

**NORWALK REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY
REDEVELOPMENT AREA PLAN UPDATE
WORKING GROUP MEETING
JUNE 7, 2017**

GROUP MEMBERS: Tami Strauss, Director of Development Planning; Sabrina Church, Redevelopment Agency; Doug Stern, Zoning Commission; Jackie Lightfield, Norwalk 2.0; Nora King, Planning Commission; Britt –Britt Liotta, Norwalk Transit; Melissa Kaplan-Macy, RPA; Sarah Serpas, RPA; Steve Kleppin, Planning and Zoning; Kathryn Hebert, Parking Authority and Public Works; Elizabeth Stocker, Economic Development; Carol Sulheim, Cornerstone Community Church

1. Introductions. Tami Strauss called the Working Group Meeting to order at 10:10 AM. She noted that the minutes of the May 17th meeting are posted on the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency website. The members present at the meeting introduced themselves as noted above.
2. May 12th Visioning Session Recap. Ms. Macy said at the last meeting they talked about the strengths and weaknesses of the area and the challenges and opportunities, and are now going to get into a deeper dive of the issues. They have taken the comments and discussion they had last time and updated and refined the map. They will break into two groups and one table will talk about community character with some specific questions to really get into it, and another table will talk about mobility issues, and then each group will report to the bigger group and have a group conversation around those issues, and then they will talk about some next steps and where they go from here.
3. Focus Issue #1: Community Character. Ms. Macy said in terms of the strengths of the community character, residents really like the existing character, the land uses, the commercial mix, the diverse city and the police and fireman in this area. There was conversation about the importance of historic buildings and the existing institutions that are already here and how they can really leverage those to create a very vibrant neighborhood in this part of the City.

Walkability was also an important strength that they talked about, and people really enjoy the character and the street layout, and pointed out that there is an opportunity for a better use of filling up the vacant storefronts, the density, and making the area more attractive and interesting. The residents really enjoy the new and old businesses that are there, and the neighborhood and institutions that they have and the cultural institutions that they have.

In terms of the weaknesses, infrastructure was an issue that came up; the gas, sewer, water, and services such as fire and police, and obviously things like parking and the circulation system. They also mentioned, -and they talked about the need for streetscape and façade improvements. They talked a lot about the lack of transit access and adequate parking, which is something they want to address with this plan. Also, how do they build on what they have in terms of creating a real sense of place and identity that makes the area unique and attractive and what is the character that they want to be going for in this neighborhood. They discussed unoccupied vacant spaces and what should be their objective for those. They talked about entrepreneurship, arts,

community serving needs. They have a good start with the restaurants they have, but people would like to see more. ~~and~~ There was an idea about creating activity with those for uses day and evening so it is not a place that happens in a limited window of the day. They talked about public access to the waterfront, and what happens when you have more people living closer to existing industrial uses and how do they balance existing industry and maintaining a working waterfront with some of the other things they might want to see in the neighborhood.

Finally, they are going to talk a lot about how to address parking. People are opposed to paying for parking, but when parking is free, it is hard to find a space because people park their car in a certain spot and leave it there all day. Even if parking is free, if it is time limited it has to be enforced in order to move cars around.

They talked about what is an appropriate type of new development, but there was not a clear consensus in terms of building height and how many units and what kind of density development they want to see in this neighborhood overall, and they eventually need to get to an understanding of what is the appropriate density given existing and potential future infrastructure, transit, and all of those things.

Ms. Lightfield said in terms of neighborhood weaknesses on the transit portion, what was specifically brought up was the lack of a train station, which was a very important highlight. As to parking, this area has very reasonable rates, so that is not a driver as much as people having the perception that there is not enough parking on the street for the very obvious reason that most people like to park there as there is no charge. She believes there is an ongoing parking study to review district-wide parking needs and coordinate that with what the max buildout is for the area. They did the RFP on that and narrowed it down to three consultants.

Ms. Hebert said they are interviewing tomorrow and will select one and present it to the full steering committee next week, and then it will go to the Parking Authority. Because it's a citywide study, it is going to take about a year for the full recommendation.

Mr. Kleppin said one thing they talked about was having that study do the work that normally would occur in the POCD ~~and~~ save some money for everybody.

Ms. King said the parking around Wall Street is confusing. She had two friends that went to Fat Cat and both got tickets because they didn't see the little meter there, ~~so she thinks there is an issue with parking in the Wall Street area.~~

Ms. Strauss noted that the POCD as well as the Parking Study are going to be coordinated efforts with Stantec and RPA so that they eliminate as much redundancy as possible.

Ms. Lightfield said as a former zoning chair, she would note that zoning in the City drives what the parking requirements are, not planning. She doesn't think there has ever been a deep dive to figure out what today's conditions are and what our parking needs are and where it should be located. They have multiple zones that have completely different parking requirements, and what the max buildouts are is something that they should be on top of and know where they are and figure out what they want to change and what the impacts are going to be.

Ms. King said they should come up with a short paragraph as to how they want to see parking. They want it free for the first two hours and user friendly so people understand clearly where to

park. That could actually feed into the POCD. She was on the Zoning Commission as well, and she thinks the City has been driven by zoning. They have a new zoning director now and the whole initiative behind bringing in a new one is that planning should be what's driving the City of Norwalk, which is where she thinks they are all moving.

Mr. Kleppin said the plan should recommend parking standards that could be very specific to different parts of the district, and then the next step would be regulation amendments that come out of those changes.

Ms. Macy said they have two different maps and they should feel free to change and update things. They should self-select whether they want to get into the mobility map or the community character map. It will be an open conversation, and then they will reconvene and talk as a group about the important points for the planning efforts.

(Whereupon the group broke up into two parts to discuss the issues.)

Mr. Serpas said the topic of her group was community character and they talked about how the area is disjointed and in disrepair, it's dirty and dated, the buildings are out of context with the historic structures there, the new development is not the context you would like to see such as higher density, more steel construction instead of wood, and building to a higher density. They talked a lot about what could be an identifying architecture for this phase. They would like to see more brick. They thought the northern part could be more of a commercial/office space center for Norwalk, but respecting the historic district along Wall Street, and to densify the southern area with buildings, maybe 4 to 6 stories in the historic area, getting gradually taller as you go out to maybe 20 stories max if the market can support that. They would like to see a retail area along West Avenue and possibly more services, making West Avenue to Wall Street more their commercial corridor with service/office space. To do this they would need a train station and a grocery store.

Maintenance of areas is a big problem and they would have to make sure that that area is maintained by the City and property owners, and have a way to enforce it. A lot of the parks are not being maintained. They also need to make the place safe for seniors, and make sure it's walkable and has all of the services that someone would need if they move here and don't want to use their car every day. They need strict sidewalk rules, like eight feet width with an extra few feet for the utility structure, and no exceptions. They are trying to push for 15 feet.

Ms. Lightfield said if they are starting to increase the density and building up, they have to open up the sidewalk so people don't feel confined. Ms. Hebert noted that DPW has got new sidewalk standards that were just approved.

Ms. Macy said she wanted to raise the idea of complete streets, because they talked a lot about sidewalks and bike lanes and parking and how much room there is for all of the things they want to see and how they can make it all fit into a historic urban environment where there are constraints, and their job is to look at all the constraints and the roadway and to come back next time with some real analysis so they can have a further discussion.

Ms. Lightfield said she would suggest from a policy standpoint, if a new project comes in that's going to redo sidewalks in a significant area, that the City then proactively does the rest of the

sidewalks so they have a complete streetscape block to block, because the piece meal approach is the problem.

Ms. Stocker said a streetscape plan should be developed that includes standards so that sidewalks are built all the same way, because they have all different types in the City.

4. Focus Issue #2: Mobility. Ms. Lightfield said they have a lot of people aging in place, and Norwalk has a horrible record as a city with ADA compliance, so navigating has been a challenge in this area.

Ms. Serpas said in terms of mobility, they talked about bikes and bike paths and having a bike share service within Norwalk, being able to take the bikes out to the beach or commuting back and forth to the train station, and that led them to an issue on West Avenue that there's just not enough room to put bikes on that street. They talked a little bit about transit and what the transit plans are, and putting some type of a circulator program within the City of Norwalk, and they are actually looking at one right now. They are starting with just a shuttle commuter during peak times between 6:00 to 9:30 a.m. and 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. that would service the downtown area, the Wall Street and West Avenue area, and move people back and forth basically from the development areas down to the South Norwalk Train Station, and move them at times of 15 minute rides. Currently the developments are utilizing private shuttle services, which causes extra traffic and problems at the train station, so they have a plan they are proposing to the City and to the state to get something running. They are working with the development owners on this right now. They talked about the Wall Street Train Station and how it would feed into the area, and looking at possibly getting that going again as another way to service that area with mobility. They talked a little bit about bus rapid transit, meaning just some type of an express service that moves people back and forth.

Ms. Macy noted that CT Fast Track is happening now between New Britain and Hartford, and there may be an opportunity in this area. It is a bus that operates like a train and provides a high level of service and a design quality with the look and feel of a train, but the infrastructure investment is not as substantial, and might be something for this group to explore further.

Ms. Stocker noted that DOT was doing a private transit study between Norwalk and Stamford. Somebody came down to present to the Transportation Round Table that the Business Council does about a year ago, but she hasn't heard anything else that the State is doing.

Ms. Macy said if there was an opportunity to create a dedicated busway between Wall Street and the South Norwalk Train Station, it would achieve a similar goal to a new train station and the threshold in terms of the investment is a lot lower, but there are a lot of questions obviously.

Ms. Serpas said they also talked about parking and the accessibility of parking down in that area, and they laughed about the fact that people are moving their cars every two hours rather than pay to use the garages, so obviously that's on the list to be looked at as far as doing some sort of enforcement of parking, as well as making alternate parking off the street to open up the streets a little more. They want to look a little more at some sort of a fast track or a fixed bus route service which would go hand in hand with each other. Definitely look at bike paths, both on West Avenue and maybe an alternate off of West Avenue that still performs the same service. Maybe even coming down the river as a transportation option, and they were talking about bike paths on the other side of the river. Currently there's one on the East Avenue side but nothing on

the West Avenue side, so maybe that's an option, and then looking at the train station and even looking at the Pulse Point as making it some type of a massive transportation hub for rails, bikes and buses.

Ms. Macy thanked everyone. She said she thinks this will really help them to get moving into a greater level of detail, and they will come back next time with some answers to a lot of the questions that were raised on some of the technical ideas they talked about.

Ms. Strauss said so next steps over the summer, June/July/August, they are going to be having focus groups with institutions and non-profits in the area, and with property owners, developers and banks, and they are also going to develop a business owner survey that they will distribute over the summer, and when they come back in September they will look at development sites, zoning and design a little bit more in depth.

Ms. Macy said they will also be reaching out to some folks individually at their meetings, stakeholders and some technical folks. In addition, Steve Kleppin will be meeting with Stantec once they are on board to try to figure that out where they could save time and resources by working jointly around the POCD, and they will talk about some bigger public meetings and they are going to reach a lot of people with the focus groups. Also, their consultant for the POCD would want to come and participate in these meetings going forward so that they can learn and gather information while they are going through this process.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Pacchiana