

Why Redevelopment?

By

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In April of 2004, the Township of West Windsor began a process to identify and designate an area around the Princeton Junction station at West Windsor as an Area in Need of Redevelopment in accordance with the Local Redevelopment and Housing Law. The objective of this designation is to secure control over the future development of this area, as well as attract technical, financial, and other types of assistance from federal, state, and county agencies, for the development of a “downtown” area for West Windsor.

Several questions (Q) with answers (A) are summarized as follows:

Q: Are we doing the right thing when there has been no indication that the property owners are planning to do any development in the area?

A: Property owners in and around the train station have approached the Township about development of their properties since I was elected Mayor in July 2001. As Mayor, I approached the State for funding and support of a redevelopment area in response to these requests. My main reason was that if development was going to occur, why not offer the residents the opportunity to have control over what might be built and what additional improvements and/or amenities would be provided to West Windsor? The Council agreed with this and the State approved the designation.

Q: What kinds of development could occur if we don't create a new mini master plan for the 350-acre area?

A: NJ Transit would likely move forward with the construction of parking garages to increase the capacity and utilization of the station. The additional parking would increase traffic congestion in the vicinity of the station, since NJ Transit would not be required to improve the infrastructure, nor guarantee additional parking designated for West Windsor residents. There would be very limited (if any) special financial or technical assistance provided by federal, state or county agencies. Without assistance from developers or the Township, the Vaughn Drive connector would be delayed until the State had funding, probably after 2016.

Private owners would likely develop or redevelop their properties in accordance with the current zoning (predominately research, office and manufacturing), including any affordable housing that is required as part of the state-mandated growth share, further increasing traffic to the station without the needed infrastructure. Any development would happen on a property by property basis

and the Township will not have the ability to coordinate or mandate a cohesive development plan, control the timing of growth, or negotiate for public amenities that would improve traffic, parking, open space preservation, and create a “sense of place” for the residents of West Windsor.

Q: Can we just build and beautify the main street around the Acme shopping center; build the Vaughn Drive connector; and construct a parking garage for West Windsor residents?

A: In order to build a parking garage for West Windsor residents, the infrastructure into and around the train station area must be improved beyond just beautification. A redesign of County Route 571 has already been approved by Mercer County but funding has not yet been secured. The Vaughn Drive connector is part of the Penns Neck package of road improvements scheduled to be built after 2016. However, as part of redevelopment, the NJ DOT has agreed to build the Vaughn Drive connector in partnership with the Township. Each entity would provide for half the funding to move the project sooner. Also proposed was a Station Drive extension that would help with traffic circulation. Financial incentives and assistance may be possible with the state under the Local Redevelopment and Housing Law. Developers’ contributions to infrastructure improvements would also be possible. Funding assistance would also apply to the Township-owned brownfield site (potentially contaminated site) that could be utilized in some way to the benefit of West Windsor residents. Once a redevelopment plan is approved, this plan would be submitted to the NJ DEP for funding to assist with the cleanup of this site.

Q: By coming up with a redevelopment plan, aren’t we just inviting developers to come?

A: A redevelopment plan will give the Township the authority to manage growth in this area. It also supports the Township in establishing a good plan to improve traffic circulation, enhance the look of the area, and create a sense of community. While this may invite developers to participate, it will be managed by what the community wants in pre-defined orderly phases over time instead of on a piecemeal basis.

The Process:

A study was completed in September of 2005 and both the Township Planning Board and Council agreed that 350 acres around the train station qualified for redevelopment. In December of 2005, along with an official resolution of approval by the Council, the study was sent to the State Department of Community Affairs. Official designation was granted to the Township in February of 2006.

Before the process started, I proposed five principles for consideration to guide the redevelopment planning process. These were transparency, equity, sustainability, capacity-based planning, and constitutional obligation. We continue to honor these principles.

The Township then began a search for a firm to develop a land use plan for the Area in Need of Redevelopment. While many municipalities with redevelopment designations have contracted with a developer of their choice to plan the area, the Township decided to hire a planning firm to evaluate the area and identify opportunities. This part of the process took 10 months to complete. The search process culminated in open presentations from each of the three finalist teams. On December 18, 2006, Council authorized the Mayor and Clerk to execute a contract with Hillier Architecture of West Windsor, New Jersey.

A three-phase planning process was determined and agreed to which started with three open, public workshops as Phase One. This phase was designed for the planning team to solicit input from the general public in order to come up with a concept plan for Phase Two. At the first workshop on February 22, 2007, the following goals of site conditions were recommended: 1) improve traffic circulation in and around the redevelopment area; 2) encourage alternative modes of transport; 3) provide easy access for commuters; 4) design the redevelopment project to be tax neutral or tax positive; 5) create an iconic and active public place for the entire West Windsor community; 6) preserve/strengthen existing neighborhoods; 7) create visually attractive facilities; 8) provide more parking for West Windsor residents; 9) increase the open space inventory; 10) protect environmentally sensitive lands; and 11) meet LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) criteria or sustainability.

Through both workshop and workshop 3, a land use plan which was supposed to meet all stated goals and provide the amenities the public wanted was developed and presented at workshop 3 on April 19, 2007. This ended Phase One.

Phase Two started on June 4, 2007 with a joint meeting of the Planning Board and Council. Direction was supposed to be coming from both entities to the planning team to prepare the documents for Phase Three – formal reviews by the Planning Board and a decision by the Council. At the June 4 meeting a concept land use plan with supporting information, choices, and options was presented. A follow-up meeting for continued dialogue and questions from the public, Planning Board, and Council with the planning team was originally scheduled to happen soon after. Continuing this direct communication is imperative for both Council and Planning Board to provide the now RMJM Hillier team with direction and recommendations to proceed in preparation of a land use plan for formal Planning Board review and Council approval.

Several additional questions related to redevelopment have been raised over the past two months.

Q: Can we plan only for ratables without housing units?

A: The state Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) has determined new regulations for the development of affordable housing. These new requirements have a “Growth Share” component which requires municipalities to provide affordable housing based on commercial development as well as residential development. Because of this, any development of the area around the train station under current zoning would necessitate affordable housing units. As Hillier showed in his June 4 presentation, allowable commercial development under current zoning of the existing properties around the train station would require 193 affordable housing units. Because of recent litigation, professionals believe that this number will be increased significantly. Therefore, good planning will include a housing component to meet the COAH requirements as well as provide vibrancy to a downtown area. This housing need not be isolated in its own location or building. Rather, it could be spread out above retail and office and parking structures throughout the area. An approved redevelopment plan would allow the Township to restrict the design of any housing including number of bedrooms as well as how many units would be built in any timeframe. Since affordable housing will be required with any development at the train station, this area would be ideal for the housing as well as the commercial in a mixed-use development thus the redevelopment plan. The challenge for the Township is if the affordable housing cannot be built at the train station with commercial development, where should the required housing be built?

Q: *Who is going to pay for all these public amenities?*

A: Through the redevelopment process, the Township is allowed to require improvements and amenities from redevelopers selected for this area by the Township in partnership with property owners. Furthermore, there will be additional funding available to improve the public infrastructure from the state and federal agencies.

Q: *How about the impact on schools?*

A: The redevelopment plan can act as a “timed-growth ordinance” which was passed by West Windsor in 1993 but disallowed by the courts. Housing need not be built all at once. Instead, it would be built based on the availability of capacity of the schools. It should be noted that property owners need not develop their properties until they are ready and subject to approved phases.

Q: *Is the entire 350 acres redevelopment going to totally destroy the community in terms of traffic circulation and normal daily operations during the construction period?*

A: Approved phases will protect existing neighborhoods and commuters using the train station. Planning consultants will take all of this into consideration in

defining the recommended phases in order to minimize disruption during development.

Q: If we do not have a redevelopment plan, what we are going to lose as a community? Why do we need a Transit Village?

A: There will be no special assistance provided from federal, state, or county agencies in the areas of traffic improvements, brownfields clean-up, and financial assistance. There will be no or few amenities for West Windsor residents. These amenities include all 15 recommended public amenities from additional open space and a community center to additional parking for West Windsor residents free of taxpayers' money. There will still be a requirement for affordable housing. There will be little infrastructure improvements. More importantly, commercial development brings traffic into an area during peak commuting hours in the form of employees. Furthermore, the Township would not be able to manage growth in this area based on the availability of infrastructure without the protection of a redevelopment plan which will assure the Township control over the future redeveloper(s). Based on our communication with the state, there are no special requirements for the Transit Village designation. This will be automatic as a result of an approved redevelopment plan.

Q: Under the redevelopment statute, Township is allowed to use a PILOT (payments in lieu of taxes) program as part of the tax incentives for public infrastructure. This would cost the school system the needed tax money for our outstanding public education.

A: The PILOT program, in this case, could only be applied to the county portion of the total property taxes. As the school budget will be based on a different formula, from school year 2009 on, according to the referendum approved by the voters last April, our payments to the school system will be based on number of students attending the system. A PILOT program would not have any effect on the Township's contribution to the school system.

Next Steps:

Council and the administration should be working together with RMJM Hillier to come up with a modified version of the scope of services and contract signed in December 2006 aimed at improving public participation and enhancing the financial and economic assessment to meet overall project objectives. This may include additional dialogue with the public on different selected topics; public information dissemination; an educational component; and more in-depth analyses in the areas of financial impact, traffic circulation, and infrastructure improvements to support the final redevelopment land use plan for the 350-acre area around the train station. We would also like to see a plan to be included as part of the final document with respect to the shares of the community benefits (equity) among all property owners in the future implementation

process. From the outset, this program was designed to break new ground and set up a new model for redevelopment projects statewide. We have made great strides in this process and we have learned so much in the past six months. There are areas that can be improved to make it even better. We should not be afraid of making adjustments to this unique open process so that it becomes even more open and effective. The next few weeks will be critical for all elected officials in West Windsor to come together to make it all happen. I am optimistic that all we have learned so far will definitely move this project forward so that we can all enjoy the future results.

For more information about Redevelopment Project, please visit the following websites:

www.westwindsornj.org

and

www.wwallaboard.org