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MARCH 27, 2006 SPECIAL MEETING

The Wethersfield Town Council held a special meeting on March 27, 2006 at 6:00 p.m. in the Council Chambers of the Rocky Hill Town Hall, 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT.

Present: Councilors Adil, Cascio, Drake, Forrest, Kirsche, Kotkin, Walsh, and Chairperson Morin.

Absent: Deputy Mayor Fortunato.

Also present: Bonnie Therrien, Town Manager, and Dolores G. Sassano, Town Clerk.

Chairperson Morin thanked Rocky Hill Mayor Anthony LaRosa for hosting the meeting this evening.

Ted DeSantos, Fuss & O'Neill's Director of Transportation Services, introduced himself and his consultant team consisting of Craig Seymour, John Wilcox, and Chris Ferrero who have been on the Silas Deane initiative for both Wethersfield and Rocky Hill. Mr. DeSantos stated that he will provide an overview of the project and each of his team will speak to their area of expertise as it relates to the project.

OVERVIEW

Mr. DeSantos stated that the Silas Deane Highway Plan project is a multi-disciplined effort and is a collaborative effort between the Towns of Wethersfield and Rocky Hill. He explained that the Highway is a State-owned five mile stretch of road which presents many architectural and streetscape challenges and is host to 15,000-23,000 vehicles per day. Mr. DeSantos said that the objective of the project is to take the corridor and work with both Towns through the Silas Deane Advisory Committee to establish a long-term vision to promote reinvestment and redevelopment of the corridor in such a way as to be consistent with the core values of each of the two communities involved. Mr. DeSantos said that his team of experts has been responsible for conducting a marketing assessment to determine the best land uses to promote reinvestment in the corridor. He said that through this market assessment, a land use plan has been developed which has driven many of the recommendations to improve transportation conditions along the corridor. Mr. DeSantos stated that he tries to refrain from referring to the corridor as a highway, but rather to refer to the "Silas Deane" as a destination, a neighborhood, a community.

Mr. DeSantos reviewed the land use, streetscape, and gateway nodes development, stating that a lot of discussion needs to be held regarding the information provided. He said that in promoting the Silas Deane as a community, his team is attempting to minimize pavement while still moving traffic along and recognizing the needs of the business owners along the corridor. Mr. DeSantos introduced Craig Seymour from RKG Associates to provide the Market Assessment Overview.

MARKET ASSESSMENT

Mr. Seymour stated that there is a lot of potential in the market to achieve some of the goals and objectives set forth. He said that one of the charges coming from the initial request for proposals was to have plans that are realistic and able to be implemented. Mr. Seymour stated that the vast majority of property along the Silas Deane is private property requiring investment initiatives by the private owners; and this won't be done unless they understand that the investments will be in their best interests. He said that the study was conducted by looking at the investment climate within the corridor and then working collaboratively to make sure that the objectives are grounded in the reality of the marketplace. Mr. Seymour said that one of the purposes of the market analysis was to assess the future development/redevelopment capacity of the corridor to improve the density, look, and investment climate of not only the street front, but also the blocks behind as well. He said that the Silas Deane competes market-wise within a much

larger market place, which is something that needs to be taken into consideration when looking to the future. Mr. Seymour said that a phasing approach needs to be undertaken since everything cannot be done at once. He said that this approach will be used as a stepping stone allowing selected investments to attract other investment capital throughout a long-term plan. Mr. Seymour stated that the market analysis looks at the supply and demand of real estate, goods and services, and the uses of such; and then makes a comparison with the surrounding region so as not to be over-reliant on a single type of use. He said that the Silas Deane does not need more retail of the type that is currently here, but better quality retail instead in order to attract more people to the corridor. Mr. Seymour explained that the last goal of the analysis is to be more self-sustaining by relying more on the local marketplace as well as attracting customers from further away.

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien asked Mr. Seymour if the market analysis considered the Convention Center and Hotel in Hartford and piggybacking onto this. Mr. Seymour answered that the analysis included the inventory of hotels within the corridor and indicated that there are a number that serve the employment and tourist market that comes through this area.

Mr. Seymour was asked if the analysis indicated a need for more hotel rooms along the Silas Deane corridor and Mr. Seymour answered that a specific demand analysis for hotels was not conducted.

Jeannie Webb, Rocky Hill Economic Development Director, commented that she has been working with some of the local hotels regarding hooking up with the Convention Center. She said that representatives from the Convention Center have stated that they are not considering the outlying hotels as there is not good transportation provided to them. Ms. Webb stated that she has recommended that the Convention Center work together with the hospitality committee of the Chamber of Commerce to discuss the transit required, such as a shuttle service.

A gentleman from the public asked about the status of the dormant railroad track running through Wethersfield to Hartford and was told that the rail line is active with one to two trains per week making runs to Middletown. The gentleman from the public asked about the line being used as a passenger rail line and was told that it is part of the plan to incorporate that rail line by using the right-of-way as a multi-use trail corridor and by using the rail line for passenger service along the corridor. The gentleman asked how large tractor trailers will be able to negotiate paths along the redesigned Silas Deane and was told that the turning radius at every intersection is being studied and recommendations made where necessary.

At this time, speakers were asked to state their name when making comments.

Betty Rosania, Chairperson of the EDIC in Wethersfield and member of the Wethersfield Silas Deane Highway Advisory Committee, stated that she is distressed to hear that this project may take twenty to thirty years as this is not what was anticipated. Mr. DeSantos commented that the recommendations being made are outlined so that they can be broken into projects that can be implemented as quickly as each individual Town can obtain funding and accommodate design permitting and construction documents. Ms. Rosania commented that since it has taken so many years already, concentration should be on the greater good. She said that she expects that the plan will take a long time; however 20-30 years is beyond some people's lifetime. Ms. Rosania asked if CRCOG has been contacted with regard to the use of the rail line. Mr. DeSantos said that he has contacted CRCOG to identify the operations of the rail line and to gain a sense of how they feel about passenger service along the corridor. He said that CRCOG informed him that they are active on a number of rail corridors as well as the New Britain and Eastbound bus ways. Mr. DeSantos stated that the key is to make the public transportation convenient and cost effective. Ms. Rosania commented that it appears that the market analysis concentrated more on Rocky Hill than Wethersfield and she questioned the extent of the analysis in Wethersfield. Mr. DeSantos stated that the market analysis was conducted on both towns and looked at the retail supply and demand within a five-mile radius of the I-91 interchange.

Paul Courchaine, of Wethersfield, commented that the concept of nodes driving retail along the Silas Deane seems to be contradicted by turning the intersection of Silas Deane and Church Street into the Town Center rather than offering retail at this location. Mr. DeSantos said that the development of this intersection will be addressed later in the meeting.

Ray Lavoie, of Rocky Hill, commented that the Silas Deane Highway is just what it is called; a highway or artery that

takes people between Hartford and Cromwell. He said that, although he applauds the effort to beautify the Silas Deane, he cannot imagine that the proposed configuration will attract investors. Mr. Lavoie compared the Silas Deane to Route 44 in Avon and the Berlin Turnpike with regard to retail opportunities. Mr. DeSantos said that he is a traffic engineer who is always working on projects to move cars better on roadways. He explained that the demographics, such as larger, flatter property sites, along Route 44 and the Berlin Turnpike are very different than on the Silas Deane where property sites are much more shallow and further reduce the building space. He said that these physical site constraints are part of the conclusion that the Silas Deane cannot be a major retail destination corridor. Mr. DeSantos stated that the Silas Deane itself will not be a place to recreate, but that the multi-use corridor will be used as a recreation area, and the Silas Deane will be made more pedestrian-friendly. Mr. Lavoie commented that he does not agree with the proposed placement of a fountain. Mr. DeSantos stated that the structure is not a fountain, but a modern roundabout, and he stressed that in creating a long-term vision, the Town needs to think outside the box.

Rocky Hill Councilor Rocco Sanzo stated that this plan started with a vision to improve the Silas Deane and he reminded everyone that this long-term project is tied to the funding that each Town may or may not receive. He said that the analysis takes traffic studies into account and also that the Silas Deane is a State roadway. Mr. Sanzo commented that nothing can happen overnight since there are numerous factors and constraints to be considered. Mr. DeSantos stated that the transportation recommendations are not in any way being made to take away from the Silas Deane's vehicle capacity, but rather to take advantage of excess pavement by finding alternative ways to move the traffic.

Wethersfield EDIC member Joe Cornelio asked Mr. Seymour to elaborate on the profitability of redevelopment. Mr. Seymour stated that there is currently a lot of underinvested real estate along the Silas Deane corridor which needs something in order to make it worth while to build. Mr. Cornelio asked Mr. Seymour to explain the report's comment that the cost of property along the Silas Deane is so high that it is not viable for the Town to purchase the property and redevelop it. Mr. Seymour stated that there are certain sites that are right for redevelopment; however the land value beneath has been compared to land transactions and sales to larger developers. Mr. Seymour said that the way to add value to these properties is to add density and more uses to the properties, and the proposed plan suggests ways to do this.

Ms. Rosania requested that the entire presentation be made before any other questions are taken, since information is not being delivered in an orderly fashion. She also suggested that there be time restraints made on comments and questions.

Mr. Christopher Ferrero of Ferrero Hixon Associates (landscape architects) spoke to the architectural design standards of the project stating that it is not all about shrubs and trees, but rather about what makes things work. He said that his responsibility is to take the fundamental transportation foundations and create a physical reality out of these basic principals. Mr. Ferrero stated that he will address land use along the Silas Deane corridor and create an image to better enhance the image of the identity of the Silas Deane. Along with this, Mr. Ferrero will address specific products and specific looks. He said that the plan is coming down to actual implementation and review of specific real items that can be further reviewed by a Design Review Board. Mr. Ferrero said that the land use plan is the fundamental outgrowth of the market assessment and acknowledges that mixed use projects produce a number of positive attributes. He said that the land use plan states that the primary commercial areas which are valuable pieces of real estate are along highways. He said that the plan attempts to develop a hierarchy of spaces along the corridor and the nodes at certain intersections are proposed to create a loop system rather than the current linear highway system. Mr. Ferrero said that the bike path and especially the railroad are viewed as transit-oriented development and he urges the Towns to push this issue as there is no better way to get activity into this area. He commented that the railroad right-of-way is an appropriate location for a bike path, especially with Beaver Brook being located in that area. Mr. Ferrero stated that the Silas Deane is currently a desert of asphalt dominated by utility poles and asphalt and the market assessment and subsequent land use plan provide a reason to divide the corridor into hierarchical nodes and centers. Mr. Ferrero reviewed the implementation of the plan by breaking the corridor into various components and dealing separately with each based on their location in the hierarchy. Mr. Ferrero reviewed some of the recommendations of the plan dealing with such items as primary gateway locations, secondary gateway locations, way-finding signage, bridges, building location, crosswalks, lighting, and landscaping. He said that the common image of the Silas Deane for both towns of Wethersfield and Rocky Hill is the Connecticut River and can be used as the theme of the flow of the corridor with the

nodes as "harbors". Mr. Ferrero reviewed the suggested diagrams, not site plans, for redevelopment of six selected parcels along the Silas Deane corridor.

Wethersfield Councilor Matthew Forrest stated that, during his campaigning, every concept mentioned tonight regarding Silas Deane redevelopment has come up with every household or resident with which he's spoken. He said that tonight's presentation is representative of what a lot of people want the Silas Deane to be. Councilor Forrest said that suggestions have been made to him regarding lighting and the possibility of a statue of Silas Deane or another prominent local figure being erected.

George Cornelius, who grew up in Wethersfield, asked if the Silas Deane will be reduced to one lane in each direction and he was told that this is far from what will take place. Mr. Cornelius asked how a 'roundabout' differs from a 'rotary'. Mr. DeSantos stated that compared to a rotary, a roundabout is much smaller in order to slow traffic while keeping it moving. Mr. Cornelius expressed concern for tractor trailer trucks being able to negotiate these roundabouts, especially since the Silas Deane is an alternate route for I-91 in the case of an emergency.

Mr. DeSantos stated that the challenge presented by this project is to create a different look and feel to the Silas Deane corridor to promote reinvestment. He reviewed the transportation recommendations to reduce pavement, slow traffic, and keep the capacity of the roadway. These recommendations include access management through a center left turn lane, rear connector roadways, and taking advantage of dead pavement space.

Rocky Hill Councilor Larry de Bear thanked the consultants for attending tonight's meeting and providing their presentations and invited all in attendance to ask questions and comment at this time.

Lee Seekus, Wells Road, Wethersfield, asked if the roundabouts will eliminate any of the traffic lights. Mr. DeSantos answered that there is only one roundabout being considered and it will eliminate the traffic signal at the intersection of the Silas Deane and Elm Street (Rt. 160). Mr. Seekus asked how this will affect pedestrian crosswalks and was told that there will be crosswalks provided. Mr. Seekus asked how the traffic will be stopped if there is no light. Mr. DeSantos said that this is a difficult question to answer with respect to a roundabout design, especially as it relates to the handicapped and visually impaired. He said that traffic speeds in a roundabout are much slower and a pedestrian crossing would only need to check traffic in one direction to cross to the splitter island and then again to make the second crossing.

Scott Coleman, Rocky Hill, asked for an approximation of how much per mile a plan like the one proposed will cost. Mr. Wilcox said that the amount is approximately \$20 million per mile with the belief that large outside developers will contribute a large amount to this and this is why it is important to sit down with property owners, Planning & Zoning Committee members, and Inland Wetlands Committee members to obtain their input before a final plan is derived. Mr. DeSantos said that he has spoken with three developers who are looking for investment opportunities and he presented the plan to them. He said that the concept of mixed use to increase density on the properties came from these developers.

Jeannie Webb, Rocky Hill Economic Development Director, stated that Rocky Hill has been reviewing several sites on the Silas Deane for investment, and every site has already agreed to implement whatever design standards are desired by the Town. She said that there still needs to be some type of overlay zoning that will increase property density.

Joe Hickey, of Wethersfield, spoke in favor of the access road to the east of the Silas Deane. He stated that there may be inland wetland issues to the north of North Street, and that the block between Church Street and Wells Road looks feasible; however he questioned how Beaver Road will be extended without destroying all of the parking of the office building on that block. Mr. DeSantos said that he is aware of what the extension of Beaver Brook will entail and the parking lot issue is the least of his concerns, since there are flood control and inland wetland issues which will present design challenges.

Rocky Hill Councilor Larry de Bear thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and asked all who have questions or comments to address them to their respective Town Manager or Mayor.

ADJOURNMENT

At 8:30 p.m., Councilor Adil moved "**TO ADJOURN THE MEETING**" seconded by Councilor Forrest. All Councilors present, including the Chairperson voted AYE. Councilors Cascio, Kirsche, and Kotkin left the meeting at various earlier times. The motion passed 5-0-0.

Dolores G. Sassano
Town Clerk