

SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes
Redevelopment Agency
Wednesday, June 11, 2008
7:00 pm - Silas Deane Middle School Auditorium

Public Forum, Part 1:
"Understanding Taxation and the Challenge of Redevelopment"

1. **Call to Order** - Chairman Lee Kuckro called the meeting to order at 7:02 pm.
2. **Roll Call/Attendance**

Members in attendance: Lee Kuckro - Chair, Daniel Camilliere - Vice Chair, Paul Thompson, and Michael Zaleski. Also in attendance: Martin Walsh, Town Council Liaison; Betty Rosania, Chair, EDIC; Ken Rizzio, EDIC Liaison; Tony Homicki, EDIC Liaison; Bonnie Therrien, Town Manager; and Peter Gillespie, Town Planner/Economic Development Manager.

Members absent: Joseph Soja.

Please note: These minutes are not a verbatim transcript of the meeting. The presentations, questions and answers have been shortened for brevity. Each question is preceded by the name of the person that posed the question, and each answer is preceded by the person that responded. For a verbatim version of the meeting, a video recording will be broadcast on local access cable television Channel 14.

3. **Opening**

Moderator Paul Thompson welcomed the audience and said that the meeting was being held to provide facts about the revenue side of Town taxation. He said that the budget side of taxation is often covered in Town Council and other budget meetings. However, citizens have been asking for more information to understand the revenue side in relation to redevelopment.

Mr. Thompson introduced the panel members and their presentation topics:

- Lee Kuckro, Chair, Wethersfield Redevelopment Agency: "History of Town Planning"
- Chandler Rose, Assessor, Town of Wethersfield: "Tax Revenue Sources and Trends"
- Tim Tuell, CPA and member, Wethersfield Chamber of Commerce: "Tax Base Analysis"
- Raymond Carpentino, Economic Development Director, Town of Rocky Hill: "Economic Development in Rocky Hill"

Mr. Thompson said that the meeting is informational in nature, not a public hearing. He said that the format for the meeting would be a series of presentations from the forum panel members, followed by an open question and answer session. Citizens posing questions were asked to give their name and address, and could direct their questions to any of the panel members, with a limit of 5 minutes per question. The meeting would close at 8:30 PM.

Mr. Thompson encouraged citizens to pose questions at a later time by calling, writing or e-mailing Town Hall. For people that could not attend the forum, a copy of the presentation materials would be posted on the Town's website.

4. **Panel Presentations**

History of Wethersfield Planning, and Why Redevelopment is Needed - Lee Kuckro, Chair, Wethersfield Redevelopment Agency: Mr. Kuckro said that Wethersfield has a long history of town planning. The Town's first modern, written plan was the 1928 "Swan Plan". It was written as an alternative to the State's plan at the time to widen Hartford Avenue and Broad Street for use as the major north-south route through Wethersfield. The plan recommended building what later became the Silas Deane Highway. The properties along this corridor were small, and their boundaries had already been set before the Silas Deane Highway was built. Many of the properties remain small today, and this factors into the redevelopment of this corridor.

More recently, the Town has developed several other plans that address redevelopment issues: the 2000 Plan of Conservation and Development, the 2001 Economic Development Strategic Plan, and the 2006 Silas Deane Highway Revitalization Plan. All of these plans recommend promotion of development and redevelopment of under-utilized properties, with the Redevelopment Agency identifying beneficial projects and creating public/private partnerships for mixed-use redevelopment.

Mr. Kuckro said that redevelopment is needed because Wethersfield depends heavily on residential tax revenue, has little developable land, and several significant properties are vacant or blighted. Consequently, it is imperative to maximize the use of commercial property.

Tax Revenue Sources and Trends: Chandler Rose, Assessor, Town of Wethersfield: Mr. Rose reviewed the Town grand list and compared it to neighboring towns. Wethersfield's residential tax base provides 89% of the Town's revenue, and 11% is from commercial. Rocky Hill's tax base is 69% residential and 31% commercial. Newington's is 80% residential and 20% commercial.

Mr. Rose presented a table showing the growth in grand lists from 2002 to 2006 for Wethersfield and neighboring towns. Wethersfield's growth rate has been less than 1% in each of the last 5 years, and essentially zero in 2006. Glastonbury's growth rate has been around 2% per year during the last 3 years. Newington's rate was 1 - 1.5% the last 2 years.

Mr. Rose next compared the growth rates of Wethersfield's residential and commercial grand lists from 2000 - 2007. The residential grand list grew 47% during that time period, while the commercial grand list grew 25%. Consequently, the percentage of the commercial tax base declined from 12.77% to 11.09%.

Mr. Rose showed a list of the top 10 taxpayers in Wethersfield. He said that 3 are retail properties, 3 contain apartment buildings or complexes, 1 is commercial and 1 is a nursing home facility.

Tax Base Analysis - Tim Tuell, CPA, and Member, Wethersfield Chamber of Commerce: Mr. Tuell gave an analysis of the potential effect of redevelopment. He said that if several properties being reviewed by the Redevelopment Agency were redeveloped, their assessed values could increase in value from about \$16,000,000 to about \$94,000,000. This is an increase of \$78,000,000 and would shift 3.25% of the tax base from residential to commercial. Residential property taxes would be reduced by \$209 on a home assessed at \$170,300. Assuming such redevelopment occurred over about a 10 year period, such change would not have a dramatic effect on taxes.

Mr. Tuell also gave an example to illustrate the scale of development being discussed. He said that Putnam Park is assessed at about \$15,000,000. To get the \$78,000,000 increase in the analysis above, redevelopment on the order of 4 or 5 Putnam Parks must take place. Mr. Tuell said that he believed another Putnam Park would be unlikely in the near future, so substantial redevelopment of various combinations will be needed to produce the scale of results in the analysis. He said that while this is not likely to be a revenue gold mine for the Town, it is certainly worth pursuing.

Economic Development in Rocky Hill - Raymond Carpentino, Economic Development Director, Town of Rocky Hill: Mr. Carpentino said that Rocky Hill has substantial growth on 52 acres of commercial land the Town owns off of Brook Street. There has been about \$70,000,000 of commercial development on two roads in this area. He believes Rocky Hill, as well as Wethersfield, have good locations. They are centrally located

in the State and having direct access to an interstate highway.

Mr. Carpentino showed a graph of the commercial growth in Rocky Hill from 2003 - 2007. It showed a range 0.8% to 4.22%, with an average of over 2%. He said that he expects similar growth in 2008 and 2009. Amidst this healthy growth, Rocky Hill has the same kinds of problems as Wethersfield. Developable land is dwindling, and there are underutilized commercial properties. Rocky Hill has the former Ames property, the Foundry site, the former Pratt & Whitney property, and numerous smaller parcels along Silas Deane Highway.

Mr. Carpentino said that his role as economic development director is mainly to find buyers and developers. His searches are national in scope. He said that Rocky Hill also has a redevelopment agency. Its efforts were once focused exclusively on the Foundry site. After the Silas Deane Highway study, its role was expanded to include the Silas Deane Highway and elsewhere.

Summary - Moderator Paul Thompson: Mr. Thompson said that, in summary, the points to take home are: Wethersfield's 1928 plan worked as intended, but change is needed; the Town has an over-reliance on residential tax revenue; and redevelopment will not affect taxes dramatically, so other goals come into play such as the availability of services, quality of life, and reduced blight.

Question and Answer Session (7:43 PM)

Question - Beth Harwick, 94 Silvercrest: I thought tonight's meeting was going to be about a plan. What are the next steps the Town will take and when?

Answer - Lee Kuckro: Tonight's meeting was to review the current situation, because the Agency learned from the referendum process that the public needed more information. Another public forum is being planned for September, the theme for which will be redevelopment solutions. By September, the Agency also hopes to have updates on more concrete steps to be taken, such as revised zoning regulations.

Question - Beth Harwick, 94 Silvercrest: I realize that redevelopment has other benefits, such as quality of life, the convenience of stores nearby, and employment opportunities. What is the Town doing now? Is it doing things like sending out request for proposals like the Town of Rocky Hill is doing?

Answer - Peter Gillespie: The Town of Wethersfield uses the same tools as Rocky Hill, including the work of the Economic Development and Improvement Commission and the Wethersfield Redevelopment Agency. The Town does marketing at trade shows, makes tax incentives available, and has a façade improvement loan program. The effects of these are now becoming visible. The Town has been in contact with all of the owners of under-utilized and blighted properties, but has not yet overcome the obstacles to redevelopment.

Question - Tony Homicki, 201 Cumberland Ave: What types of businesses should the Town try to attract? That is, for example, medical or manufacturing? Or should it change its zoning?

Answer - Raymond Carpentino: I can't speak to zoning issues, but Wethersfield should look at the services it wants to provide, and follow its economic development plan. Rocky Hill has seen the recent addition of some white tablecloth restaurants, and the development of some warehouse and distribution centers near Exit 23 off I-91. I've thought that the area between New Haven, Middletown and Hartford has the potential to be some kind of learning corridor.

Question - Tony Homicki, 201 Cumberland Ave: What is the Town doing with the recommendation in the Fuss & O'Neill plan for an overlay zone that would give more flexibility for redevelopment?

Answer - Peter Gillespie: The Town has been talking with developers about it. The feedback from developers is that it would be beneficial to have flexibility through mixed use zoning. That is, residential / commercial / retail, so people can live and work in close proximity. The Town is drafting such zoning regulations now. Prior to the second public forum, these regulations may be ready for

public hearing and comment, and could be a topic of discussion at the public forum.

Question - Lee Kuckro: Does Rocky Hill have an overlay zone?

Answer - Raymond Carpentino: Rocky Hill already has the flexibility in its regulations to change zoning. One of the problems with Silas Deane Highway is the numerous small properties. Chain stores are among the few that can finance projects right now. They need bigger parcels, and it is easier for them to locate in a town that has large parcels available, rather than go through a slower and more complex process to acquire and consolidate small parcels.

Answer - Lee Kuckro: One of the purposes of an overlay zone is to provide incentives for developers to construct denser development.

Question - Bob Young, 20 Coppermill Road: I believe there are two types of problem properties, blighted and under-utilized. For blight, the Town has laws and they should be enforced. For underutilized properties, I don't want government to get involved with how property owners use their land. I think the biggest obstacle to redevelopment is high taxes, and the Town should be looking at ways to cut spending. Also, what kinds of development provide the highest revenue?

Answer - Chandler Rose: Mixed use development is the most desirable from a revenue perspective.

Answer - Peter Gillespie: Medical is a good use from a revenue standpoint. Medical brings with it expensive equipment that adds value to the property and yields more revenue.

Question - Amanda Delmastro, 157 Church Street: How does the Town find out what kind of development businesses and people want.

Answer - Peter Gillespie: We don't have information on what people want, but we do have market study information from the Silas Deane Highway Master Plan. That plan is available on the Town's website. Sometimes the Town's demographics do not suit a developer or store's interest. For example, his office recently contacted Trader Joe's (a food store chain), but they felt that Wethersfield's demographics were not a good match. There is a study of Old Wethersfield due out soon. It will also be made available on the Town website under Preserve America.

Question - Ken Sokolowski, 79 Main Street: What will it take to make a big difference?

Answer - Tim Tuell: Redevelopment is a part of making change, but it will not be the majority. Economic development is already on-going. Wethersfield is likely to remain a residential community, but redevelopment can help with revenue and improve the quality of life.

Question - Ken Sokolowski, 79 Main Street: Does Rocky Hill have a redevelopment agency and what funding is available to it?

Answer - Raymond Carpentino: There is no specific funding, as its activities are covered under the economic development department.

Question - Betty Rosania, 88 Desmond Drive: The Wethersfield Redevelopment Agency was formed partly because of what happened when the State made available in the 1970s some land it was no longer going to use for the I-291 project. Rocky Hill had a redevelopment agency at the time to support the acquisition through a referendum. Rocky Hill's referendum passed. Wethersfield did not have a redevelopment agency and its referendum did not pass. What staffing does the Rocky Hill have for its economic development office, and how does it market the town?

Answer - Raymond Carpentino: I have one administrative assistant. My office also works with the Town's redevelopment agency, economic development commission, youth advisory board, and the façade improvement committee. Rocky Hill does its marketing mostly via e-mail, but also mails material prepared by the Town and has a few thousand dollars for marketing.

Question - Betty Rosania, 88 Desmond Drive: Do you think the resistance to redevelopment is fear?

Answer - Raymond Carpentino: Yes, fear and misinformation.

Question - Beth Harwick, 94 Silvercrest: Has the Town considered teaming with other towns to share information and coordinate?

Answer - Peter Gillespie: Yes, my office often attends economic development forums with other town professionals and personnel. We also review the development plans of other towns, and participate in statewide planning organizations.

Answer - Lee Kuckro: The Redevelopment Agency also met with the Town of Windsor about a project that involved historic preservation of a factory building.

Question - Joe Burke, 722 Prospect Street: How important are these changes? Are more staff needed to make things happen? Right now, we've got 5 volunteers assisted by the economic development director.

Answer - Bonnie Therrien: Wethersfield has 2 staff - one planner, and one assistant planner. One additional staff person was recently requested but not approved. Rocky Hill has 2 economic development staff, and 7 planning staff. This is about double what Wethersfield has.

Answer - Raymond Carpentino: As an economic development director, I have the luxury of advocating for business, whereas planners cannot. Separation of planning and economic development works better, but requires more staff.

Answer - Bonnie Therrien: Wethersfield eliminated its planning staff completely in 1991. The Chamber of Commerce helped recreate the current planning positions. This is way less than what neighboring towns have.

5. **Call to Adjourn -** Mr. Thompson thanked the audience for coming and for its participation. He reminded people that the Redevelopment Agency meetings are open to the public, and its meeting minutes are posted on the Town website. The next public forum is planned for September and will focus on the specific steps that can be taken. The meeting ended at 8:28 p.m.
6. **Next Meeting Date -** June 18, 2008 at 5:00 pm. (regularly scheduled meeting).

Respectfully Submitted,

Kevin T. Sullivan
Agency Recording Secretary