

# **TOWNSHIP OF WEST WINDSOR**

*Office of the Mayor*

## **REDEVELOPMENT: LET'S DO IT RIGHT OR NOT AT ALL**

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It has been more than seven months, since the Council virtually took over the redevelopment planning project. Many different ideas have been discussed and discarded; budget spent; resolutions passed; but with no real tangible results. On September 26, 2007, the Council President sent a memorandum to the Planning Board Chair which referred the redevelopment plan to the Planning Board along with nine recommendations. The Planning Board responded in a very positive and professional manner. A budget and scope of services were provided on October 24, 2007 and again on November 7, 2007. Finally, the proposed funding was passed on December 17, 2007. Yet more and more restrictions and strings continue to be attached to the project by the Council.

Why redevelopment? It is clear that West Windsor has been facing numerous problems in the areas of land use planning and traffic improvements over the past fifteen years. Some issues have been and are being resolved. Some solutions have been initiated in the past six years. But the area around the train station is one of the remaining areas in West Windsor that is guaranteed to experience more development under existing zoning and more and more traffic in the future. Without a long-term vision and growth management plan around the train station, problems will be inevitable. Even commercial development will bring more traffic into the area. The number of commuters using the train station will continue to grow even without sufficient parking as drop offs with twice the trips.

With a Redevelopment Plan, the Township would be able to manage commercial, retail, and any residential growth with a badly needed timed-growth approach. Other additional benefits include selection of the redevelopers within the 350-acre zone; negotiation for shared services; and a requirement of impact contributions for public amenities. The redevelopment statute also requires the State and County agencies to be part of the redevelopment process which could raise an opportunity to bring in much needed traffic improvements to the area minimizing impact to existing neighborhoods. Furthermore, with one of the top ten train stations in the nation, redevelopment could increase our ability to recruit quality business ratables to West Windsor. This would contribute to reducing the burden of the residential property taxpayers.

Information and recommendations were provided by the Hillier Team to Township officials on June 4, 2007. Consistent with the above, we now need to provide our

direction to the Hillier team as to what we really must have, such as parking for West Windsor residents, a Main Street, and the Vaughn Drive connector; and what we feel we would like to have such as a public safety substation and improved bicycle/pedestrian connection between both sides of the railroad tracks. Once the plan is adopted, the Township can apply the timed-growth approach and other land use management techniques to protect the best interests of the community in terms of traffic, school impact, and other considerations. In the future, according to the statute, we can also amend the redevelopment plan as circumstances merit.

The concept is very simple. If we want some amenities at no taxpayer expense, the next step is to jointly decide what they would be. Then work with the community and property owners to reach an agreement on how to make it all happen based on information provided by the consultants and other professionals. If we do not like the information provided by the Hillier team, then the Planning Board should be employed to offer a second opinion.

As I proposed before the redevelopment process started, the Township needs to follow five principles: transparency, equity, sustainability, capacity-based planning, and constitutional obligation. The final Redevelopment Plan is a long-term plan. It takes years and a number of phases to bring it to the final build-out. Once the Plan is adopted, the Township would possess the authority to manage the future growth within the 350 acres district. Control of our future destiny; reduction of our residential tax burden; creating a place where our children and families would want to go; and facilitating a more clear sense of community—aren't these what we all want in West Windsor?

After endless debates and meetings over the last year, the time has come to put politics aside and craft a Redevelopment Plan that is acceptable to this community which would provide a commercial, civic, and cultural focal point for West Windsor. I strongly urge the Township Council, Planning Board, property owners, and the general public to all work together with the Administration. With open minds and mutual trust, using the best technical information available, we can move this project forward.

The key question now is: Is the Council really committed to the redevelopment planning process? Should we stop now before more money is spent? Are we going to give up all the important tools that will help West Windsor to manage its growth in the future? Or should we let all property owners do what they are allowed to do under the current Municipal Land Use Law and not the Redevelopment statute? If we want to do redevelopment, the task must be accomplished with all the experts from both the Hillier Team and the Planning Board. Only general principles and guidance are required for the professionals. There is no need for more restrictions, meetings, and resolutions, which would be prohibitive from the standpoint of further costs and time delay.

Let's put aside political differences and do redevelopment right or be honest with the taxpayers and end the project once and for all. The potential consequences, good, or bad, we will all have to share.