

WEST WINDSOR: Early end to Planning Board's redevelopment review

By Kristine Snodgrass, Staff Writer
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WEST WINDSOR — The Planning Board completed its review of the redevelopment plan for the train station area Thursday night, well ahead of the end its 45-day review period.

It unanimously passed a resolution to send its report of recommendations to Township Council, just 17 days after receiving the plan. The recommendations will be incorporated, at the discretion of council, into an ordinance on the redevelopment plan, said Township Attorney Mike Herbert.

Council President Charlie Morgan, who attended the meeting, said he was “shocked” that the board voted to complete its review process four weeks before its deadline, while denying several community groups the opportunity to provide input.

The board also neglected to “de-politicize the process” and contribute its planning expertise to the redevelopment plan, he said. “They basically passed the buck right back to council, and it’s very unfortunate,” he said.

In reaction to the vote, Councilwoman Linda Geezers said the council will “take a very close look” at the board’s recommendations, and allow for further feedback from community groups.

“We’re definitely moving forward on bringing closure to this stage of the planning process,” she said. “It’s time to put the final touches on the plan and take a vote.”

Planning Board Chairman Marvin Gardner said Friday that the board went into “significant detail” in reviewing the plan. The board held three meetings on the plan, and corresponded via email between meetings.

“No one can suggest we just skimmed over it,” he said. “We finished it in an expeditious manner.”

He also urged the Township Council to work quickly to approve the plan, and to begin working with state agencies to establish funding sources.

At the meeting, the Planning Board went through a 16-page report compiled by attorney Gerry Muller of suggestions that had been discussed both at meetings and through e-mail, debating and voting on issues.

A lengthy discussion was held on bike lanes in the redevelopment area. In an area where the plan calls for “multi-use trail” for bikers, Planning Board member Diane Ciccone urged for bike lanes on the roadway, alongside parked cars.

However, traffic consultant Gary Davies said that bike lanes alongside parked cars are

a safety hazard, as bikes can be forced into the traffic when drivers open their doors.

Ms. Ciccone, a biker herself, said the plan should make it as easy as possible for bikers to get to their destinations, not create a path that would require bikers to get on and off the road.

"I mean, it's done all over the world, I don't understand why it can't be done here," she said.

However, Mr. Gardner reminded the board that it is under a 45-day time limit to review the plan, according to state statute.

"Maybe we've gone far beyond what is required by us," Mr. Gardner said, adding, "If they (council) haven't gone into this issue in that detail, I don't know if it's appropriate for us."

The board agreed to include a general statement in the plan that bicycle lanes would be incorporated into the plan wherever practical.

Mr. Morgan called this refusal to go into detail is "unprofessional."

Ken Carlson, president of the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance, said the group was "very frustrated" with this result. It had sent two letters to the Planning Board in the past week, giving its own recommendations on the redevelopment plan, which it said lacked sufficient detail on bicycle access.

"The Planning Board has really missed a big opportunity to set bicycle pedestrian guidelines for the redevelopment area," he said.

Mr. Gardner said Friday he was surprised by this response, and felt that the board had spent considerable time addressing the issue. Any further concerns they have should be addressed to council, he said.

"They're directing their attention at the wrong body," he said.

Near the end of the meeting, after Mr. Gardner declared official review of the plan complete, Planning Board member Martin Rosen again questioned the controversial housing element of the plan, and if it would encourage developers.

The plan calls for a 350 housing units in District 1, the core of the redevelopment area. A developer could negotiate for more housing units, based on amenities offered to the township, according to the plan.

The land is owned by Intercap Holdings, which has filed a builder's remedy lawsuit against the township.

Mr. Gardner questioned township planner John Madden, asking if, in his professional opinion, the housing figure would contribute to a vibrant, viable town center environment.

In response, he said, "350 is, in my opinion, a very healthy density," adding that it would nearly double the current highest housing density in town.

Mr. Gardner added that, as discussed at the last meeting, other factors add to vibrancy in a town center, including diverse retail and community uses such as a farmers market.

However, Mr. Madden declined to say the housing figure would "financially motivate" a developer.

"If the question is, 'Is it going to happen?' I can't answer that question," he said.

Mr. Morgan, speaking during public comment before the resolution was passed, said he was concerned the housing number was possibly not financially viable.

"It's the most significant remaining issue you've got, and I worry about it," he said.

Also at the meeting, the Planning Board recommended that a provision in the plan that gave two zoning options to the owner of district one be deleted. At last week's meeting, Mr. Gardner said the provision by council gave "preferential treatment" the current landowner, Intercap Holdings.

It left open indefinitely the option to either retain its current research, office, or manufacturing zoning, or comply with the mixed-use residential zoning in the plan.

"I wasn't quite certain that this type of dual zoning was appropriate in furtherance of the plan," Mr. Gardner said.

The board also discussed a request by the Parking Authority to increase the permitted height limit on parking garages from four stories to five.

After some discussion, Planning Board member and council Vice President Heidi Kleinman reminded the board of the time spent on the issue at the council level, talking to residents who didn't want high garages.

"Even four stories was a very difficult task," she said.

Planning Board member Larry Rubenstein said parking at the train station is a "paramount" problem in the township that needs to be solved with redevelopment, even if it means adding another story to the parking garages.

"Ultimately, solving a problem 90 percent doesn't solve a problem," he said. However, the board agreed to leave the height of the garages as in the plan, with a suggestion to increase the footprint of the buildings if necessary to increase parking.

Mr. Gardner pointed out the board had received the information from the authority that day, and the judgment should remain between the council and the authority because they have spent significant time working on the issue.

"It's really unfair to call on Planning Board members to make these decisions tonight," he said.