

Next Steps: Redevelopment Process in West Windsor

By

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Several 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 designation 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 to this.

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, and, for the development of a “downtown” area for West Windsor.

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.

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 and sustainability.

In the past two months, issues have been raised as to what could happen if we don't proceed with the redevelopment planning? And, how would the community benefit from implementation of such a redevelopment plan?

Without a redevelopment plan, NJ Transit would likely move forward with the construction of parking garages to increase the capacity and utilization of the station. Other property owners could develop their properties adhering to current zoning as well as the new state-mandated affordable housing growth share requirements. This development would undoubtedly bring with it additional parking for employees and require additional housing somewhere. The additional parking and development would

increase traffic congestion in the vicinity of the station, since NJ Transit and other property owners would not be required to build new infrastructure. Any additional parking designated for West Windsor residents would have to be paid for by West Windsor taxpayers or commuters. There will be no or few amenities 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.

With a redevelopment plan, the Township has the authority to coordinate or mandate cohesive development of the area. The plan is supposed to include all benefits the community will receive based on contributions from all developers in the future. These benefits include the 15 recommended public amenities already proposed from additional open space and a community center to additional parking for West Windsor residents free of taxpayers' money.

The advantages of having the designation of "Area in Need of Redevelopment" with a final redevelopment plan for Township include: 1) the ability to develop a cohesive plan for growth in the area; 2) the ability to secure additional technical and financial support from federal, state, and county agencies; 3) the authority to manage and limit the future growth of the area based on availability of infrastructure, such as school capacity, roadway capacity, etc.; and 4) the ability to retain additional property taxes for infrastructure improvements in the future.

There has been some confusion about the PILOT (Payments In Lieu Of Taxes) program. The PILOT program, in this specific 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 2007, 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. Furthermore, both the School Board and County are, and always will be, part of this process.

At this point, 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.

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