

West Windsor Township

Office of the Mayor

Guiding Principles for Redevelopment Planning

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A number of questions and concerns have been raised as West Windsor plans to move forward for the redevelopment of the area surrounding the train station. Some redevelopment projects have come under criticism because of a real or perceived lack of public input; abuse of funding alternatives; developer insensitivity; and the use of eminent domain for the taking of property when an owner does not wish to sell. Unfortunately, the extreme and/or most negative cases always generate headlines. The fear, rumors, and arguments against any type of redevelopment seem to resurface time and time again. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to clearly lay out the guiding principles which I had presented to Township Council soon after the state officially designated the 350 acres of property surrounding the Princeton Junction Train Station at West Windsor as an Area in Need of Redevelopment in February, 2006.

There are five general principles that would serve as guidelines throughout the course of the redevelopment planning, namely: transparency, equity, sustainability, capacity-based planning, and constitutional obligation. It is important to point out that I insisted, and Council agreed, that the Township adopt a “pay-to-play” ordinance long before the redevelopment planning process started and this bedrock principle will be adhered to.

To assure transparency, the redevelopment planning process began by establishing a search committee before the Council voted to issue a request for qualification and proposal in March, 2006. The search committee consisted of individuals from the Township Council, Planning Board, and Administration. I served as Chair and all six members on the search committee were selected by the three respective entities with two of each. Recently, there were three open public presentations on qualifications and experience made at Town Hall by the three finalist firms selected by the search committee from seventeen original applicants. The final decision will be made at an open public meeting. So far, this selection process has been the most open and competitive process to ever happen in the state with respect to the selection of the consultant for redevelopment planning.

The final three firms were selected based on a very thorough and comprehensive review by the search committee. During the course of this selection, an executive session was held to establish a strategy for contract negotiations with the three firms. Outside of this meeting, the process has been completely transparent. An open and effective decision-making process will be strictly followed as we move forward with the entire redevelopment project.

Equity is as important as transparency. We need to ensure that all residents will benefit from this redevelopment project. To accomplish this goal, an open public process with full community participation is critical. We need to encourage residents to be involved in the planning process. This includes the Charrette process through which all segments of the community, including residents, businesses, commuters, and other stakeholders, can participate in the design.

The final plan, once it is adopted, needs to encompass sustainability. This speaks to the long-term values the plan brings to the community in the areas of environmental conservation, quality of life, fiscal sustainability, and economic growth. Green design and application of a sustainability plan concept on all issues where possible will also be important.

An essential part of the sustainability plan is capacity-based planning. Several important questions need to be answered before this project can begin. These include the capacity calculations that have to be taken into consideration for both short-term and long-term implications. What can the area reasonably sustain? We need to look at existing or improved infrastructure. We need to look at the impact of any housing on our schools. The School Board has been involved in the development of West Windsor especially with the Toll Brothers development. They will be intensely involved in this development.

Concerning constitutional obligations, the current State COAH (Council on Affordable Housing) regulations include growth share affordable housing requirements as part of all non-residential development. Any suggestion to exclude housing units in the redevelopment area is not only impractical based on smart growth principles but would also raise issues of affordable housing compliance as part of this Township's constitutional obligation. I sincerely believe with all above-mentioned principles, we should be able to meet all our constitutional obligations.

This redevelopment plan, once established and approved, will take some time to implement. Resulting development will not happen over night. I envision a phased approach where land will be reclaimed by first erecting parking garages and some retail establishments or restaurants. We need to plan the staging of this for minimum disruption to our commuters.

West Windsor is faced with an extraordinary opportunity to transform unproductive, unsightly surface parking and contaminated sites into a mixed-use Transit Village which will finally create a viable downtown center. West Windsor has been lacking this for too long. Such a Transit Village would help to attract additional ratables and provide additional amenities. While we will look at site-appropriate housing opportunities, we are also committed to preserving open space. If we adhere to all five principles discussed here, I know that a plan can be developed to achieve this special place for West Windsor.

