

Capitol Region Council of Governments

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MINUTES OF REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING

May 15, 2008

ATTENDANCE

Members and Alternates

Jeff Carboneau
Tom Derlinga
Sue Errickson
Linda Keith
Patrick Kennedy
Rudolph Kissman
John Larensen
Tomas Manning
Bradley Pellissier
Sharon Purtil
Laurie Whitten

Town

Suffield
East Granby
Tolland
Avon
South Windsor
Manchester
Marlborough
Bolton
Somers
Glastonbury
East Windsor

Others Present

Rob Rowlson
Richard Heapes
Emily Moos
Mary Ellen Kowalewski
Rebecca Augur
Greg Hyme

Town of West Hartford
Streetworks
CRCOG
CRCOG
CRCOG
West Hartford News

Chairman Larensen called the meeting to order at 6:10 pm.

Adoption of Minutes

Kissman moved to adopt the minutes from the April 17, 2008 meeting. Carboneau seconded. The motion passed.

Blue Back Square Development

Rob Rowlson, West Hartford Economic and Community Development Officer, and Richard Heapes, developer of Blue Back Square, made a presentation on the planning and development of the project. Mr. Rowlson described how the town came to renovate the old high school into a town hall in the early 1980s, and moved the Board of Education and Police Department to the same area. At this time, two car dealerships, on Farmington Ave. occupied much of the area behind these civic uses along Main Street. The Town changed the zoning for those areas to allow for dense development, up to 6 stories because they realized their potential, and because the topography would allow for taller development that would not appear taller than the steeple of the church or other buildings on Main Street.

In the mid-1990s, the Town administration began to question how the civic uses on the east side of South Main Street contribute to or detract from the rest of downtown. The Town conducted a study and developed a vision for that section of downtown.

Streetworks first looked at the site in late 2001, and proceeded to buy one of the key parcels. The group was attracted to West Hartford because downtown West Hartford already had brand recognition and was unique in the region. The developers thought they could complement existing retail and commercial in downtown by adding office, residential and retail space that would clinch the downtown's regional appeal and therefore, financial success.

Both the developer and the Town conducted extensive public outreach in the planning stage. The developer independently assembled the parcels, and worked with the Town to develop a master plan. The Town bonded for \$50 million to buy back from the developer the public portions of the project, including the streets, metered parking spaces and parking garages. The Westfarms Mall filed numerous lawsuits, and the project went to referenda.

Mr. Heapes talked about the constraints of the Town's Special Development District regulations. He thinks that their specificity on how sites will appear in the public realm is reasonable. Because these types of mixed-use projects are difficult to put together financially, as markets can shift substantially during the planning, permitting and construction periods, he thinks that the Town's regulations could be more flexible on the private/use side of things.

Both Mr. Rowson and Mr. Heapes discussed parking issues and how this project could never have happened if traditional parking requirements were imposed. Mr. Heapes indicated that in designing a project, many developers seek to maximize the efficiency of parking by striking the right mix of uses. Therefore, Blue Back includes doctors' and other professional offices, residential, retail, entertainment and dining uses.

Mr. Heapes attributed his firm's willingness to take on the large financial risk of this project to 1) the existing success of the downtown, and 2) the Town's senior administration.

Report on Zoning, Subdivision, and Plan of Development Referrals:

Rebecca Augur reported on this month's referrals. There was discussion on a referral from Tolland regarding buildable squares, and whether there were any regional policies or impacts from the proposal. Kennedy suggested an addition to the draft comment to read that the commission should consider the administrative burden and burden on property owners that could result. Keith moved to accept the referral comments as amended. Pellissier seconded, and they were unanimously approved.

Other Business

There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:30pm. Several members then toured Blue Back Square with CRCOG staff.