

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
CITY OF STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT
URBAN REDEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
MONDAY, JANUARY 24, 2011

1. At 6:10pm, Chairman Stephen C. Osman called the special meeting to order. The following were in attendance:

Commissioners:

Stephen C. Osman, Chairman
James I. Nixon, Vice Chairman
Joel P. Mellis, Secretary/Treasurer
Jackie Heftman
Christopher D. Meek

Staff:

Christopher L. Bergstrom, Executive Director
Rachel Goldberg, General Counsel
Durelle Alexander

Attendees:

David Kooris, Vice President, Regional Plan Association
Milton Puryear, Executive Director, Mill River Collaborative
Lisa Louer, Esquire, Sandak Hennessey & Greco
Elizabeth Kim, Staff Writer, Stamford Advocate
Jim Lohr

2. Presentation by Regional Plan Association Vice President David Kooris of Report Entitled "Towards a Liveable Neighborhood – A Vision for a Walkable, Transit-Oriented, Vibrant, and Human-Scaled Downtown Stamford"

The Chairman noted that he and Commissioner Heftman had served on the Sub-Committee working with RPA; further, that the Commission had attended multiple workshops over the past two years in a joint effort to create the final report before the Board for approval tonight. This report, prepared by Mr. Kooris, was co-funded by the Urban Redevelopment Commission and the Downtown Special Services District. Executive Director Bergstrom reported that the DSSD Board approved the report at its meeting on January 19th. He said, "Once we approve it, the next step is to present it to the Mayor ... and the next step from that is to go with him to the Planning and Zoning Boards, probably meeting in joint sessions with us." The Executive Director continued, "There's a lot of good stuff in here. Some of it can be enacted as is, the planning part of it. The zoning part is really a framework that is going to require either City staff or a Consultant to write actual zoning code. Then there is a good part of this that is really guidance for the Mayor and the Planning Board in terms of prioritizing the capital budget as it relates to pedestrian improvements downtown." It was noted that, in the report, Mr. Kooris addresses creating a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) mechanism for pedestrian improvements. Executive Director Bergstrom explained, "The simplest and most logical way to do that is by an extension of the Southeast Quadrant Plan and the creation of a TIF mechanism for that because the TIF is built into the Redevelopment Statutes for the State." Chairman Osman asked, "Will you be extending the time?" The Executive Director responded, "Because the Southeast Quadrant Plan expires this year (July 2011), we would need to extend it anyway and, if everyone agrees, we would want to modify it to put that kind of TIF mechanism in for pedestrian improvements. The first step is the approval of RPA's report."

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Commissioner Heftman asked, "David, did the DSSD approve this report as is?" Mr. Kooris responded, "They made some minor changes, which I'll mention when I get to them." Mr. Kooris explained that the report is divided into three sections. The first, and briefest section, contains changes that could be adopted tomorrow by the Planning Board. The second section doesn't actually delineate the zoning changes, but provides the framework, and the third section is about capital planning/improvements to the public realm.

The first section recommends the Master Plan changes. Mr. Kooris said, "At the end of the 2002 Master Plan, there were three downtown categories – downtown corridor, which basically covered Tresser Boulevard; downtown core, which covered the historic district up around Old Town Hall and Bedford Street; and then the downtown collar, which extended east on East Main Street, south just to the top end of the South End, and north all the way to Ridgeway along Summer and Bedford. The concern going into this project was that this definition of downtown was overly expansive and that the category description, particularly of the collar, invited an intensity of uses such as commercial, which is retail and office, in places that were not really central to the downtown. If you look at the map, you can see that basically the corridor and the core have been merged into one zone that we're calling Center City. When we were looking at the corridor and the core, we felt that the distinction between the two might create a false dichotomy between Tresser Boulevard and the pedestrian-oriented historic core. The combined core and corridor, Center City, will create a category that encourages high intensity, mixed-use development and that includes residential, office, retail, hotel and institutional uses centered around the train station and the historic heart of downtown. The other recommendations are really about constraining the geographic extent of those downtown categories." It was noted that Metro Center, Metro Green and the northern half of Gateway have been pulled into Center City. Mr. Kooris continued, "This part (section one) could theoretically be adopted as is. This is developed enough that should the Planning Board buy into this concept, this could be adopted and become the new map for the Master Plan." Mr. Puryear asked about a parcel (Czescik Homes) which is included in the Mill River Park Master Plan but omitted in this report. Mr. Kooris responded, "We took the boundaries of Mill River Park that were in the previous Master Plan, added a little bit on the side of what was the Advocate site, but never actually talked about that parcel. It wasn't in the 2002 plan but I don't think anyone would object to adding it." Following discussion, it was decided to redo the boundaries and include this parcel, changing it on the Use Plan Map from red to green.

Mr. Kooris continued, "The next section describes what the changes to zoning should be basically without writing zoning text. We are recommending that everywhere in the Center City zone enable a wide range of uses – hotel, office, retail, destination retail, residential – everything that is allowed in the downtown today. Two of the most important pages of the report (14 & 15) address how buildings relate to the sidewalk ... how buildings relate to the public realm. The purple streets on the ground floor activity map are what we call primary frontages and, on those streets, you have to have either an active façade or an overflow use with an active façade spilling out onto the street. This means you can't put your loading dock, your garage entrance, a screened garage façade, a blank wall, on those streets that are the central pedestrian public spaces of the downtown."

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Mr. Kooris added, "We are also recommending removing from the retail streets two stretches – Bedford to the north edge of Latham Park to Hoyt, and then on Summer, from Spring up to First. Commissioner Heftman said, "They are not really retail now." Chairman Osman asked about the node at Hoyt and Bedford. Mr. Kooris responded, "You can build commercial there. You can build a mix of uses there. They could have retail on their ground floor ... we did not disallow it; we just removed the incentive. We're enabling it to continue to be a commercial node outside of the downtown, but this is different that incentivizing ground-floor retail with an FAR exemption." Executive Director Bergstrom said, "The concept of concentrating retail is that if you dilute it, given the mass of residents downtown and given the market size we have, the more you spread retail out, the less successful any of the retail is going to be. The concept of these streets is 'where do you want to use a retail FAR incentive to incent retail that will dramatically enhance the pedestrian experience, that will connect the core of downtown with whatever you want to connect it with.' The consensus has been during these past two years that it is more important to extend the connection south and shrink the connections to the north. This Plan revision uses the retail intensity to link the center of town to the Train Station."

Mr. Kooris continued, "The next part of this section deals with building form. Basically, this lays out a strategy for the shape of development of buildings. It is recommended that step backs be made a standard requirement throughout the Center City at the height at which the building's base ensures the upper floors of a building have a limited presence on the public realm." Step backs were discussed and it was noted that step backs along narrower streets reduce the impact of taller buildings and towers on light and air access to the sidewalk. Executive Director Bergstrom said, "It's a combination to have an appropriate frame in human scale to the public realm and then to get light into it by stepping the towers back."

Commissioner Meek left the meeting at 7:16pm.

Mr. Kooris said, "Pages 18 through 19 are about on-site pedestrian infrastructure. We basically said it is the responsibility of buildings that, through their development, they must provide a minimum standard streetscape which includes sidewalks of ample width, street trees that can mature to have a canopy, and amenities such as trash cans and benches. Every property fronting a primary street should be lined with five foot wide sidewalks, a row of street trees, and pedestrian-scaled lighting." Attorney Goldberg asked, "What do you do so the next time street trees die, they don't get paved over as they have in the past?" Mr. Kooris responded, "That's a good question. I don't have an answer." Chairman Osman said, "Why don't we specify in the plan that they have to maintain and/or replace existing trees. This would be a good way to keep the street holes filled with trees. It would become part of the responsibility of the buildings. Could you add that?" Mr. Kooris agreed to make that addition to the plan.

Mr. Kooris continued, "There are a couple of superblocks in the downtown and there might be opportunities through redevelopment to break them down with new pedestrian connections/links much like the URC achieved with UBS with the new cut-throughs, etc."

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“One of them is Summer Street South, which basically says from a pedestrian point of view that you should be able to keep walking south on Summer essentially until you hit UBS at Federal Street and that’s not hard to achieve. The second is Parcel 38, where any redevelopment of this site provides an opportunity for through-block connections to break up the scale of that block and enable a potential extension northward to Suburban Avenue. The last one is Franklin Street. The block from Broad to North in-between Washington, Franklin and Summer is a long block. With Mill River, it would be nice to have some connection between North and Broad.” It was noted that a path is currently possible through existing surface parking lots and is utilized by walkers in the downtown.

Mr. Kooris said, “The next three pages are about parking. There are essentially three elements: (1) that you reduce the requirements in accordance with existing demand; (2) that you implement policies that will further reduce demand; and, (3) that you provide that in a variety of flexible ways.” Reducing the future demand for parking was discussed. Suggested strategies listed in the report include car sharing, mobility management, contingency plan, bicycle facilities, pricing, selling or leasing parking separately from commercial/residential space, financial incentives for mode shift, parking maximums and improved user information. Mr. Kooris explained, “These are a list of options. One of the changes we made since the DSSD meeting is after parking maximums, it now says in parentheses (contingent on high-quality, intra-city transit).” The DSSD also requested removal of the sentence “New commercial development should be mandated to allow off-peak public use of their garages.” Executive Director Bergstrom added, “For parking maximums to work, you really have to have good transit. The reverse is also true. To have good transit, you have to have parking maximums. I actually think the way to solve the parking problem is to have it going forward be built as public parking. We manage it, we price it, we control the supply of it and you take the whole parking thing out of the equation of the private developer.”

Mr. Kooris continued, “The next section is about off-site improvements and public amenities. Right now we get off-site improvements from development in two ways: (1) formal negotiations with the developer; and, (2) informal negotiations with City staff. Based on feed-back from the amenities workshop and Stamford’s history with zoning incentives and amenity programs, four issue areas emerge as target improvements for well-calibrated zoning incentives: (1) diversity of uses; (2) pedestrian conditions and the public realm; (3) green buildings; and (4) multi-modal transportation.” It was noted that the Mill River Greenway and Park are successful strategies to incrementally create public amenities with private development, whereas the plazas that are best maintained are often located high above the sidewalk, beyond the reach of the typical pedestrian. Discussion ensued pertaining to off-site road and traffic improvements. The report recommends removing most of the bonuses that are in effect today; i.e., the plaza, the community rooms, and replacing that with a very limited amount of bonuses that can leverage private development and a strong market to create more energy efficient buildings, better public spaces and better public transit.

The final section of the report addresses capital planning and improvements to the public realm. Mr. Kooris said, “These are improvements to the space in-between buildings that we cannot hope any one development is going to fix. Veteran’s Park is the simplest example but it’s also redesigning Tresser Boulevard.”

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Mr. Kooris continued, "With respect to new and enhanced public spaces, I have laid out a set of reasonable steps that could be taken to essentially recreate the East-West public pedestrian corridor. I think there are some pretty simple things you could do from Old Town Hall through to the Luxe site that would dramatically change how that functions. The next tier deals with piazzas and green streets. Currently one of the most successful locations within the Center City is the piazza located at the intersection of Bedford and Spring Streets that provides space for outdoor seating for three separate restaurants. There are half a dozen locations where you could replicate this, over time." Attorney Goldberg said, "I will propose once again the idea that the restaurants on Atlantic Street be able to have space for tables in the park right across Atlantic Street." It was noted that there are approximately 1,000 tree pits throughout the downtown, with 14% currently empty, providing an opportunity to plant over 100 trees at key locations without infrastructure investment. Mr. Kooris said, "What bothers me is developers being allowed to cut down the trees the second they get their zoning approval, when it may be years before they break ground; i.e., Tresser Square, where all the trees were cut down on the east side of Washington; Ritz Carlton, where all the trees were cut down on Atlantic Street on the primary pedestrian route between the train station and the downtown." It was the sense of the Board that RPA address the "pacing of tree removal" in its report.

Mr. Kooris reviewed the last section, traffic calming. He said, "It is probably more detailed than need be but the City had contracted a Traffic Calming Study for the entire City and they came up with some really good recommendations for the neighborhood, but totally ignored the downtown. We have ideas of what could be. There is a lot of space that's not used by cars, but it hasn't yet been given to pedestrians." It was noted that breaking down the scale of downtown streets is essential for creating a walkable city; further, that addressing the distance across intersections is critical.

Commissioner Nixon asked, "What about the other side of the highway? The South End? Is there consistency between the concept laid out here and what they're doing in the South End? Is there potential for the South End and the downtown to become competitors?" Mr. Kooris responded, "The best statement in the report responding to that is the following: 'Infrastructure investments should strengthen the connections between the Center City and surrounding neighborhoods. The value of the Center City will grow with stronger connections to the Transportation Center, the waterfront, and complementary activity centers in other neighborhood. Failure to strengthen these physical linkages will force competition between distinct activity centers in other neighborhood.' There are many people in the City who believe that the South End and downtown are competing with one another. And they very well could, unless they are tied together so closely that they are viewed by all of us as pieces of a whole."

Following further discussion, Commissioner Nixon made a motion to approve the Regional Plan Association Report "Towards a Livable Neighborhood," subject to the revisions made by the Commission. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Mellis and carried by unanimous vote.

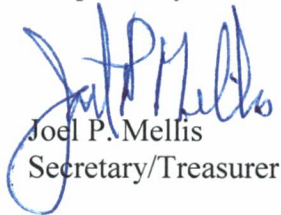
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3. Adjournment

The regularly scheduled meeting for Thursday, February 10, 2011 at 6pm is cancelled. No date for the next meeting was set at this time.

There being no further business before the Board, Commissioner Nixon made a motion to adjourn. The motion was carried by unanimous vote and the meeting was adjourned at 8:22pm.

Respectfully submitted,



Joel P. Mellis
Secretary/Treasurer

CITY OF STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT, URBAN REDEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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SPECIAL
MEETING NOTICE

A special meeting of the City of Stamford, Connecticut, Urban Redevelopment Commission, will be held in the Commission Offices on the 9th Floor of the Stamford Government Center, 888 Washington Boulevard, Stamford, Connecticut, on Monday, January 24, 2011 at 6:00pm.

AGENDA:

1. Roll Call
2. Presentation by Regional Plan Association
Vice President David Kooris:
“Towards a Livable Neighborhood”
3. Adjournment