

REVIEW OF THE EAST NORWALK NEIGHBORHOOD TOD PLAN

FOR THE

CITY OF NORWALK, CONNECTICUT



MARCH 2021

SUMMARY REPORT

Submitted by:



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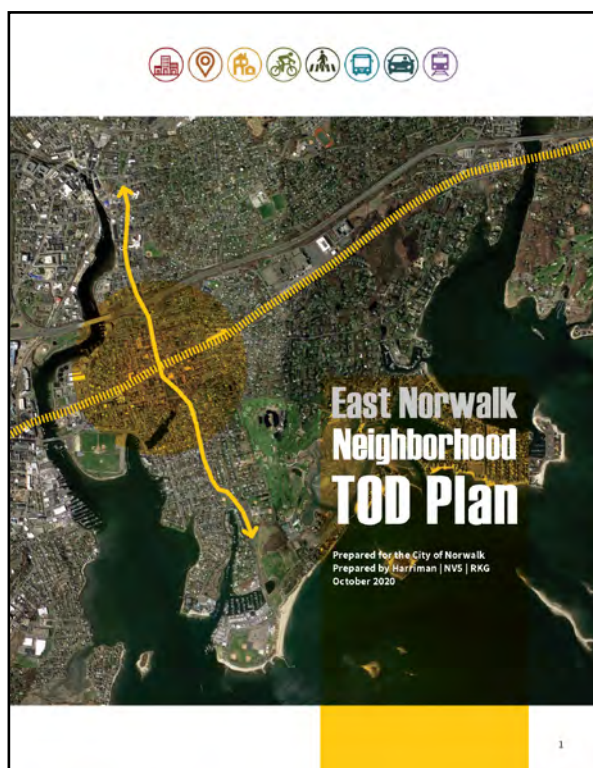
INTRODUCTION

TPUDC was hired by the City of Norwalk to complete the Building Zone Regulations Update (referred to in this document as “Update”). As a part of the process, TPUDC was first tasked with conducting a peer review of the East Norwalk Neighborhood TOD Plan. This review specifically focused on the amenity structure, parking recommendations, and relationship of the draft zoning and design guidelines to the Update. In addition to the comments within this Report, we have made comments directly in the TOD Plan, Draft Zoning and Design Guidelines documents.

TIMELINE

Because the standards for the Industrial Zone No. 1 (I-1) and the East Norwalk Village TOD Zone (EVTZ) are based on the existing zoning standards, which will be substantially and fundamentally revised during the Update, our recommendation is to wait to revise the TOD area zoning and design guidelines as a part of the zoning update process.

While waiting to revise the TOD area zoning as a part of the zoning update may be the best approach, we understand that there is significant development pressure in this area and the TOD draft zoning and design guidelines may not be able to wait that long to be updated. Starting with this assumption, we therefore recommend adopting the TOD zoning with the explicit stated intention that it be replaced with the results of the zoning update process. We also acknowledge that the general themes of the TOD study and recommendations related to the general bulk and height standards of the study will not change as a result of the comprehensive zoning update.



ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEET THE GOALS OF THE TOD PLAN

We evaluated the recommendations of the TOD Plan and would recommend the addition of the following items to further address the goals of the Plan:

MULTI-MODAL CONNECTIVITY AND ACCESS / PARKING

- Provide amenity points for additional bike racks.
- Conduct a Transportation Demand Management Study of the area to better understand and mitigate the traffic and parking challenges.

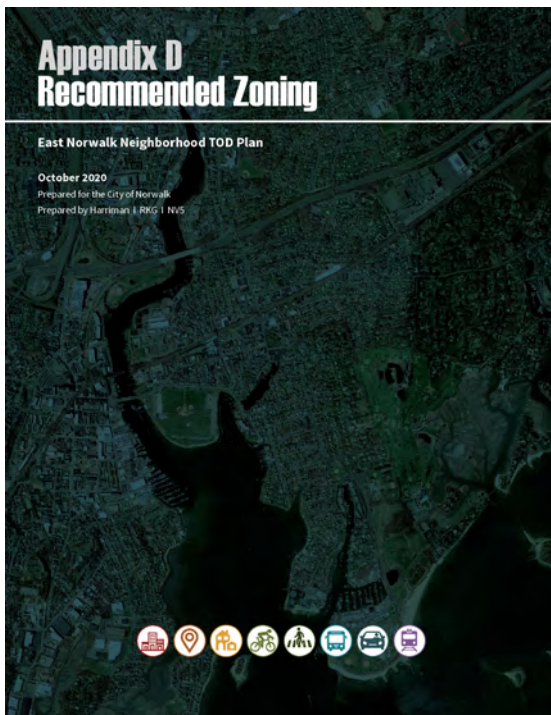
UTILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

- Include more of the green infrastructure elements listed in the Plan (permaculture, pollinator habitat, solar, tree preservation, bioswales) as amenities in the Draft Zoning Section H Specification and Applicability of Amenities.
- Evaluate creating a separate detailed LID and Light Imprint New Urbanism manual. This manual should outline measures that are context-appropriate solutions that give priority to the character of the surrounding neighborhood. This will ensure that stormwater and other infrastructure requirements don't solve engineering and destroy community character or make a site undevelopable.

PARKING

We understand that the perceived lack of parking is a large concern for many in the community. In evaluating the parking we have the following recommendations for changes to the parking standards that will be considered in the zoning update:

- The existing mixed-use development parking calculations are overly complicated and should be simplified. Mixed-use development parking should take into account shared parking between uses that have parking demands that do not coincide such as office and churches or commercial and residential.
- For multi-family parking requirements add a maximum of no more than 10% of the required amount, unless the additional spaces are for public parking.



ZONING AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

I-1 DISTRICT

Since residential is only permitted as an accessory use to industrial and required to be located in the same building we recommend that design guidelines be adopted to ensure compatibility and mitigate any negative affects. Below are recommendations for specific design guidelines:

- Provide separate delivery and loading for industrial uses.
- Parking and loading areas shall be paved to reduce dust.
- Permit shared parking between uses.
- Provide sound insulation between uses.
- Height of the ground floor from finished floor to ceiling must be a minimum of 15 ft. to 18 ft.
- Service entrances shall only be located facing an Alley or Secondary/ "B-Street". Service entrances not located on an Alley, Internal Drive shall have service doors compatible with the design aesthetic of the rest of the building.
- Lighting shall meeting Dark Sky Standards where properties abut a residential zone.
- Industrial uses shall be ventilated separately from other uses.

Many of the requirements for this zoning district will change with the zoning update and current Industrial Zone study. It may be appropriate to create a separate Light Industrial Artisan zone designation as part of the Update.

EVTZ AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

As noted, some or all of the proposed EVTZ zoning may be replaced or modified with the Building Zone Regulations Update. While any changes will be developed as part of the Update process and will be consistent with the adopted East Norwalk TOD Plan, there are a number of items that we recommend be changed now in the proposed EVTZ zoning and Design Guidelines.

PROCESS

We recommend combining the following sections of the Design Guidelines: "1.2 Peer Review Process" and "3 Peer Review Process". Having language about the process in one location in the document can reduce confusion.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

There are references to requirements for Historic Buildings throughout both the Draft Zoning and Design Guidelines. We recommend that the references to historic building requirements be incorporated into a separate section of the EVTZ zoning and/or the Design Guidelines to make it easier for a reader to find what they need pertaining to historic buildings.

BUILDING PLACEMENT

There are not building placement standards in the draft zoning or design guidelines. We recommend creating specific building placement standards and not referring back to the Neighborhood Business (NB) zone standards since some of the NB standards may not be appropriate. Recommendations for changes to the NB standards for the proposed EVTZ zoning include:

- Create a maximum and minimum front yard measured from the ROW line, not the centerline of the road, that would allow for the setback variation that was specified in the goals of the TOD Plan.
- For the maximum building area standard remove 35% coverage for buildings and leave 80% coverage for buildings and parking and 20% for open space.
- Using FAR as a standard is no longer considered a national best practice. This is because the results of development with the same FAR can vary wildly and do not lead to predictable outcomes for the community or for developers. As such, we recommend removing FAR as a standard and letting the other bulk standards such as height, setbacks, lot coverage, etc. determine the form and massing of development.

STREET ACTIVATING USE

While the intent of requiring ground floor space be limited to “Street Activating Uses” is good, if the real estate market does not currently support those uses, the unintended consequence of this requirement may be to cause properties and/or businesses to sit vacant rather than being developed/redeveloped. We understand that there are already vacant buildings in the area. Most cities we work with around the country see vacancy as a major concern economically and socially, and seek to alleviate this issue as a top priority.

If Norwalk feels the same way about vacancy, you may consider the following recommendation to address this issue: We recommend shifting focus of this requirement from the use of the building, to the form and character of the building along the corridor. By simply requiring that a building be built

or redeveloped after a change in use, with a storefront facade facing the street, but not limiting the use in certain areas, it will allow for the space to be occupied depending on the market forces. We recommend requiring a “Street Activating Use” at street intersections and the storefront facade in the other areas highlighted on the map in the document. The point at which the most valuable use of the property is commercial or a “Street Activating Use”, the building will naturally convert on its own. By requiring the storefront facade, the future expense of converting the space to commercial uses is greatly reduced, thus accelerating the pace at which the change of uses is likely to occur. In areas of the City that have low vacancy rates, we would not necessarily recommend this strategy.

AMENITY STRUCTURE

A concern in adopting codes with amenity structures is that redevelopment won’t occur if the height and density bonuses don’t offset the amenity costs financially for a developer. We understand that development companies provided input during the TOD Plan process. While the amenity structure may be financially feasible for them on larger developments, individual property owners, interested in redeveloping their property, may need to partner with adjacent property owners or purchase adjacent properties to develop their property.

Typically we do not recommend amenity structures, instead we normally would recommend allowing the height and density by-right and making the amenities into requirements, if permitted by state statutes. Considering the community interest and concern regarding additional height and density it may be prudent to proceed with this process via special permit for now and further evaluate this during the comprehensive zoning update.

We recommend the following additions/changes to the current amenities for the proposed zoning:

- Add a green sustainable elements category to the amenities. Move from the Indoor Pedestrian Plaza / Outdoor Pedestrian Seating amenity category the green wall; green roof; rain gardens; and the integrated rain garden, building drainage, and public art amenities and include permaculture, pollinator habitats, solar, and bioswales. Require that a specific amount of the amenity points come from this category.
- For public parking, consider changing the points to 1 point for every 2 spaces with a maximum of 6 points. It could be difficult to meet the minimum requirement of 5 spaces on smaller lots and that would deter people from pursuing this amenity when it is one of the more important items that some in the community feel is a top priority to be addressed.

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- Remove FAR from the bonuses since it will be removed in the Update. See prior comments about FAR.
- Remove the increase in maximum building area coverage standard from the bonuses since we recommend this be a general standard for the proposed EVTZ zoning.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommended changes below are included in this report to highlight their importance.

- We strongly recommend that parking only be allowed at the rear of the property - not along the side. This is one of the most important elements of placemaking and should be given a high priority.
- Sidewalk requirements don't require a planting strip or street trees; this should be added as a requirement unless there is insufficient physical space to do so. Even where space is insufficient, if there is development that involves new construction or demolition, the additional streetscape elements should be required within the private property, with an access easement granted.
- The zoning and design guidelines would benefit greatly from diagrams.
- Images need to be selected carefully so that they don't show unpermitted elements along with the element intended to be illustrated.