



Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association In the News



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April 29, 2007

Hour

Public to deliberate city Master Plan revamp

By [ROBERT KOCH](#)
Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — The first overhaul of Norwalk's Master Plan of Conservation and Development in 16 years is nearing completion, and the public may weigh in during a public hearing before the Planning Commission May 9.

"This plan is what guides the zoning regulations and the developments that are being done in the city," Walter O. Briggs, Planning Commission chairman. "It sets up all of the goals and aspirations for the city of Norwalk for the next 10-year span. It talks about what we need to do to improve our infrastructure, and hopefully points us in the direction we should be developing the city."

A municipality's master plan guides zoning regulations. State law requires that municipalities update the master plans every 10 years. Norwalk's new plan is several years overdue.

The public hearing on the draft "City of Norwalk Plan of Conservation & Development" is scheduled for 7 p.m. Wednesday, May 9, in the Common Council chambers of City Hall, 125 East Ave.

In September, the Common Council approved paying consultant Chan Krieger & Associates \$82,126 to assemble the new master plan. An electric version of the resulting draft plan recently has been posted on the Department of Planning and Zoning Web site at <http://www.norwalkct.org/CityDept/planzon.asp>

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the Department of Planning and Zoning web site at <http://www.norwalk.org/citydept/planzoning.asp>. Mayor Richard A. Moccia said he has received a copy of the draft plan but has yet to sit down with Planning and Zoning Director Michael B. Greene to review it.

"I want to sit down with Mike and go over specific areas," Moccia said. "I know they worked long and hard enough on it, so I want to give it due diligence."

The draft plan, dated April 2007 and 58 pages in length, addresses economic growth, environment and infrastructure, open space and recreation, community and cultural facilities, transportation, and governance, zoning and urban design. The section titled implementation remains incomplete.

"By directing new development to appropriate locations, the city can still offer places for new residents to live," reads part of the introduction. "With proper planning for dense, mixed-use development in existing transportation corridors, future public transit can be effectively introduced as the population grows, with adversely impacting existing neighborhoods and natural resources."

The section on governance, zoning and urban design recommends against allowing buildings that "have the effect of 'walling off' the waterfront. Other recommendations in that section: Strengthen the character of neighborhoods and commercial areas, improve architectural design quality, design streets for people as well as vehicles, 'green' Norwalk through the care and preservation of trees, and re-use historic and architecturally significant structures "where economically feasible."

Greene said the new plan focuses toward the core of the city.

"It's that of balancing development with the protection of the neighborhoods, and also balancing development vs. environmental concerns we have about some of the impacts of development," Greene said. "It's a heavier concentration on the redevelopment of the urban core."

While the new master plan is overdue, the existing plan is not entirely outdated. That plan, titled the "Plan for Development for the City of Norwalk 1990 to 2000," has been updated over the years by the addition of master plans, such as the Mid-Harbor Planning Study.

"For the most part, we're staying the course," said Dorothy S. Wilson, senior planner in the city's Department of Planning and Zoning, of the draft new plan. But the new plan "updates, because of certain things we've accomplished. The Maritime Yards project was built, and various projects have been built. We're seeing things moving forward. But I do think this plan goes back and revisits some of the things, gets a little more specificity (such as) efficient traffic flow and historic preservation."

In working to update the city's master plan, the Planning Commission has invited input from residents, neighborhood associations and urban planning consultants such as Chan Krieger & Associates of Cambridge, Mass., have been working on the plan update.

Chan Krieger was hired by the city under Mayor Alex Knopp to draft the Mid-Harbor Planning and the S Norwalk Planning studies. Knopp considered those areas, as well as the Main & Westport Avenue Corridor parts of the city susceptible to development pressures and thus deserving special attention through mini master plans.

Laurel Lindstrom, president of the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association, which produced its own master plan, said she planned to review the draft master plan over the weekend.

"I think this is a good time for the public to review it and make sure that whatever they feel should be in there is in there." Lindstrom said.

Briggs said the Planning Commission will hold two public hearings on the draft plan. From there, the plan goes to the Common Council's Planning Committee and the full council for action. The mayor will sign the document. The plan also has been sent to South Western Regional Planning Association, Briggs said.

April 26, 2007

Hour

Council, public to face off on park golf plan

By ROBERT KOCH
Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — The Common Council's Recreation, Parks & Cultural Affairs Committee plans to hold a public hearing May 16 on a miniature golf proposed for Veterans Memorial Park.

Opponents of the proposal label the golf course, which is slated for a portion of the 35-acre park off Sea Avenue, commercialization. Plan backers have called that criticism unfair and urged detractors to wait for a formal plan with details of the course to be released.

"We'll have a public hearing," parks committee Chairman Fred A. Bondi said Wednesday. "It's pretty funny that they're opposed to something that they don't even know what it's about. We're not going to put something (at Veterans Park) that's distasteful.

If we're going to put something there, it's going to be nice and complementary to the park."

With a plan for the golf course anticipated to be presented shortly, Bondi and Director of Recreation and Parks Michael A. Moccia are setting up a public hearing before the parks committee on the evening of May 16.

Under the proposal, Jerry Petrini, owner of My Three Sons Family Fun Center on Wall Street, would build a miniature golf course on 1.5 acres on the east side of the park between the restrooms and the baseball area.

The area is now unused save for a service road. Petrini would operate the course under a lease with the city. Petrini could not be reached for comment Wednesday afternoon. Moccia anticipates that Petrini will have a detailed plan for the golf course ready by May 16. Moccia said the public hearing that evening will be "for Veterans Park."

Moccia has said the proposed golf course is part of the city's long-range plan to make Veterans Memorial Park family friendly. Addressing charges that the miniature golf course would "commercialize" the park, Moccia said that already occurs. Moccia pointed to the concession stand operated by Stew Leonard's at Cali Pasture Beach. The city and private entities should work together to make parks self-sustaining without resorting to "over-commercialization," according to Moccia.

"You need to do it tactfully and tastefully. It's time we start looking at partnerships, because it's going to decrease taxpayers' (contributions). It's going to bring people there for a reason. That's going to reduce the problems that are in the park. It's going to bring families into the park," Moccia said.

Opponents of the proposed golf course, meanwhile, are gathering signatures against the miniature golf

course proposal. Vantage Point Condominium Association launched a petition in February.

More recently, the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association has posted in local shops and delicatessen a petition titled "To Stop City from Commercializing Vet's Park With Proposed Miniature Golf Course and Amphitheatre."

About 200 people have signed it, according to association president Laurel Lindstrom. "We opposed the park's current plan for a miniature golf course, batting cages and amphitheater, because such large-scale permanent facilities will negatively impact the character of the park and nearby neighborhoods," Lindstrom said. "This is a step that we don't want to go down this road."

Art Santella, a lifelong Seaview Avenue resident, said he also is collecting signatures against the proposed miniature golf course. He said the course would commercialize the park, reduce residents' property values and quality of life and be disrespectful to veterans to whom the park is dedicated.

"There's a memorial for the dead of 9/11. There's a memorial there for the veterans that died in foreign wars. There's a monument there for veterans," Santella said. "What are they going to do, fly the flag at half-mast under the golf course?"

"We're talking not only about a miniature golf course, but five attached batting cages," Santella said. "It's a quality-of-life issue for us and a property value issue. It's not right to put this stuff in a memorial park."

March 28, 2007

Hour - editorial

Time to deep-six miniature golf plans for park

The cat's out of the bag, thanks to some alert East Norwalk residents, and now we are awaiting a public hearing on a proposal to allow a commercial miniature golf course in Veterans Park.

We expressed our opposition to the proposal in this space once the word was out and now we reiterate the strongest terms.

Allowing this would be the proverbial camel's nose under the tent. A miniature golf course no doubt soon would be followed by batting cages and a talked-about amphitheater. We were under the impression that if an amphitheater were to be built anywhere, it would be in Oyster Shell Park, north of the Maritime Aquarium.

What is disturbing is apparently the preliminary plans for the golf course already have been reviewed by Planning Commission and the Common Council's Recreation and Parks Committee.

Why was this allowed to progress this far under the radar? Again, we admit we may have been asleep at the switch, but now we're focused on opposing it.

Veterans Park — old-timers will remember when it was called Duffy Field — was a rough mixture of fill and clamshells in a salt marsh that was filled in to create the park.

Over the years, it has been improved and increased regulation over its use has made it a friendly venue for families. It is host to several sports, including baseball, soccer and cricket, just to mention a few.

The boating public is well-served by its launching ramps at the northern end of the park. It is the site of the annual Oyster Festival, admittedly a great attraction that brings thousands of visitors to the city. The downside of the festival is the beating the park takes during the fest — fortunately, each year somehow it is restored to its original condition. Just because the city has a record of ignoring deed limitations on park land is no reason to add to that record.

It has taken several years to restore Mathews Park, the former site of the police station and the public works garage, and that's an unfinished task — it will be until the old police station is razed.

We have always extolled Norwalk's harbor as one of the best and safest on this side of Long Island Sound. The view of the harbor and out to the islands at its entrance remain a pleasant and irreplaceable vista.

Proponents of the miniature golf course are trying to sell it as an attraction for families. It might be true that families would visit in the daytime, but late hours in the evening — requiring extensive lighting — belie their contention. Quite simply, the area doesn't need more traffic, filled as it is with a number of bars and restaurants.

"Open space" is the buzzword these days, and it's not always easy to come by. Let's not trash this gem in the center of the city at the harbor's edge.

March 27, 2007

Hour - Another View OpEd

Laurel Lindstrom Theodore J. van de Kamp and Nancy Firooznia

City urged to rethink golf course at Vets Park

We are writing to express our serious concerns about the commercialization of Veterans Memorial Park with the planned 36-hole miniature golf course, batting cages and construction of an amphitheater.

The miniature golf course, which could be voted on by the Common Council before the summer, is a bad idea for a number of reasons. The problems of visual impact, visibility to the harbor, and lack of cohesive conflict of activities within the park, are reasons enough to be concerned. And there are more.

It is being touted as a way to keep out "troublemakers." While it's true that a few years back, residents around the park had to live with drug dealing, drag races, underage drinking, noise, shootings, criminal activity and generally disruptive behavior, things have changed. To the city's credit, it did a great job eliminating this problem from the park with tollgates, speed bumps, earlier park closings, and more effective enforcement.

Now we see this progress being reversed by what can only, at best, be called an ill-conceived project. The defenders of the miniature golf course promote it as a magnet for families that will improve the environment of the park and provide additional revenue for its upkeep. With all due respect, this reflects a wishful-thought mindset that conveniently side-steps some serious potential problems.

Consider:

The golfers — The course will be open until 10 p.m. during the week and reportedly until 11 p.m. on

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the general — The course will be open until 10 p.m. during the week and reportedly until 11 p.m. on weekends. We question if the dominant players will be families during these evening hours. The more likely groups will be unsupervised teenagers or possibly customers from the SoNo bars and pubs who want to play a round or two after a few drinks. In other words, it's a new hangout.

Traffic — In an already dense area with its restaurants, bars, and shops, the golf course can only add to the density and increase traffic problems.

Increased expenditures for city — With a commercial venture that attracts crowds, the city will have to consider additional security in the park and surrounding the park, pressuring an already overextended police force. And, in the case of an injury, the majority of the liability would fall back on the city since this is still city property and the vendor's insurance liability is minimal (as stated in the city's request for proposal).

Off-season vandalism — Since the course will only be open in the summer months, who is going to bear the cost to watch over the facility in the off-season to avoid vandalism and misuse of the facility?

"Slippery Slope" precedent — In a city where we are trying to preserve our open spaces for the enjoyment of local residents, this move towards commercialization sets a dangerous precedent for the future. Already, there are plans in the works to build an amphitheater in the park for concerts and other events. We find it amazing that this idea would even be given a minute's notice given the city's experience with the Oyster Festival; namely; massive traffic jams, noise, increased demands on the police department, costly repairs to damaged park land, and lack of profitability. Just imagine a mini-Oyster Festival every summer weekend.

Lack of transparency — Perhaps most important is the "under the radar" nature of how this project moved forward. The residents and taxpayers in the East Norwalk neighborhoods around the park will be those who bear the brunt of whatever impact this project has — yet there was no attempt at getting the public involved in the process, or even obtaining critical market analysis to show that a project like this was appropriate. By the time citizens and taxpayers knew anything about what was happening to "their" park, the preliminary design for the miniature golf course had been reviewed by the council's Recreation and Parks Committee and by the Planning Commission. We were told that the revised design will be ready for final review within a month and then would go to the Common Council for a vote soon after. The decision had already been made.

It took an editorial in *The Hour* and perseverance by the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association to bring this out into the open. Only then was there an offer to hold a public hearing, which is yet to be scheduled. We are very interested in hearing from other concerned citizens and from members of the council about their views on this project. Please contact us. We hope that at the very least the city would hold a public hearing to listen to what citizens have to say about what the city does with public space.

Laurel Lindstrom Theodore J. van de Kamp and Nancy Firooznia are residents of Norwalk.

March 15, 2007

Norwalk Citizen-News

Residents Call for Hearing on Veterans Park Proposal

[By Lauren Garrison](#)
Norwalk Citizen

ENNA in the News

The Department of Recreation and Parks' proposal to build a 36-hole miniature golf course and a five-batting cage at Veterans Memorial Park is encountering opposition from neighborhood groups.

Richard Akin, the president of the Vantage Point Association Board of Directors, has gathered 30 signatures from residents of the Vantage Point condominiums, which are located on Seaview Avenue adjacent to the park, in opposition to the planned construction. Akin has presented the signatures to various city officials asking for a public hearing to be conducted on the matter. In a telephone interview, Akin acknowledged "In some ways, it's a little premature because we don't know exactly what they're going to do, but that's what we want the hearing."

He explained, "From all indications, it's going to be sort of a little mini-amusement park over there, and it's pretty much looking right at it. It's right across the water from us. Any noise over there would bounce off the water right onto our apartments. Obviously, this can be not only something we don't want to look at or be near, but it also can affect the value of our apartments."

Arthur Santella, who is also a resident of Seaview Avenue, opposes the proposed construction for a different reason: its environmental impact. In an e-mail, Santella explained that the park is "home to many species of wildfowl and wildlife. It is surrounded on three sides by tidal marsh and is itself still covered by water during large storms. It is also a major route and stopover for the Atlantic Migrating Bird Flyway." In Santella's opinion, "The damage that this [construction] will do to the flora and fauna of this park is incredible."

Recreation and Parks Director Michael Moccia, who initiated the proposal, said the course and batting cage would cover only an acre and a half of the park's 35 acres. "It would be completely landscaped, with no obstructions for losing views. There would be no heavy lighting," he said. "We're looking to bring a wholesome family attraction to the park."

He added, "We're trying to come up with innovative ways to bring in revenues for the department to offset expenditures."

According to Moccia, the city put out a request for proposals and is currently entertaining one from My Three Sons, the only bidder who "met all our criteria." The RFP called for proposals from "experienced miniature golf developers for the design, development, construction, operation and maintenance of a 36-hole Nautical Themed miniature golf course along with five batting cages on a 1.25 acre tract of land at Veterans Park owned by the City. The anticipated lease term for the land lease for the new miniature golf course would be for ten years with an option for an additional ten years."

Also according to the RFP, the bidder's financial soundness/stability; proposed method of operation, including proposed hours of operation; experience with either miniature golf courses or sport facilities establishments in general; proposed marketing plan; commitment to implementing and supporting long-term, quality services; and proposed lease fee, financial arrangement, capital plan and term of lease will be evaluated.

Separate from the golf course and batting cage, the city plans to increase the amount of athletic field space in the park and turn softball fields into Little League fields, Moccia said.

As for the public hearing the Vantage Point residents are requesting, Common Council members Nicholas Kydes and Fred Bondi, who both represent District C, in which the condominiums are located, said that it is likely a hearing will not be conducted until June or July.

Kydes explained that My Three Sons must first submit a coastal area management application and get approval for the proposed project. My Three Sons would then draw up a preliminary plan and submit it to the city.

the Planning Committee. At that point, said Kydes, conducting a public hearing would be appropriate.

February 25, 2007

Hour

Condo residents tee off versus golf course plan

By [ROBERT KOCH](#)

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — Residents of Vantage Point condominiums on Seaview Avenue have taken aim at a miniat golf course proposed by the city's Department of Recreation and Parks and a Norwalk business owner for Veterans Memorial Park.

"We need 25 signatures to get a city hearing and protest the development," reads the petition circulate Richard Akin, president of the Vantage Point Association board of directors "If you agree that we don't v this miniature golf course, please fill out this form and put it in my newspaper cubby."

Akin said about 30 residents signed the petition forms and returned them to the newspaper delivery area the condominium complex. He brought the petition to City Hall. Akin said residents fear that the miniat golf course will bring noise, light and traffic to the neighborhood and become a "little amusement park.

"This actually has the potential to affect the value of our building," Akin said.

Ted Van De Kamp, also on the Vantage Point board of directors, said the miniature golf course stands to commercialize the park.

"The idea of a park for me is a refuge from noise," he said.

The petition comes a month after Director of Recreation and Parks Michael Mocciae explained the mini golf concept to Planning commissioners. The proposal calls for building a 36-hole course on 1.5 acres on east side of the park between the restrooms and the baseball area. The area is currently unused save for service road.

Jerry Petrini, owner of My Three Sons Family Fun Center on Wall Street, would operate the course under a lease with the city.

Mocciae characterizes the condominium residents' opposition to the golf course as premature and off-b. He asks what petitioners can oppose, given that no formal plan has been submitted to the city yet.

Mocciae said the project is in keeping with the city's long-range plan to make Veterans Memorial Park a family friendly park. Capital improvements include repairing the boat launching ramp, constructing a fishing pier, expanding the city marina, installing pedestrian lighting, refurbishing the restrooms, building a small boat storage area, refurbishing entry gangways to marina, and conducting a design study for a possible amphitheater.

The parks director said the miniature golf course will be no more disruptive than softball, baseball and other activities now held at the 35-acre park.

"It's bringing people there for a structured activity for families, and that's what we want there: Families. I'm going to bring people to the park, it's going to bring revenue to the park," Mocciaie said. "Once you tell people you're not going to block their view, it's not going to be Coney Island, and you're not lighting up living rooms, and it's not adding traffic, what's the downside?"

Fred A. Bondi, chairman of the Common Council's Recreation, Parks & Cultural Affairs Committee, said the committee will hold a public hearing when a plan is brought forward for a golf course. Like the parks director, Bondi characterizes the golf course as an improvement.

"Nothing is going to be over 12 to 14 feet (tall). It's going to be a nice layout. It's going to be professionally done," Bondi said. It would be "probably 600 or 800 yards away (from Vantage Point). Plus it's on the opposite side of the water. There's a basin in between them."

Laurel Lindstrom, president of the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association, said the association had concerns that a miniature golf course proposal was a "done deal" and that the public had been left out of the process. Neighborhood association board members brought their questions to Mocciaie during a meeting on Jan. 31. For example, does the golf course pose potential risks or disadvantages to the city and neighborhood? The answer: "None. City can end lease and require the vendor to return the park to its original state," according to minutes of the Jan. 31 meeting posted on the ENNA Web site.

Lindstrom said the neighborhood association hasn't taken a position on the proposed golf course. She said the association's goal is to inform the public about issues affecting residents and encourage discussion. In such cases, the association has encouraged residents to speak with their council representatives, she said.

"If (Bondi) is going to hold a public hearing, that's a good thing," Lindstrom said. And the golf course "still has to be approved by the council."

Because the area is a park, the golf course does not require site-plan approval by the city's Zoning Commission. It does, however, require input from the Planning Commission. After Mocciaie's presentation last month, Planning Commission Chairman Walter O. Briggs said commissioners are looking favorably on the proposal, but added "we're waiting to see a better description of it."

Akin, meanwhile, stands by his request for a public hearing. He said he picked up his petition from the planning department and plans to give it to the council president.

February 6, 2007

Hour

Lawmakers aim at giving local residents relief from I-95 traffic noise

By [ROBERT KOCH](#)

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — Local lawmakers hope to lessen the roar of cars and trucks for residents living along or near Interstate 95 by building additional sound barriers.

ENNA in the News

On Monday, the Transportation Committee of the General Assembly held public hearings on several bills aimed at giving residents relief from traffic noise along the busy interstate.

Under a bill introduced by state Sens. Bob Duff, D-25, and Andrew J. McDonald, D-27, the state Department of Transportation would be required to install sound barriers along Fairfield County state highways to "provide relief from traffic noise and other attendant issues." Duff said the bill is aimed at Interstate 95.

"Over the past several years, I have had constituents contact me on an almost monthly basis to share with me the fact that the noise from neighboring highways has only increased with the time they have spent on property owners," wrote Duff in testimony submitted to the Transportation Committee. "This legislation does not promise to be a cure-all for the problems associated with living near a major highway; rather, it provides a measure of relief to area residents."

Duff said that up until nearly two decades ago, the transportation department constructed sound barriers along Interstate 95. He described their placement as haphazard and their number as too few. Duff said the bill is intended to "jump start" the department into building additional sound barriers.

For now, the transportation department is awaiting lawmakers' response to the bill.

"The DOT is neutral on that bill. It's up to the General Assembly to decide whether to approve the legislation and identify a funding source," said Judd Everhart, spokesman for the department.

The department hasn't installed new sound barriers along Interstate 95 in more than a decade, according to local lawmakers. Under existing policy, the department does not install new barriers unless a new road is built, or if an existing barrier is damaged or destroyed, said House Minority Leader Lawrence F. Cafero Jr. 142. Cafero said he has been working with the transportation department to change that.

"It seems like the barriers end where Darien starts, and they haven't been built since the early 1990s," Cafero said. "We're talking about noise pollution and air pollution. We have to prioritize, and (funding) could come under our environmental package with regard to clean air."

Cafero said he welcomes the legislation aimed at building more sound barriers.

Under a separate bill, introduced by state Rep. Christopher R. Perone, D-137, the transportation department would be required to construct Type 2 noise barriers — the large wooden partitions — along "any portion of a highway that is adjacent to a residential community."

Perone, a member of the Transportation Committee, said the federal government withdrew funding for sound-barrier construction in the early 1990s, and the state never put aside money to continue the program. "Traffic and the need for more barriers has increased since then, he said.

"Because there's been so much development, there's so much congestion on the roads," Perone said. "We need to bite the bullet and make it happen. The issue is not going to resolve itself. Traffic is not going to get any quieter."

Perone said a handful of people spoke to the committee at the public hearing Monday morning. The committee accepted written testimony from many others, including Bruce J. Baldwin of Middlesex Condominium Association in Darien.

Arianne and Michael Schuck, who live on Keeler Avenue in Norwalk, lent their support to the bill co-

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sponsored by Durr and McDonald. They cited noise, air pollution, tire hazards and a tractor-trailer accident along Interstate 95 in September 2003 as reasons to build more sound barriers.

Sound barriers are needed along both sides of Interstate 95 between East Avenue and Strawberry Hill Avenue, according to Laurel Lindstrom, president of the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association.

"Driving along this stretch of the interstate, one sees several homes on both sides in close proximity to the highway," Lindstrom wrote. "A sound barrier is needed along both sides of the I-95 ... construction of a sound barrier on one side and not the other could worsen the situation for the side that doesn't receive the barrier because the sound is likely to be magnified."

Perone would like to see sound barriers installed along that stretch of the highway as part of the state's reconstruction of Exit 16. He welcomed the written statements from Lindstrom and other residents.

"The written testimony people take seriously," Perone said.

January 10, 2007

Hour

Police charge local in 'Bambi-napping'

By [PATRICK R. LINSEY](#) and [MAX HADLER](#)

Hour Staff Writers

NORWALK — The post-holiday calm on Winfield Court was shattered Monday night on word of a kidnap

It was around 8:30 p.m. when Deb Wilberg's telephone began to ring. It happened fast, her neighbors said — the unwitting victim jammed into a big red car and driven away.

The police quickly arrived and Wilberg delivered the grim news. Her illuminated reindeer lawn ornament disappeared, and, with it, her holiday cheer.

But thanks to witness statements, police said they were able to track the suspect's vehicle — a burgundy Jaguar with vanity plates.

Police said they found the car parked nearby at the home of Ivoni Stefanidis. A small army of holiday lawn ornaments was guarding her door.

"The reindeer was already outside and part of the outdoor array," said Lt. Paul Resnick Tuesday. "Officer [interviewed her about the reindeer and her comment was, 'If the person thinks it's theirs, they can have

An officer was dispatched to summon Wilberg.

"He's like 'Ma'am, you're going to have to come and identify Bambi for me,'" Wilberg said. Identification established by a little bit of tape applied by Wilberg's husband to protect Bambi's electrical cord, police said.

Officers intended to give Stefanidis a misdemeanor summons, Resnick said, "but she became loud and verbally abusive." Stefanidis was placed under arrest and charged with sixth-degree larceny and simple trespass.

Speaking to The Hour from her home Tuesday evening, Stefanidis claimed custody of all reindeer and snowmen on her property.

"It's crazy," she said, gesturing to her collection. "Look at this. Do you think I have a need to steal?"

As for Wilberg, her reunion with Bambi was a brief one. She said the reindeer was whisked to the police station where it awaits a hearing on Jan. 18.

Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association President Laurel Lindstrom said she is "glad that hopefully (th situation has) come to a conclusion."

"We are a fairly friendly neighborhood," Lindstrom said. "We are safe for the most part — even for lawn ornaments."

Staff writer [Patrick R. Linsey](mailto:plinsey@thehour.com) can be reached via e-mail at plinsey@thehour.com.

January 10, 2007

Hour

Council OKs commission nominees

By [ROBERT KOCH](#)

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — Three Democrats joined five Republicans Tuesday night in approving Republican Mayor Richard A. Moccia's nomination of four newcomers to the Norwalk Historical Commission.

On an 8-6 vote, the Common Council approved the appointment of Eric Chandler, Charles Lashley, David Park and Charles L. Yost to the commission, which has become the front line of a battle between preservationists and the Moccia administration.

The approval came following pleas by the public and several commissioners to instead retain Ralph Bloch, Elizabeth Booth, Marija Bryant and Carol Ann Falasca, whose terms on the commission expired Dec. 31. Council members weighed in on the personalities and the process.

"It is the prerogative of the sitting mayor to (put forward appointees). It is not a perfect process," said Republican Councilman Douglas E. Hempstead, before praising the departing commissioners. "Thank you all of these four people, who've given their blood, their time ... Please stay involved."

The appointments come amid division between the Moccia and the Historical Commission over the latter's authority, as outlined in the City Charter. Moccia and the city attorneys believe the commission has

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overstepped its mandate by invoking the city's 90-day demolition delay, and delving into redevelopment of private property. Commissioners, also citing the charter, say it's their duty to protect the city's history.

On Tuesday night, Historical Commissioner Gail Wall, traced the nomination of four new commissioners to a dispute between preservationists and The Norwalk Inn & Conference Center, which wants to raze the adjacent Grumman-St. John House to expand. Wall, a Republican, accused the Moccia administration of having a "political agenda."

"His conflicts of interest are many regarding historic preservation. The Norwalk Inn is the unofficial home of Republican conventions," said Wall before Moccia intervened.

Said Moccia: "I think it's improper to start implying my integrity and any conflicts of interest. ... I have issues that could raise. I'm not going to do that. I'm trying to be polite."

Others speaking during the public participation portion of the meeting praised the work of Booth, Bryan Falasca and Bloom, who is recognized as the city historian. They characterized their replacement as a move that would leave the commission with largely new and inexperienced members.

"As chairman of this commission, please give me my four commissioners back!" said Marilyn C. Robinson, Historical Commission chairwoman. "I need them, we need them, the city needs them. They're hardworking and dedicated. They're well-qualified."

Democratic Councilman Matthew T. Miklave urged the council to require that one council meeting transpire between the time a mayor puts forward appointments and the council votes on them. That, and requiring nominees to appear for the appropriate council subcommittee, will fix the process, he said.

"The most important role the council has is the role of oversight," Miklave said. "I believe the council has not exercised its role of oversight as it should. ... I believe the process needs to be fixed."

A move by Democrat William M. Krummel, the council's representative on the Historical Commission, to table the four appointments pending further review failed.

Voting for the four nominees were Republicans Hempstead, Joanne T. Romano, Richard A. McQuaid, Nicholas D. Kydes and Kelly L. Straniti. Three Democrats, council President Michael W. Coffey, Herbert A. Grant and Fred A. Bondi also backed Moccia's nominees.

Voting no were Democrats Krummel, Miklave, Carvin J. Hilliard, Kevin M. Poruban, Phyllis Y. Bolden and L. Briggs. Democrat Douglas W. Sutton was absent.

Yost, a financial planner, is a former councilman, former Planning commissioner and former Board of Estir and Taxation member. Lashley is a data manager. Chandler, an insurance title researcher, has been involved in Revolutionary War re-enactment. Park, recently retired, sits on the board of directors of the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association, according to their resumes.

The four new commissioners also received their endorsements.

"I've known Eric (Chandler) for years," Straniti said. "We have one thing we have in common. He's a Revolutionary War buff. I'm a Civil War buff."

Said Hempstead: "Kudos to Mr. Yost for his involvement in the community. ... Mr. Yost and I had discussed about conditions in The Norwalk Museum. He's a dedicated, lifelong Norwalker."

about conditions in the Norwalk Museum. He's a dedicated, inspiring Norwaker.

December 23, 2006

Hour

Master Plan revisions enter final lap

By [ROBERT KOCH](#)

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — The overdue revision of Norwalk's Master Plan of Conservation and Development — the city blueprint for zoning regulations — is entering its final lap.

Chan Krieger & Associates, the Cambridge, Mass.-based planning firm hired by the city to assemble Norwalk's new "master plan" met last week with department heads, school officials, members of the Planning Commission, as well as neighborhood association representatives and Mayor Richard A. Moccia, to solicit input and update the various parties on where they stand in assembling the new plan.

"They had some very, very detailed questions concerning the direction the mayor wants to go, as far as philosophy and what I thought," said Moccia, recapping his discussions with the Chan Krieger planners. They had discussions with other departments. (Residents) are concerned about over development, neighborhood preservation, zoning issues, land conservation, things of that nature."

A municipality's master plan guides zoning regulations. State law requires municipalities to update their master plans every 10 years. The updated master plan is five years overdue.

For several years, the Planning Commission, with input from residents, neighborhood associations and consultants has worked to update the Norwalk's master plan — last revised in 1990. Walter O. Briggs, commission chairman, anticipates the new plan will be more comprehensive than the plan it will replace.

"There is no draft yet," Briggs said Friday. But "I think (the final plan) is going to be very comprehensive in it will (about) 50 pages long. It will give a comprehensive overview of what is needed, what development should be, and how we think development should occur in the city."

Briggs said the Chan Krieger consultants will return to Norwalk in January, or early February, with a more defined document. Planning commissioners will review that document, make corrections or changes as preliminary and later final draft will emerge. The Planning Commission then will schedule two public hearings.

From there, the new master plan will go to the Common Council's Planning Committee, then up to the full council for approval or rejection. Moccia, as mayor, must sign the approved plan.

In September, the Common Council approved paying Chan Krieger & Associates, the firm that prepared Mid-Harbor Planning and the South Norwalk Planning studies, \$82,126 to assemble the new master plan.

Over the last week, Chan Krieger Principal Alan Mountjoy and Senior Planner Kimberly Jones met with city officials and others, as Mountjoy put it, to "get an overall cumulative (idea) of where the city is headed."

"Part of our goal is making this into something that is understandable by the community and is a useful

ENNA in the News

"Part of our goal is making this into something that is understandable by the community and is a useful document in sort of setting the tone for Norwalk," Mountjoy told Planning commissioners Tuesday.

Jones said Chan Krieger are drawing upon three sources of information when assembling the revised master plan: Interviews with city department heads and their "wish lists," current plans and documents, including the 1990 master plan, and planning principles developed by the Planning Commission.

Earlier Tuesday, representatives of several neighborhood associations, including the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association, met with Mountjoy and Jones. The Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association among other neighborhood groups, has submitted its own "mini-master" plans to be incorporated into the larger master plan. The discussion Tuesday touched upon neighborhood uniqueness, zoning regulations and development concerns, according to ENNA President Laurel Lindstrom.

"We emphasized the uniqueness and history of neighborhoods. There are unique neighborhoods throughout Norwalk that need to be protected," Lindstrom said. "We really had a concern about the trend toward overdevelopment and that it doesn't end up destroying neighborhoods."

Mountjoy, speaking to Planning commissioners later Tuesday, acknowledged that issue.

"There were still concerns about small-scale development in neighborhoods," Mountjoy said.

Residents' concerns about overdevelopment have ranged from several-unit condominium development in residential neighborhoods, such as along Stuart Avenue last year, to large projects running in the range of several hundred units, which have been proposed for along commercial corridors.

Moccia, while acknowledging that development concerns will continue, added that the potential for overdevelopment may be limited, given the fact that few large tracts of land remain in the city.

"There are not too many more Norden or Pepperidge sites left, so I think it's going to be more smaller projects in neighborhoods, maybe like we had on Stuart Avenue, that cause concerns," Moccia said.

December 14, 2006

Hour

Locals livid over ongoing area flooding problems

By Harold F. Cobin
Hour Correspondent

NORWALK — a meeting Wednesday night to advise the public on how flooding problems in some areas of the city will be corrected triggered a torrent of criticism against city officials for waiting so long to fix the problems.

Angry homeowners and business owners shouted complaints and pointed fingers at Department of Public Works director Harold Alvord and Mayor Richard A. Moccia, displeased that after facing years of flooded basements and backed up drains, it will be a year or more before many of the proposed solutions can be implemented.

"What do you want us to do in the interim?", Olmstead Place resident Dee Arnone asked Moccia. "We are tired. Enough is enough. I'm tired of repairing my home. I can't sell my house."

ENNA in the News

tired. Enough is enough. I'm tired of repairing my home. I can't sell my house.

"If I could solve your problems tomorrow, I would do it like that," replied Moccia, snapping his fingers.

Moccia added that things were probably going from bad to worse after receiving word earlier that all earmarked funds the Congress put in spending bills were cancelled. Some of the proposed flood control projects were to be funded with earmarked money.

About 60 people (actual count was more than 75) packed a third-floor conference room in City Hall for meeting, which was called by the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association to hear proposals from a consulting firm on how to rectify flooding problems in seven areas of the city.

Alvord barely got through describing the proposal for five of the areas when some members of the audience became hostile, accusing the city of being negligent, incompetent or not caring.

"You did nothing," a man shouted at Alvord. "You waited for the accident to happen. You knew it would happen. God will be on our side."

Moccia urged the audience to appear at upcoming meetings where spending proposals for the city's 2008 operating and capital budgets will be reviewed to voice their desire to see increased funding for correcting flooding problems. He added that funding the proposed corrective actions was a "priority" in mind.

Alvord said all three of his department's vacuum trucks used to clean storm drains and sewer lines are out of service. He said one new truck should be delivered next month, and he will request funds for another one next year.

Alvord said the engineering studies of seven flood locations by the consulting firm Tighe & Bond at a cost of \$120,000 showed a myriad of problems, from insufficient pipe capacity to pipes that are clogged with debris or have collapsed.

Alvord described the problem and proposed corrective action for only five of the seven locations because a resident or business owner was present for two of the locations.

The areas discussed were Buckingham Place/Lockwood Lane, Noah's Lane, Olmstead Place, Fitch Street and Bouton Street.

Residents of North Taylor Avenue and Ivy Place also described flooding problems, although those areas were not included in the Tighe & Bond study.

Alvord said he told Tighe & Bond not to waste time preparing a formal report. He said the information he was providing was based on sitting down with hydrology engineers from the firm and looking at maps of the city's sewer system while they described proposed corrective actions. Alvord said Tighe & Bond will submit a formal report at a later date.

Alvord and Moccia were joined at the front of the room by District A Councilman Herbert Grant, state Representative Chris Perone, D-137, Walter Griggs, chairman of the city's Planning Commission, and Laurel Lindstrom, president of the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association.

Some of the firm's proposals were:

- Buckingham Place/Lockwood Lane - Increase the diameter of the storm water pipe that runs from Norwalk River to Park Hill Avenue to be able to handle a 25-year storm. at a cost of \$3.5 million.

- Noah's Lane - Install a pipe along Noah's Lane Extension and down Noah's Lane to carry storm water to the sewage system on Toilsome Avenue at a cost of \$325,000. Plan would also add additional drains.
- Olmstead Place - Repair storm drain pipe that has probably collapsed. Also, dredge retention pond and expand berm so it catches more storm water. Later repair a culvert that runs from Fitch Street beneath the Metro-North Railroad tracks.
- Bouton Street - Repair stone culvert that runs beneath Metro-North Railroad tracks. It's believed a portion of the culvert has collapsed.
- Meadowbrook Lane - Replace existing drain pipe with larger diameter drain pipe. Also, install a retaining wall to capture more storm water.

December 11, 2006

Advocate

Forum to look at flood issues

Eastern Norwalk sustained damage

By Lauren Kline
Staff Writer

NORWALK — After 9 inches of rain fell in one weekend in August, leaving waterlogged basements, yards and other property damage, the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association plans a forum to look at the causes and possible solutions.

At the meeting, scheduled for 7 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesday in Room A333 at City Hall, Director of Public Works Hal Alvord will discuss recommendations from Tighe and Bond Consulting Engineers, a firm the city hired to examine flood prevention.

Tighe and Bond reviewed seven hard-hit areas in the August flood: Buckingham Place and Lockwood Lane; Olmstead Place, Burlington Court, Meadowbrook Lane, Mary Austin Place, Bouton Street and Noah's Lane. Alvord said. Because of cost, the study was limited to those areas, Alvord said.

Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association President Laurel Lindstrom said she organized the meeting because, of the 42 claims filed with the city after the flood, 20 came from residents in the association. Eleven of the 22 streets listed in the claims are in eastern Norwalk, she said.

"There are probably twice that many streets that experienced flooding but didn't actually submit any claims," Lindstrom said.

Some of the worst damage was on Olmstead Place and Lockwood Lane.

The city's capital budget is due later this month, and she hopes the meeting will provide information about how flooding occurs so residents can make informed requests of city officials who decide how money is spent, Lindstrom said.

"It could be really costly to pay for any of the solutions, but it's better to know up front so you can prioritize and know what kind of choices have to be made," Lindstrom said.

Though none of the seven studies is final, they suggest most areas need pipes installed or larger pipes to

improve capacity, Alvord said. He will not discuss the cost or scope of the work until the analysis is final, said.

December 10, 2006

Hour

Neighborhood group to eye city flooding, drainage problems at meeting

By [PATRICK R. LINSEY](#)

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — As the city hears from a consulting firm on drainage problems, the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association has scheduled a meeting for Wednesday night to discuss flooding in Norwalk

Several months ago, the city commissioned a \$120,000 study from the Tighe & Bond consulting firm to look into flooding problems in seven areas of Norwalk. Public Works Director Harold Alvord will update residents on his office's progress in finding solutions for the hardest hit neighborhoods.

Lawrence Ruttenberg lives in one of those neighborhoods. The lower level of his home has flooded three times in the last year, which he said has cost him \$12,000 in repairs — a sum not covered by his homeowner's insurance.

"I can't afford to live there if this keeps happening," said Ruttenberg, whose house is located on Buckingham Place off of East Avenue. "I've been there since 1953. I was born in that house. I've lived there all my life. I intend to die in that house."

Ruttenberg's house sits near the end of a course of storm drains that flow into the Norwalk River. In periods of heavy rain, water flows out of a storm drain near his house and onto his property, Ruttenberg said.

"As long as it rains over a longer period of time that's OK, but when you get like two inches in an hour, water's gone. We're just flooded," he said.

Alvord said Tighe & Bond has offered its recommendations for solving the flooding problem in the Ruttenberg neighborhood — and the solution is not cheap. Mayor Richard A. Moccia said he will look into next year's capital budget to determine whether "we can put some preliminary money (together) for the planning."

"It may be that we just have to put in much bigger pipes to handle the flow," said Moccia, who will also attend the meeting Wednesday.

ENNA President Laurel Lindstrom hopes collective interest will spur city action.

"Our feeling is there's strength in numbers — especially when it comes to getting things approved on the budget," Lindstrom said. "Now with this meeting, I was able to work with the people on Buckingham (an Olmstead Place)," another neighborhood that has experienced flooding.

Ruttenberg said he never saw flooding on Buckingham Place before 2000 and that the problem has gotten even worse in recent years.

"I'm not an engineer or anything, but the only thing I can really think of is all the development that's going on," he said. "If everything's black top instead of grass, water has got to go somewhere."

on," he said. "If everything's black top instead of grass, water has got to go somewhere.

And while he is frustrated, Ruttenberg said he's not blaming the city — yet.

"I do give the mayor and the council members a lot of credit so far. But now is the time because it's bud time," he said. "This is where it really comes down to are they going to do something?"
The ENNA meeting will be held Wednesday at 7 p.m. in Norwalk City Hall Room A333.

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December 6, 2006

Advocate

Law would limit tag sales to three

By Lauren Klein
Staff Writer

December 6, 2006

NORWALK - After receiving complaints from some residents that neighbors were holding numerous tag sales causing traffic and sign pollution, the city's zoning staff is proposing a regulation that would limit people to three sales a year.

"We do allow tag sales as a customary use," said Mike Greene, director of planning and zoning. "Some people like doing it on a Saturday afternoon. It's social. It's part of what makes a neighborhood a neighborhood."

The concern, however, is that some residents may be running a business on a private property under the guise of a tag sale by buying items and reselling them each week, Greene said.

The planning and zoning staff chose three as a tag-sale limit to accommodate one sale each during spring, summer and fall, Greene said.

Maribeth Becker, head of the Coalition of Norwalk Neighborhood Associations, said she has never encountered anyone with a concern about tag sales in neighborhoods.

Greene said the rule was something his department was doing to prevent any future problems or frustra-

"We're trying to solve the problems before they happen," he said.

Laurel Lindstrom, president of the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association, also said she never heard complaints about too many tag sales but said that allowing each resident three a year seemed sufficient.

"It's interesting that they are proposing this," she said. "From my perspective, I've never had a tag sale, so three seems generous. But for people who have them often there might be a legitimate reason."

The Zoning Committee will discuss the regulation tomorrow. It must then be reviewed by the full Zoning Commission.

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November 29, 2006

Hour

Seligson gets OK to develop West Avenue

By [ROBERT KOCH](#)

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — The Common Council last night gave local developer Stanley M. Seligson his marching orders for redevelopment of West Avenue: Come back to us by mid-March with an acceptable plan and you'll reshape Norwalk's urban spine with new retail, housing and offices.

On Tuesday night, the council approved designating Stanley M. Seligson Properties as master developer of Area B of the city's West Avenue Corridor Redevelopment Plan, and giving Seligson until March 16, 2007 to present the council an acceptable development team and conceptual plan.

If Seligson fails to do so, the city will issue a request for proposals seeking other developers.

Leaving City Hall Tuesday night, Seligson expressed confidence that he will deliver by next March.

"(After) close to 60 meetings, we've listened and changed the plan dramatically — listening to the neighbors and listening to the citizens," Seligson said. "We feel we're using the best planners in the country, and we're in a position with them to be able to address what I'd like to believe are all the needs of the community. Our goal is to make this a very, very special project."

The West Avenue Corridor Redevelopment Plan, drafted by the Redevelopment Agency and approved by the council last June, will serve as a framework for Seligson to work. It allows for up to 350 new residential units, 75,000 square feet of office space and 393,174 square feet of new retail space in the core area.

Seligson left City Hall with Douglas T. Adams, his vice president of development, and planners from Street Works, the urban design firm engaged in West Avenue redevelopment. So far, Seligson said he has presented new concept plans to several neighborhood groups. Aside from the smaller scale, the new plans leave streets more intact and call for several small parking garages rather than a single large one, he said.

What Seligson has come up with so far has won over Gordon F. Tully, a registered architect who vigorously opposed Seligson's earlier designs for the West Avenue area.

"When Seligson Properties and Street-Works presented the current design at a recent meeting of the East Norwalk Neighborhood Association, on which I serve as a board member, the project really took my breath away. Not only had the major problems been resolved, but a wonderful and cohesive design had been created," Tully said. "I strongly support the designation of Stanley M. Seligson Properties as master developer for the West Avenue Corridor Redevelopment project."

On a nearly unanimous vote, the council approved designating Seligson the preferred developer. The vote came after comments by the public — split roughly for and against — and discussion among council members.

Councilman Matthew T. Miklave, chairman of the Planning Committee, gave five reasons to give Seligson the "first crack" at reshaping West Avenue: Seligson owns roughly 60 percent of the land in the redevelopment area, has invested about \$12 million in the project, has demonstrated his development abilities with Lohmann's Plaza and other projects, and has listened to the public.

And, according to Miklave and others, seeking other developers at this point would delay the project.

"Putting this out for a request for proposals will delay the process. This process should move forward as expeditiously as possible," Miklave said. "If we're going to develop West Avenue, we should do so and get on with it. If we're not, we should take the cloud of redevelopment off the property owners and let them get on with the lives and livelihoods."

The potential use of eminent domain, although not at stake Tuesday night, has prompted property owners in the West Avenue area to oppose the redevelopment plan and Seligson's designs for the area.

"What bothers me is people are trying to make plans with my property," said Keal Evans, owner of Europ Auto Center Repair Inc. at 539 West Ave. "Now people are telling me they're going to take my property to make something else. What's going to happen to me?"

On that point, Mayor Richard A. Moccia indicated that property owners will be treated fairly.

"There will be relocation efforts made for people living in the area, so we're not going to be chasing them out of town," Moccia said. "Property owners there have to be treated with respect."

Councilman William M. Krummel cast the only vote against making Seligson preferred developer.

"Our American business history has repeatedly shown us that open competition is the best way to achieve excellence," Krummel said. "I understand that because of the preferred developer's very large holdings that there may not be a significant response to an request for proposals, however, I think that is a necessary risk we must take to ensure that we continue to maintain the principles of open competition."

November 29, 2006

Advocate

Stanley Seligson becomes preferred developer for West Avenue

By Brian Lockhart
Staff Writer

November 29, 2006

NORWALK - Developer Stanley Seligson last night was chosen as the city's preferred developer for West Avenue - again.

Seligson was first selected in 2001 - effectively blocking the city from seeking other developers' proposals

The deal was allowed to expire in 2004 when new leadership in the city's Redevelopment Agency took greater control of the planning process and scaled back Seligson's initial vision for new housing, retail and

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office space.

But Seligson never gave up. Instead, he continued accumulating property in the neighborhood and now owns more than 60 percent, including The Advocate's offices. He also hired designers and consultants to continually revise his plans, spending \$12.4 million along the way.

The Common Council rewarded him for his perseverance last night, voting 12-1 to give him until March to gather a development team and propose a plan. The plan must meet the city's requirements for West Avenue - a maximum of 420,000 square feet of retail space, 95,000 square feet of office space, 350 residential units and related parking.

Seligson hopes to break ground in 2008.

"This is not an outsider," Democrat Matthew Miklave, chairman of the council's Planning Committee said of Seligson.

Miklave voted in favor of naming Seligson the preferred developer instead of seeking other proposals. Democrat William Krummel cast the sole dissenting vote with Democrat Phyllis Bolden and Republican Minority Leader Richard McQuaid absent.

Seligson did not address the council before the vote, but waited outside the chambers afterward to greet and thank legislators individually.

His company intends to propose its plan to the Redevelopment Agency and council early next year. He has been showing it privately to neighborhood groups.

"We've listened and changed (the plan) dramatically," Seligson said.

When he unveiled his first, \$270 million proposal in 2001, it called for 610,000 square feet of office and retail space, a hotel, 500 residential units and possibly a movie theater.

Several residents, including some who have spoken out against Seligson, last night testified the developer has been responsive and urged the council to vote in his favor.

"There's no other developer that will do what is fundamental to achieving a legacy Norwalk will be proud to inherit," said Joseph Sette, chairman of the West Norwalk Neighborhood Association.

East Norwalk Neighborhood Association member Gordon Tully said what he has seen of the current plan has taken his breath away.

"(It's) really going to be noticed, not just in Fairfield County but, I believe, throughout the industry," Tully said.

Krummel was the lone council member last night to argue the city should seek proposals from other developers.

He lamented the city courted Seligson for so long that last night's vote appeared pre-ordained.

"Open competition is the best way to achieve excellence," Krummel said. "From the very start, it would appear open competition is not encouraged."

Earlier this fall, a West Avenue Acura dealership suggested the council would violate its procurement guidelines if it did not seek other developers.

But Redevelopment Agency Director Timothy Sheehan last night said the agency's attorney and the city purchasing director disagreed. Acura did not appear to be represented at the meeting.

A handful of other neighborhood businesses encouraged the council to reconsider. The group, which includes owners of Currie Tire, European Auto Center and Casey's Sheet Metal Service, have been vocal opponents of the plan because they fear the use of eminent domain to acquire their properties.

"I think it's already a done deal," said Keel Evans, owner of European Auto Center.

John Louizos, an attorney for Currie Tire, told the council his client intends to submit an application to the zoning department to build a 26-unit condominium building on the site.

"Our client's prepared to move forward with the development of their own property," Louizos said.

Some council members, including President Michael Coffey and Republican Joanne Romano, said they continue to oppose the use of eminent domain in the West Avenue project. The council ultimately has to approve any takings.

Romano told Seligson that the council also retains its right to reject his plans.

"I want to make sure the people who own business and properties are taken into consideration first and foremost," she said.

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November 16, 2006

Norwalk Citizen-News

Emotions Run High Over Historic East Avenue Home

[By Lauren Garrison](#)

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A Nov. 1 public hearing on the fate of the historic Grumman-St. John House revealed intense emotions among both the property owners and preservationists, who have thus far failed to find a mutually satisfactory way to avoid demolition.

The principals of the Norwalk Inn own the house, which is located at 93 East Ave. and adjacent to the inn. They plan to demolish the house to make way for the inn's expansion. However, local preservation groups are adamant about saving the home, which is on the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation's 2006 list of Important Threatened Historic Places, is listed in the National Register as part of the Norwalk Green Historic District, and is included in the East Avenue Village District.

According to Norwalk Preservation Trust President Tod Bryant, the Connecticut Historic Preservation Commission voted unanimously Nov. 1 to ask state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal for assistance in preserving the home. If Blumenthal chooses to take the case, he can seek an injunction to prevent demolition, said Bryant. A 90-day demolition delay obtained by the Norwalk Preservation Trust and the Historical Commission from

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the city's Building Department is in effect until the end of December.

The city's Demolition Delay Ordinance allows the Historical Commission to conduct a public hearing on case in which a delay is requested. A recording of the public's comments from the Nov. 1 hearing will not be given to Mayor Richard Moccia, the Planning and Zoning commissions and the Common Council. All have a part in working with the property owners to try to find a "mutually agreeable" alternative to demolition, according to Historical Commission Chairman Marilyn Robinson.

At the hearing, many members of the public spoke on the importance of preserving the home, which they consider to be a vital part of Norwalk and American history. Inn co-owner Chris Handrinos, his daughter Maria and several of the inn's employees also spoke, expressing frustration over an inability to manage their private property without input from the community.

Bryant kicked off the discussion by providing the audience with a brief history of the house, which was built by Samuel Grumman sometime in the middle of the 18th century, probably around 1750 to 1760. The house was "heavily damaged during the burning of Norwalk [by the British in the Revolutionary War] because a great deal of the combat during that raid took place right there, right around that house," said Bryant. Afterward, the Grummans rebuilt the house, and in 1802 they sold it to Stephen Buckingham St. John. According to Bryant, during the 1870s the house was doubled in size, and a mansard roof and new trim were added, giving the house the look it has today. The house was sold to developers in 1925, after which it went through a series of owners who rented it out as apartments. The owners of the Norwalk Inn purchased the home in 2001.

Resident JoAnn Jackson said she believes that Norwalk, "with its 350-plus years of history, has a special responsibility" to America. "Is it really acceptable for us to allow this piece of Norwalk and American history to be destroyed? Don't we have a patriotic responsibility to find a solution?" Jackson drew a comparison between the current situation and Norwalkers who, centuries ago, stood by and watched helplessly as the British burned their houses.

Jackson also said she believes that allowing the destruction of the Grumman-St. John House would send a dangerous message to other owners and developers. "If the house you purchase should ever become an inconvenience, don't worry. The city of Norwalk will accommodate you," she said. "Just wait 90 days, and then the wrecking ball can swing."

Other speakers tried to reason with the inn's owners by calling attention to the potential monetary gain from working with the existing historic structure. Bryant noted that "heritage tourism is the fastest growing tourism segment in the state."

Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association President Laurel Lindstrom said, "The more I hear about [this home], the more I hear about possible alternatives to the destruction that would actually be a win-win for everyone so the owner could come out ahead as well as the neighborhood and community."

Lindstrom suggested the house could be restored and perhaps used as offices or a bed-and-breakfast.

Diane Lauricella, who identified herself as part of the original group to save the Grumman-St. John House so many years ago," said she often travels to the Litchfield Hills area, where there are "many inns that have incorporated historic structures and done very well." It is well known, she said, "that you can make a good penny off of embracing the history. The fact that this inn is right in the middle of an exciting time in Norwalk history, I think has been an asset that hasn't been exploited enough. I would like to help the Handrinoses that, but I think they need to begin again a discussion of how to make this work for them economically.

Lauricella said she believes an appropriate solution would be to allow a third story to be built onto the inn

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a way that is not going to be oppressive to the neighbors." This could be done, she said, using low light or special kinds of facades. Although the inn is located in a village district, its owners should not be required to undergo a costly process to obtain special permits in order to build the third story, she said.

ENNA member Gordon Tully pointed out a few practical matters. First, he said, running a bed-and-breakfast is "not the same thing as running a hotel."

"The B&Bs typically are not attached to the hotel," he said. "Making a B&B out of a historic building brings a whole different clientele, the rooms tend to have antiques in them, they charge high fees, they're maintained differently." In addition, "all of the historic B&Bs I've been to have been in rather quiet neighborhoods in little towns. This one is right on a major highway, and I think you ought to take account of that."

Tully noted that he doesn't believe any of these are insuperable obstacles. "But I'd like to focus on the fact that Mr. Handrinis is going to give and help and participate in a fair trade-off, fair negotiation on these real issues that he has to face, and the historic community, which I support wholeheartedly, has to address these issues."

David McCarthy, a housing developer who works in Stamford, said he thinks the zoning regulations in Norwalk should be modified to provide developers with incentives to preserve historic buildings. For instance, he said, Stamford's zoning requirements now allow developers to increase a site's density and decrease parking in return for restoring a historic building.

In response to the numerous audience members who spoke in favor of preserving the home, Handrinis said, "A respect for the past cannot be absolute. The city also requires a thriving economy, one guided by fundamentally sound business decisions. There must be a balance of historical concern and economic necessity."

Since purchasing the house in 2001, "we have been tied up in red tape; it's been costing our business many thousands of dollars and no small amount of extra effort and frustration," Handrinis said. "Frankly, I have a hard time understanding how those who have never invested one penny in the property have so much power over those who have put a great deal of their hard-earned money into a lawful, private investment. It's common sense that responsibility will always be tied to opportunity. I believe we can all agree to that. In this case, the Norwalk Inn has been saddled with all the burdens of ownership while being denied the right to make the most out of the property."

Tully pointed out that Handrinis' notion that "anybody who owns property ought to be able to do anything they want with it," which Tully called the "Libertarian view," is held by only around 15 percent of voters. "I don't agree with it, and neither do the vast majority of people in this country," said Tully.

"However, I'd just like us all to focus on the fact that this same battle, this same disagreement, this same problem, is being acted out all over the country. It's a hot topic and not an easy one to resolve."

Frank DeMilo, a member of the Norwalk Preservation Trust, also replied to Handrinis' complaint about lacking control over his private property. "Ninety-three East Avenue is on the National Register of Historic Places," he said. "The state of Connecticut considers destruction of those properties at the same level as pollution of our land, air and water."

Handrinis' daughter spoke in support of her father. "To insinuate that any aspect of the Norwalk Inn management has a disregard or disrespect for history is just untrue," she said. "As the daughter of immigrants, both my parents were born in Greece and history and heritage have been of the utmost value in our home."

ENNA in the News

She is an English teacher and teaches history as "the core value" in her lessons, she said. "Values are not expressed through symbols or circus-level figures, they're contained in your actions and in your spirit and your heart. And this decrepit, old, broken building is just a symbol Our philosophy, in terms of honoring hi has been expressed through our actions. The way that we do that is by honoring the present."

She went on, "The voice of Norwalk is demanding an expansion. We're overbooked, oversold, overextend on a constant basis To contradict this voice especially when we've made offers, we've attempted to be reasonable and we've just been met with such a dismissal is insulting, quite honestly. It is insulting, and it not putting value to action. It is a total contradiction. I think that this expansion needs to be supported our terms because we are the ones who are truly serving Norwalk."

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