

CITY OF NORWALK
PLAN REVIEW COMMITTEE
March 14, 2013

PRESENT: Jill Jacobson, Chair; Joseph Santo; Jim White; Nathan Sumpter; Emily Wilson; Mike O'Reilly; Adam Blank; after the meeting was called to order: Harry Rilling; Mike Mushak

STAFF: Michael Greene; Mike Wrinn; Dori Wilson; Brenda Hrtanek

OTHERS: Atty Frank Zullo; Dominick M. DiGangi; Kim Morque

Jill Jacobson called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Since Mr. Rilling did not appear before the start of the meeting, Ms. Jacobson appointed Mr. White to the Plan Review committee for the evening.

I. SITE PLAN REVIEWS & COASTAL SITE PLAN REVIEWS

a) #5-13CAM - B. Beinfield - 280 Wilson Ave - New single family residence - Preliminary review

Mr. Wrinn began the presentation. He said that the application was for a single family house on Wilson Avenue. He described how the lot was on the same piece of land as the Sono Icehouse, but that it was its own lot. There was also a nature preserve next to it. The owner is Bruce Benfield who is an architect. Coastal Area Management had signed off on it. It would have a gravel driveway so there would be no drainage issues. It met with all other zoning requirements for a single family house. It would be placed on the next Zoning Commission agenda. The house was to be built for Mr. Beinfield.

II. SPECIAL PERMITS

a) #8-84SP - Graham Capital - 40 Highland Av - Office complex - Request for release of surety

Ms. Hrtanek began the presentation. She said that all required improvements had been done and that staff recommended release of the surety.

b) #X-13SP - SoNo Gardens - Monroe/Madison & MLK Jr. Dr - 90 unit multifamily development - Add 47 parking spaces - Determine if minor change

Before Mr. Wrinn began the presentation, Emily Wilson recused herself and left the room. He continued by showing the commissioners where the property was on a map. He told the commissioners that the applicant wanted to add more parking so that every unit would have 2 parking spaces. The applicant needed a variance from the Zoning Board of Appeals, which they received, because some of the spaces would be in the front setback

Atty Zullo continued the presentation. He gave a history of the property. It was

built in the early 1960s with Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD") funds. At that time, it was a cooperative. Everyone that lived there was an owner of the property with the City of Norwalk and HUD. In 2005 it was turned into condominiums. They have paid their mortgage off and now a bank has given them a commitment for a loan to fix some of the mechanicals, etc. in the building which are getting old. They are short parking spaces. Some will have to be in the side yard setback. The property is bounded on one side by Metro-North railroad. He pointed out the proposed parking spaces on a map. If they received this approval, the bank would fund the loan.

Mr. Mushak had questions about a grassy area on the property that had previously been used as a staging area for a State funded project. Atty Zullo said that the parking spaces would be taking over the grassy areas but that the applicant would plant street trees. He showed the commissioners the landscaping plan. Mr. Mushak, who is also a member of Norwalk's Tree Advisory committee, was fine with the plan. The commissioners agreed that this was a minor change.

c) #3-13SP - First Taxing Dist - 34 Grandview Av - Water tower & pump station replacement - Preliminary review

Emily Wilson returned to the room. Mr. Greene began the presentation. He showed the commissioners where the water towers were on a map. One would be taken down and replaced. They would also be replacing the pump station.

Atty Zullo continued the presentation. He showed the commissioners an aerial photo of the current water towers. He said that one of the towers, which held 100,000 gallons of water, would be replaced by a tower that held 1 million gallons of water. The tower was approximately 75 years old. He explained how some of the infrastructure of Norwalk is over 100 years old. He also explained that they were moving the water tower to a place on the property which was the furthest away from the neighbors. The pump station was designed to be similar to homes in the area. He showed them designs of the water tower. He explained that Dominick DiGangi, Operations and General Manager of the First District Water Department, arranged for a loan from the state that would complete this project.

Mr. DiGangi continued the presentation. He explained how he had arranged financing. The package they prepared became the number two in priority to the state. However, it would have to be done quickly. With state financing, the city would save approximately \$1 million. He explained that water mains were being replaced in the surrounding streets. Other aspects that would be upgraded were water quality, reliability, and security. There would be new fencing, security cameras and lighting.

Mr. Blank asked if Mr. DiGangi could give the commissioners a brief overview of the purpose of the water tower. The two tanks serve different purposes. One of them replaced the reservoir to provide water for the Spring Hill area and other areas of the city. Mr. Blank also asked where the water came from. Mr. DiGangi said that some of it came from a water treatment plant in New Canaan as well as a well field by the Norwalk River. It then is stored in the larger tank. Mr. Blank asked why it needed to be stored. Mr. DiGangi said the main reason was because of fires. Mike Elliott, also an employee of the First District Water Department, said that it was mainly redundancy. Also, being taller than the hill helps it to provide better water pressure to the residents. Mr. Blank

asked if cell phone and utility lines could be placed on top of them. They said that there were some at Norwalk Hospital. Mr. Santo asked whether the height of this tower was the same as the one on Strawberry Hill. He had a question about a tank which Mr. DiGangi said was not part of the First District.

Mr. Mushak asked whether they could put "Welcome to Norwalk" on the water tower. He thought it was big and industrial looking. He also said that since people driving on I-95 could see it, it would be a nice gesture and would welcome people. Mr. DiGangi thought that was something that the commissioners should discuss. Mr. Mushak said that he had advised the Spring Hill neighborhood about making the area where the water towers were a park. He thought it could be an educational park especially since there are no other parks nearby. Mr. DiGangi had not been in those previous conversations but said that the neighbors had decided against it. Mr. Mushak thought it was a beautiful space. He asked if they would be open to this suggestion but Mr. DiGangi thought it was something else that had to be discussed amongst the commissioners. There was a discussion about when this application should be put on the Zoning Commission agenda. Also, they discussed the meeting with the neighbors. The biggest concerns were the increase in rates as well as the screening of the water towers.

III. REQUEST FOR EXTENSION OF APPROVAL TIME

a) #1-09SP/#1-09CAM - SoNo Hotel TR Sono Partners, LLC - 43 - 47 South Main St - 121 room hotel with 7,764 sf office & 70 space indoor valet parking in automated garage - Request for 1 year extension of approval time

Dori Wilson began the presentation. The applicant has paid taxes and fees. They are trying to get their finances together in order to start the project. Mr. Santo thought there was some concern that this applicant was tied into the other project at 99 Washington Street. He believed that the off-site lot mentioned in the applicant's valet parking proposal would be used at this site. The request would be on the Zoning Commission's agenda for the month of March.

b) #2-08SPR/#2-08CAM - 95/7 Ventures LLC - West Av/Putnam Av & Reed St - North of Reed St - ±605,000 sf mixed use development in a Design District Development Park (park includes #3-08SPR) - Request for 1 year extension of approval time

Dori Wilson began the presentation. This is the northern parcel of the project. It had retail, office and restaurant space. The applicant is hoping to get it re-started. Mr. Rilling asked how many parts of the project have requested one year extensions. Ms. Wilson said that this is the fifth extension for this parcel. Mr. Blank would like to see the parcel have some type of wildflower seeding on it. He thought it was ugly and would not cost much to do. Mr. Mushak recommended that the language should state the applicant should use hydroseeding with a Northeast wildflower and warm season grass mix. There was a discussion about approving the extension based upon whether the applicant completed the hydroseeding.

Mr. Greene mentioned that part of the parcel would be used as a staging area for another project so the whole parcel would not be seeded. Mr. Rilling felt that while

other communities were building, Norwalk was not. He was concerned about giving the applicant another extension if the parcel was going to be used to grow wildflowers. Mr. Sumpter agreed that it was time to get the developers to start building their projects. Mr. Blank thought that by taking away approvals it would de-value the property and less likely for the property to be developed. Mr. Greene went through what would happen if the commissioners denied the extension. The applicant could re-apply and they would have to review it again. If regulations and conditions had not changed, the commissioners would have to approve it. Mr. Mushak noted that there are a lot of projects being built in Stamford which do not go through their Redevelopment Agency. He thought that if the Zoning Commission denied the extension, this applicant would have to go back to the Redevelopment Agency, break their contract with the city and begin the planning process again. It could help them come up with a design plan that would work in today's economy. Mr. White said that essentially the problem is that banks are not lending money as they used to.

Kim Morque, President, Spinnaker Real Estate Partners addressed the concerns of the commissioners. He said that office space is still not being sought. There is office space planned as part of the north parcel. He said that it would help more to grant the extension. Mr. Rilling asked what he would be doing during the extension period to get the project moving forward. Mr. Morque said they had re-financed the project. They are preparing a market feasibility analysis to determine next steps. He said that the multi-family market is better than the office market and that Stamford has a stronger housing market than Norwalk. Mr. Mushak asked if Mr. Morque would consider an amusement feature at the parcel. He believed it would help tourism by bringing people to Norwalk. They would then spend money at the Aquarium, dining, etc. Mr. Morque said that they were maintaining the property year round. Also, some remediation of the property would have to be completed this summer.

Mr. Rilling asked about the construction financing of the project which Mr. Morque discussed in some detail. Mr. Mushak said that if there was any way for the Zoning Commission to make the process smoother with the Redevelopment Agency, they should try. He then asked whether taking the Redevelopment Agency out of the process would make things easier. Mr. Morque said it would not. This item would be on the Zoning Commission agenda for March. It would have the condition that the applicant would hydroseed the parcel.

c) #19-05SP - St. George Greek Orthodox Church - 238 W. Rocks Rd - Community center - Request for ext of time

Mr. Wrinn began the presentation. He said that the applicant is about a month or two away from ground-breaking, thus, they still need an extension. The commissioners agreed and it would be put on the Zoning Commission agenda for March.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:25p.m.

Respectfully submitted by,

Diana Palmentiero