

Council spats, 'the redevelopment' highlight West Windsor in 2006

By: Molly Petrilla, Staff Writer, Princeton Packet
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THE YEAR IN REVIEW

WEST WINDSOR — The process began approximately nine months ago, and dominated most of the township's meetings in 2006.

Its point of focus consists of 350 acres — including the Princeton Junction train station — and it's frequently been referred to simply as "the redevelopment project."

"I feel we have accomplished a lot," Mayor Shing-Fu Hsueh said, reflecting on 2006 in West Windsor. "No. 1, of course, is the redevelopment. Finally we signed a contract, and we definitely are in the process of getting things moving ahead this coming year."

In late March, Mayor Hsueh issued a request for qualifications and proposals, urging interested planning firms to offer their submissions for the township's area in need of redevelopment.

A total of 17 firms put proposals forward, and by the end of August, a seven-member search committee that consisted of the mayor, two Township Council members, two Planning Board members and two township administrators whittled the list down to three finalists.

In September, representatives from West Windsor-based Hillier Architecture, Street-Works LLC of White Plains, N.Y., and the team of Princeton's Michael Graves & Associates and Duany Plater-Zyberk of Miami made public presentations before residents and township officials, listing their qualifications and outlining their visions for the redevelopment site.

At the behest of the council, Mayor Hsueh negotiated with all three firms the following month and, on the eve of the Nov. 7 council election, appeared before the council at an agenda meeting to recommend Hillier.

The council took the mayor's advice and approved Hillier in a 4-1 vote. Councilwoman Heidi Kleinman cast the lone "no" vote because she preferred the Michael Graves and DPZ team.

In addition to consuming much of the township's meeting time and manpower, the pending redevelopment plan also shaped the race between incumbent Barbara Pfeifer and challenger Will Anklowitz to fill a council seat former member Kristin Appelget vacated in May.

Over the course of three public debates, Ms. Pfeifer openly supported a transit village that would include retail and housing for the township's redevelopment area, while Mr. Anklowitz offered a more conservative view, claiming that the site needed slightly more parking and some commercial development, but not much more than that.

Mr. Anklowitz defeated Ms. Pfeifer by nearly 800 votes on Nov. 7 and has since brought his cautious approach to redevelopment to the council, recently joining forces with Councilman Charles Morgan on a long series of questions about Hillier's contract that one councilman described as a "filibuster."

That "filibuster" marked a climactic point in council members' increasingly tense relationship.

Over the last year, a great deal of in-fighting occurred at council meetings regarding a variety of issues — with members frequently lashing out at each other with personal insults.

In particular, a strong feeling of distrust emerged over the last year, as members often questioned each other.

When the council appointed Ms. Pfeifer to fill Ms. Appelget's vacant seat in May, Mr. Morgan conducted an independent investigation into her credentials, contacting the dean of academic services and registrar at Samford University — where Ms. Pfeifer received her associate's degree — to confirm if she had obtained the degree in "pre-law" as her application stated.

As it turned out, she had received an associate's degree in general studies with a major in paralegal from Samford and then later earned a bachelor's degree and master's degree in business administration.

At the time, some council members considered censuring Mr. Morgan for investigating on his own, but ultimately decided against it.

The council faced further strife over its use of e-mail — an issue that Councilman Franc Gambatese said he found troubling throughout the last year.

According to some council members, the governing body has come dangerously close to deliberating through e-mails — a practice that is prohibited by the state Open Public Meetings Act, also known as the Sunshine Law.

In a recent interview, several members said that while the council's use of e-mail had subsided slightly after the issue was raised over the summer, it reared its head in recent months.

Most recently, Mr. Gambatese asked not to be copied on e-mails from other council members, spurring several biting remarks from other members at subsequent meetings.

But while the year was a somewhat tumultuous one for council members, for other township organizations it was a time of growth.

In January, one of the mayor's task forces became a full-fledged organization, and it worked hard for the last 12 months to establish a place for itself in the community.

Throughout the year, the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance strove to raise awareness and push for improvements for cyclists and walkers throughout the township.

The group scheduled several walks to draw attention to dangerous areas in the township, including the Alexander Road S-curve and train station area along Princeton-Hightstown Road.

Shortly after the group's final walk of the year — which took place at the Village Shoppes on Clarksville Road — a serious pedestrian accident occurred at the very spot members had attempted to highlight as a dangerous area.

That incident in particular helped add teeth to the new group's mission, and it is continuing to work with the township and state to make West Windsor a safer place for cyclists and pedestrians.

The West Windsor Arts Council — an outgrowth of another of Mayor Hsueh's task forces — also solidified its place in the community this year.

In September, the council signed a memorandum of understanding with the arts council that serves as a preliminary agreement under which the township designated the former Princeton Junction firehouse on Alexander Road as an arts center.

Under the agreement, the township retains ownership of the 7,200-square-foot firehouse and the arts council enters a long-term lease agreement of at least 10 years.

The arts council had been hoping to make the firehouse its home for more than three years, but has instead been relying on a small pavilion area in Nassau Park shopping center.

As it waits to take occupancy of the building, the group will continue to expand its programs, according to Executive Director Eduardo Garcia.

Looking toward 2007, Mayor Hsueh said the township will likely wrap up a number of projects it started in 2006.

According to the mayor, cleanup of Grovers Mill Pond — site of the famous "War of the Worlds" broadcast — will continue in preparation for the 70th anniversary celebration in 2008.

In addition, he said, work on the Alexander Road bridge will continue in 2007, and construction will begin on expanding the West Windsor Senior Center.

The mayor also said he hopes to see the pending skate and dog park — which are now under construction — completed sometime next year.

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