suited to handle situations and doesn't think it is needed in Norwalk.

Ms. Young asked if the operations team is mainly comprised of security. Mr. Madden said that security is underneath and a part of the operations team, and that cameras oversee the entire property.

Ms. Smyth asked if the security team is trained to work with kids. Mr. Madden said that they have been turning to Dee Davis, who is on their development team, for that. He said that Davis is an

outreach figure and they could leverage from her community presence and understanding. He said that the security team is trying to be a comforting presence.

Mr. Livingston asked about issues with the furniture. He said that there is a concern with kids jumping on them and then jumping down. Mr. Madden said that there was a report of a 3 year old moving an ottoman and jumping on it near the glass rail. He said that a security spoke to the guardian, who was close nearby and pulled the child away from there. He said that Facebook was a distortion of this incident.

Ms. Smyth asked about programming for the public. Mr. Madden said that the public realm space is flexible. He said that they are open to concerts for holiday celebration, and other program elements that draw people in. He said they've been focusing on the holidays. Ms. Smyth said that the bell is magical. Mr. Madden said that he had a different opinion because, 2 weeks before opening, they came to me and said the bell weighs 2000 pounds and they didn't know how to pull it in the middle of everything.

Mr. Livingston asked if everything has gone as expected, or if there is anything that the committee should know about. Mr. Hennessey said that they have gone from construction mode to operational mode, and that tax assessments are next. He said that the weekly town committee meetings were enormously helpful. He gave the example of shutting down roads, which took everybody at those meetings to make the project happen as smoothly as possible, especially considering a very aggressive construction schedule with concrete pours at night. He said that this also protected the public from undue noise. Mr. Madden seconded Mr. Hennessey's opinion. Mr. Livingston thanked them.

OLD BUSINESS

A. Follow Up Discussion on Economic Development Tools - Enterprise Zone and Tax Increment Financing District Eligibility and District Growth Potential

Ms. Casey said there were some questions from last month that they wanted to follow up on. She spoke to Mr. Livingston's question about which census tracts were eligible for the Enterprise Zone in order to look at expanding the tools. She said that last month they were talking about expanding the Enterprise Zone into the Wall St/West Ave area and establishing a Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) District. She said they wanted to follow up on what areas would be eligible, so they looked at all census tracts in the City and 8 met at least one of the following criteria certifying them as eligible:

- 1) 25% or more people below the poverty level

(None of the census tracts fit this criteria)

- 2) 25% or more of the families receiving public assistance
(4 of 8 tracts qualify based on this: 437, 440, 441, 444)
- 3) 200% of the State's average unemployment rate or 8.6% unemployment
(All of the census tracts qualify for this except for 434)

Mr. Livingston asked which geography was the current enterprise zone. Ms. Church said that it is 441 and a little be South of that into 445. Ms. Casey said that, if they were to expand they would focus on tract 437 which is the Wall Street/West Ave area. She said that 437 qualifies on criteria 2 and criteria 3.

Ms. Casey said that the other question they received at the last meeting was regarding the TIF District eligibility and what kind of upcoming projects would spur increased tax revue that would go into the TIF. She said that, remembering from last month, that they have that Base Tax that all of the new development incremental tax gets put off in its own fund or a portion of it can be put off into a separate fund. She said they would go through the process of creating the geography, which could be the Wall Street - West Ave Redevelopment Plan geography, and they would go through a feasibility and financial study identifying what the priorities and how the funding would be used.

Ms. Casey said the money that gets carved off into that special fund gets spent on the infrastructure improvement or whatever the financial plan identifies as a priority. She said her presentation is a reminder of what the definition of TIF is, and what the criteria for the TIF District would be. She said that the other piece is to be mindful of thinking of the TIF District, it couldn't be more than 10% of the total parcels within the City. This is important when talking about Wall Street/West Ave, but it is also important when talking about future TIFs, and if they like the TIF model and TIF tool and would like to go about implementing it somewhere else. She said they would want to make sure they would have a little flexibility before they go pass a TIF with the 10% all-in-one shot.

Mr. Livingston asked whether they had done any kind of rough analysis. Ms. Casey said no, it's just something to be mindful of.

Ms. Casey said that it was great timing for the Wall Street/West Ave Redevelopment Plan to be passed in May, because they had a look at a bunch of overlapping criteria with the TIF District. She said that, if they were looking at the criteria, that it is hitting 3 out of the 3 definitions. She

said they did a 3-step approach in June about what is coming up and what could be eligible. One of the things they looked at was the Zoning Update passed in June 2019. She said they also looked at the Wall Street/West Ave Redevelopment Plan and all of the priorities and redevelopment sites that were a part of that plan. She said the third thing they did was meet with staff at Zoning & Planning, and the Redevelopment agency and others to ask if anything was missing off of the list that they had discussions about.

Ms. Casey said that, if they were to look at the new zoning and what it allows, it's actually an approximate increase of 5 million square feet. Based on what the original zoning allowed, the Pinnacle itself would be 500,000 square feet as a reference point. She said that when the regulations were passed, there were 3,400 units that were allowed, which increased with the new zoning by 1,700 units resulting in 5,100 total units. She said that the key is that, based on the zoning, this is the maximum total build out in the Wall St/West Ave area. She said that this doesn't take parking, public realm, or community spaces, etc. into consideration so the actual impact would be far less square footage and units of development.

Ms. Casey said they looked at properties that were in the Redevelopment Plan and identified the length of terms for the potential growth sites to create a graphic and list.

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| Short Term: | Loehmans Plaza site, YMCA site (across from Lockwood Matthews Mansion), Wall Street Place, Highpointe, Norwalk Public Library |
| Medium Term: | Yankee Doodle Block, Pulse Point/Riverview Plaza, Head of the Harbor North, Smith Street |
| Long Term: | Library Block, Lillian August Site, AutoZone and medical offices site, CVS and Dunkin Donuts site |

She said that the short term are plans that have been submitted, or maybe expired, or the staff has sat down with the teams who have been projecting development on these sites. Mr. Livingston asked what is considered "short term" in terms of timing. Ms. Casey said 1-3 years. Mr. Livingston said that the hospital wanted to do something with the YMCA site.

Ms. Casey said that the public library was undergoing a strategic plan exercise with a proposed expansion that includes a flexible space for 250-300 people. She said there would be an up and coming presentation for this within a month or so. She said that they visited the Westport library, who retrofitted their library space, where they have maker space with a 3D printer, a music studio and a concert space. She said they will be asking for funds from the FY 2020-2021 budget for an architectural study.

Ms. Casey said that “medium term” and “long term” were not identified in the Redevelopment plan, and that “long term” is 7+ years. She said that this involves projecting what these sites would look like in 10 years, if the buildings were to move or the owners were to sell. She mentioned that Lillian August is moving to the SoNo Collection so the site may open up. She said that there are a lot of sites along West Ave that might not be to the best of their use, so they are projecting what those might look like in 10 years.

Mr. Livingston said that the committee is not taking action tonight and asked about a timeline. Ms. Casey said that for the FY 21 budget, they actually put money into the budget to be able to bring on a TIF consultant. She said they think that will be an 18 month process and for the enterprise zone, it is a faster process with a short term approval, about a 6 month process, while the TIF is the longer approach.

****MS. SMYTH MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING AT 7:45 P.M.**

****MS. YOUNG SECONDED**

****MOTION PASSES UNANIMOUSLY.**

Respectfully submitted,

E.A.Sheils