

June 21, 2004

MTA studies billboard removal

By **AMRITA DHINDSA**

Hour Staff Writer

A representative from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority was in Norwalk recently to survey the billboards located by the East Norwalk Metro North station.

Although David Eldridge would not comment on what action the MTA would eventually take, he did walk around the area with Third Taxing District commissioners, members of the East Norwalk Neighborhood Association and the East Norwalk Improvement Association, and state Rep. Bob Duff, D-137th District, to survey the site and ask questions.

Eldridge's visit was in response to a letter that the community sent the MTA in October to take down several billboards around East Norwalk train station and clear up debris.

Paul Coggin, a Third Taxing District commissioner, is one among several who opposes the billboards, saying they detract from the historical and aesthetic significance of the area.

"The MTA will look at the advertising revenue they are getting from the billboards and look at contracts..." said Coggin in a phone interview after Edridge's visit. "They will take into consideration the area as a whole, how well it is maintained, its historical significance, and the degree of community support behind it. We think we have a pretty good case." Along with the letter was included photographs of train stations in other towns that did not have billboards displayed and information about the historical significance of the area. Neighboring towns like Southport, Westport, and Darien are void of unsightly billboard signs, the letter reported.

In addition, one of the billboards is said to be within 25 feet of a historical monument placed over 100 years ago by the Daughters of the American Revolution, and within several hundred feet of the earliest known land purchase in the State of Connecticut - taking place in 1640 when Roger Ludlow traded goods for what is now regarded as East Norwalk. Approximately 200 feet away is an historical cemetery marking the burial of notables such as the Revolutionary War Colonel and Governor Thomas Fitch, also known as Yankee Doodle. East Norwalk residents are considering transforming the area into a pedestrian-friendly village center and oppose the presence of billboards which they say detract from the character of the area.

"This area has wonderful old churches, an old historical cemetery, nice small businesses and shops," said East Norwalk Neighborhood Association president Laurel Lindstrom. "There's a conflict with what the community would like to see here." Coggin says the effort has the support of neighborhood associations, Mayor Alex Knopp, Duff, and Planning and Zoning Director Michael Greene. By a regulation passed by the city in 1985, Norwalk cannot host more than 50 billboards. At the time that the regulation went into effect, 109 billboards were up but dwindled to 62 once older signs were decommissioned.

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E. Norwalk train station may banish billboards

<http://www.norwalkadvocate.com/news/local/scn-sa-nor.signs4jun15,0,3798959.story?coll=nor-top-headlines>

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By Matt Breslow
Staff Writer

June 15, 2004

NORWALK -- Rail passengers who disembark on the East Norwalk station's northbound side are greeted by the backs of two large billboards.

A more hospitable backdrop will welcome riders if a group of residents and officials has its way.

Paul Coggin, a Third Taxing District commissioner, is spearheading an effort to have the Metropolitan Transportation Authority take down several billboards around the East Norwalk station.

Coggin said the MTA is willing to consider the idea and is expected to send a representative to examine the station in the next week before making a decision. The MTA controls the billboards.

Those who oppose the billboards say they are unsightly and detract from a neighborhood some hope to revitalize.

Laurel Lindstrom, East Norwalk Neighborhood Association president, said other local towns' railroad stations aren't marred by billboards.

"They have character. They're quaint. They're historical. They're aesthetically pleasing," she said.

Coggin said photos she took of other towns' billboard-free stations were included in a packet sent to the MTA about nine months ago. The formal request for billboard removal was signed by the taxing district commission, Lindstrom's organization and the Beautification Committee of the East Norwalk Improvement Association.

Also included was information about the neighborhood's historical significance. Coggin said Roger Ludlow made a historic land purchase from American Indians at Fort Point Street and East Avenue, and Thomas Fitch V -- whom many consider the true "Yankee Doodle" of the eponymous song -- is buried in East Norwalk Cemetery.

Lindstrom said revitalizing the village, enhancing its aesthetics and making it a pedestrian-friendly destination have long been discussed.

"That would be a really nice start," she said of the proposed billboard removal.

Coggin said the railroad bridge where the billboards are located serves as "a main gateway" to East Norwalk's village center. He said that in deciding whether to grant the billboard removal request, the MTA will consider the amount of support behind it, the history of the neighborhood and how well the surrounding area is maintained.

An MTA spokesman was unable to comment on the request yesterday.

After Coggin learned of the impending MTA visit, he e-mailed local officials and community leaders, encouraging them to help spruce up the neighborhood. About 10 people, including Lindstrom, showed up Saturday for a last-minute neighborhood cleanup, Coggin said.

Michael Greene, the city's Planning and Zoning director, said his department cannot take any action regarding the billboards because they represent a legally nonconforming use. However, he said the department supports efforts to have the signs removed.

Greene said one of the Planning and Zoning commission's goals is to reduce the number of "off-premise signs," as they are known in zoning parlance. Toward that end, the city passed a regulation in 1985 stipulating Norwalk can host no more than 50 billboards. Because there were 109 billboards in Norwalk at the time, the regulation essentially meant any billboard removed cannot be replaced, Greene said. The number of billboards has since dropped to 62.

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Note: see photo below. Of the eight people that showed up to participate in the Cleanup organized by the ENNA, all eight were there from the ENNA members list. Not bad for less than 24 hours notice!

Laurel Lindstrom

June 12, 2004

The 3rd ENNA Cleanup of the year



Volunteers from right to left: Jeff Bortolot, Ed Holowinko, Paul Piecuito, Michael Pavlicin and Third Taxing Commissioner Paul Coggin.
Photograph by Laurel Lindstrom

A productive day's work! We collected two truckloads of garbage and debris from the area surrounding the cemetery, East Avenue to the Interstate and along Fitch Street to the Strawberry Hill Avenue train bridge.

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The Advocate:

<http://www.norwalkadvocate.com/news/local/scn-sa-nor.midharbor4jun11,0,3745043.story>

Harbor vision cites untapped potential

By John Nickerson
Staff Writer

June 11, 2004

NORWALK -- Retaining water-dependent uses on Norwalk Harbor, while lengthening a waterfront path and reversing environmental damage are major themes in a nearly finished master plan for harbor development.

At the third and final public hearing on the plan held last night at City Hall, city officials, residents and developers said they agreed with its evolving vision for the harbor.

The plan covers the area from Chapel Street down river to the South Norwalk Boat Club near the southern end of Water Street.

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The plan for the mid-harbor is being developed by Chan Krieger & Associates, a Cambridge, Mass., planning firm. The city hired the firm for \$50,000 as part of an effort to develop master plans for specific area of the city.

The firm is scheduled to turn in its final draft of the plan in several weeks.

Plans for the Wall Street area and Webster Street have already been developed and a new plan is being drawn up for SoNo South that incorporates the section of the city south of Washington Street to the South Norwalk railroad station.

Chan Krieger principal architect Alan Mountjoy told the 30 people attending last night's meeting that it was important for the city to continue to have a working harbor to make sure the federal government will continue to pay for its dredging.

He also said the city should foster year-round uses for the harbor while leveraging its investment in tourism by finding other things for families to do, such as improving Oyster Shell Park near The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk.

Based on his knowledge of successful shorefront developments, such as Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Mountjoy said it was imperative to concentrate attractions in a small circle.

"If you want to keep people in Norwalk, you don't want them to get back in their car to go to the next attraction. They very well may leave the city. . . . It's very easy to discourage people," he said.

He suggested that a walking path be created behind the aquarium that would prominently connect it to the rest of SoNo.

The plan also calls for removing invasive weeds along publicly owned shoreline and reconstructing wetlands where possible.

Ripe for redevelopment is Liberty Square on the east side of the Stroffolino Bridge and the former Neptune Boat Club across the river from the aquarium, Mountjoy said.

He believes that the area could support a 40- to 60-room boutique hotel, a public waterfront promenade as well as more docks for out-of-town boaters.

He also called for easier pedestrian access onto the Stroffolino Bridge as well as slightly reconfiguring the intersection at Washington and Water streets to make it easier for pedestrians to cross the busy thoroughfare.

Asked by one resident how much the public improvements would cost, Mayor Alex Knopp said the city has received \$900,000 from the state to finish Oyster Shell Park.

"This is not a plan that focuses totally on public investment. . . . It's not as though this is a \$20 million plan. That is not in the nature of this process," Knopp said.

"A lot of this will take place over time. . . . It's not like we are going to rush out and build them all right away," Mountjoy said.

Laurel Lindstrom, president of the East Norwalk Neighborhood Association, said she was impressed with the plan.

"I like the vision of the plan. It started with real solid ideas," Lindstrom said, complimenting Mountjoy on the pedestrian-friendly nature and promotion of harbor access.

Developer Keith Brown, an owner of the Neptune Boat Club site, which he calls SoNo Wharf, also praised the plan.

"There is an untapped resource of boating people that don't come to Norwalk right now, because there is no

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place for them to come," said Brown, who wants to put in more slips for visiting yachtsmen.

He said he shared Mountjoy's vision for SoNo Wharf, believing a small hotel would thrive there.

At the close of the meeting, Knopp said he believed that the plan was heading in a direction that properly balances recreational, commercial and residential needs.

"So far, this fills the gap and provides the necessary framework for the area that we were missing in the past," he said.

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The Hour:

Norwalk mid-harbor plan gets thumbs up

By Robert Koch
Hour Staff Writer

Excerpt: Laurel Lindstrom, president of the East Norwalk Neighborhood Association, praised the study for its creation of waterfront vantage points, without destroying the character of those neighborhoods, such as Academy Street.
