

**CITY OF NORWALK
REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY
SPECIAL MEETING
MAY 26, 2016**

ATTENDANCE: Felix R. Serrano, Chairman; Commissioners Lori Torrano, Lisa Cooper and Tom Devine

AGENCY COUNSEL: Marc Grenier, Esq.

STAFF: Timothy T. Sheehan, Executive Director; Susan Sweitzer, Senior Project Manager

OTHERS: Douglas Adams, GGP; Paul Madden, GGP; Martin Vahtra, GGP Chicago; Attorney William Hennessey; Steve Cecil, The Cecil Group/Harriman; John Block, Tighe & Bond

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Serrano called the Special Meeting to order at 6:15 P.M.

ROLL CALL

Chairman Serrano noted that a quorum was present.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Doug Adams said on May 18th there was a Public Hearing with the Zoning Commission and the next day *The Hour* ran an article to the effect that the Redevelopment Agency had completed its design review, which was obviously incorrect, and they contacted *The Hour* and they corrected it.

He thanked the Commissioners for holding this Special hearing as well as the time put in by Tim Sheehan, his staff, Steve Cecil and John Block, who worked with their team extensively over a long period of time on the design review and the report they produced. He thinks that that effort resulted in a better project overall, and he looks forward to hearing the formal presentation.

Attorney Hennessey said the reporter was inaccurate in saying the Agency had completed its design review, and he was very gracious when they explained it and he online corrected it.

I. BUSINESS

A. REED PUTNAM URBAN RENEWAL PLAN AREA

1. Review and Approve Peer Review Report dated May 20, 2016 as final design review of SoNo Collection Project

Mr. Sheehan said the design review for the SoNo Collection was extensively looked at in a variety of different ways, most importantly in terms of the design guidelines that were approved both by the Redevelopment Agency and the Common Council as part of the amended Urban Renewal Plan. Each aspect of the design guidelines was taken into consideration and the project was measured against those design guidelines, and Mr. Cecil

will describe how this project in the opinion of the consulting team has met the objectives of the design guidelines and deserves the Commission's consideration.

Steve Cecil said GGP has an excellent design and an excellent design team that has been terrific to work with to come up with different ideas and to be imaginative in the way that they have advanced a project that is very unusual. The overall purpose of the design review is to make sure that the project conforms with the Urban Renewal Plan. The design review team has been both themselves, the Cecil Group, a subsidiary of Harriman Architects and Engineers, and Tighe and Bond who has been focusing on a review of the traffic, parking and circulation.

He explained that most of the topics within the URP that they focused on are in the design guidelines which were written just for parcels 1, 2 and 4, which are the parcels that the SoNo Collection will be built upon. The zoning conformance is underway and there are important aspects of the design that need to be coordinated with the City agencies, particularly utilities and traffic. The designs are substantially complete in terms of architecture, landscape architecture, site improvements and the exterior lighting. Topics which must be completed and resolved prior to final approval are: Traffic Conformance, Signage, Architecture and resolution of designs related to the sculpture garden, window wall elements on the facades and information on materials to be used; Landscape and Streetscape; Hotel design and Ground level tenant storefront designs. In terms of the traffic circulation and offsite improvements, they have virtually all the information they need, but it needs to be coordinated with the City and with Zoning, and John Block will talk a little about that, but they are finding that the project is in substantial conformance with the application aspects of the URP and design guidelines in particular.

John Block, partner in Tighe and Bond, said they have been working with Steve and Tim and GGP for over six months and they provided peer review memoranda to Tim who transmitted it to GGP, who responded with complete thorough responses. Their review included the review of five different traffic impact reports, two sets of submission drawings, and just this week he got some other plans that GGP submitted for review. They also reviewed two storm water management plans and made some suggestions, and GGP has incorporated all of their suggestions. After review of all the traffic reports, one issue that concerned them was the 15% mass transit credit. The 95/7 project before this project was a mixed use project, and the 15% credit was understandable, but for a regional mall that has the hotel they were concerned that if the peak hour traffic didn't realize that 15% credit, what would the roadway system be like, so GGP gave their consultant the task of looking at a 7% credit. They provided that review to them and they checked it, which indicated that the system did have acceptable levels of service. Certain traffic improvements need to be part of the approval, as well as offsite signage, which is important to make sure people can get to and from the project. All of the drawings they have been reviewing are preliminary and will depend on the conditions of the approval of Zoning as well as the Office of State Traffic Administration (OSTA). This project triggers an OSTA review and needs a certificate, so they have been reviewing it. Once the City has given approval, OSTA will go through their process and issue their conditions of approval.

They reviewed the parking layout, which does meet the requirements of the proposed text change, and it meets national standards for this type of mall. The parking garage is going to be a fully automated facility, 24/7 operation, with state of the art parking access and revenue

control, and that needs to be designed and reviewed as well. Having proper signage to make sure that the customers know where the available spaces are is very important, and that will all be part of the design of the garage.

Mr. Cecil said this is a very large mall with very large anchor tenants, and the architects have taken the overall mass of the development and broken it down into a series of boxes that are tied together at the ground level and at the upper levels, which you will see from a distance with this great atrium and the skylight windows that drop down and tie the open space together and breaks up the project's scale and size.

West Avenue has all of the stores in the front and the entries, so the parking structure necessarily has to be back behind the retail frontage. It is a very complex parking structure with a series of frames to frame portions of the back side so you see it as parts, and a series of vertical fins that will be made out of aluminum and painted with a graphic which changes color in an implied kind of a graphic form that mirrors the shape of the hill and will have a very interesting effect as you drive along the interstate or walk along the edge.

A set of sustainability design guidelines have been established, and they will be separately submitting their overall approach. Mr. Sheehan noted that there will be an additional sustainability review that will come after the mechanical systems are fully flushed out in the project, and GGP understands that they are coming back for that process.

Mr. Cecil said in terms of open space, the roof is going to have a wonderful exposure towards the east and south and there is a garden that will be looking out and taking advantage of that sunny situation in the summertime. The natural daylight coming down into the mall areas provides that connection between the inside and the outside, and there are significant window walls that will help bring that into play. They have an extensive public realm plan and an extensive planting plan and they have plans that show their intention in terms of how that open space is going to work.

The project steps back from West Avenue where it abuts Pine Street and the historic church at that corner. By providing a plaza at this location, the project preserves views of the structure and provides a forecourt both with the new development, the hotel, and for the church, and recognizes the orientation of the church towards both Pine Street and West Avenue. The project extends the cornice line of the lower elements of the project across the face of the hotel using a setback so that you don't have the full vertical expression coming down to the ground.

In terms of connectivity, the project fills out the site, with the project built up to the street edge, helping to create a walkable environment. The project connects to the existing sidewalk and street networks on all sides, providing connection to its surroundings. The perimeter walkways and connections still need work with respect to design review. In addition to creating the best practical pedestrian connection along North Water Street, there needs to be a generous sidewalk and crosswalks along Pine Street back in along the service drive. There is a bicycle path which will become a nice pedestrian route to connecting West to Crescent Street around the edges, and all of those edges are connected with crosswalks and safe pedestrian connections. The ability to move along the edges is as important from an urban design standpoint in some ways as the ability to get up into the mall, and he thinks they have done a very good job with that.

The project has a layer of retail shops and tenant uses along West Avenue. The guidelines say that they should be wrapped around the corners, which they are. So, for example, the hotel lobby will front on West Avenue, but it turns the corner to Pine Street. There are spaces underneath the parking structure where North Water Street emerges as it encroaches the riverfront and the rail alignment, and those spaces wrap the corners.

They have enumerated and provided a large number of bicycle racks in obvious locations, and they are intending to have bicycle storage within the parking structure. He doesn't think that the design guidelines quite anticipated what a shopping mall might be, but one of the concerns with many shopping malls is that the interior uses are really invisible from the outside, and what this design does is opens up two major areas. The atrium above North Water Street with its sculpture garden on the interior is tied into the second level mall with some surrounding exterior garden space and is a very interesting way of opening views into the mall.

Ms. Torrano asked about pedestrian safety around the exterior of the mall. Mr. Cecil said the guidelines are pretty clear that the streets need to have a set of eyes if possible. One of the open questions is the nature of the surveillance cameras and how it will be handled around some of the back and side edges and the loading dock areas. They are presuming that there will be a set of cameras to a central security situation, which is a 24 hour job to make sure that it is all working well.

Mr. Devine asked how the trucks are going to get to the loading docks. Mr. Block said trucks will enter through North Water Street and take a left onto North Service Road to the north loading dock area, or if it's for the hotel, they will come off of Pine Street and circle around and back into the loading dock for the hotel. All the trucks will leave going up the North Service Road northbound to Crescent Street, which will remain one-way.

Mr. Cecil said one of the things that the guidelines call for is making sure that the vehicle access from the streets in visible locations is minimized, and the loading docks and limited access for parking around the back sides conceal those kinds of uses as best as can happen. They are hoping that the City and the proponent can find ways of being persuasive with Conn DOT in planting some more generous trees along that ramp and to find ways to better screen the loading docks.

Mr. Cecil pointed out some of the architectural characteristics of the façade composition. Mr. Devine said there is a lot of blank space on the façade along I-95, and he thought they were supposed to avoid large blank walls wherever feasible. This is the image that is going to be left on Norwalk as people drive by, and it seems like that is a lot of blank wall.

Mr. Cecil said one of the things that is going to be critical, and they emphasized this in their review memorandum, is that signage becomes part of the architecture, and they really want to make sure that the signage is playing a role to break up these boxes and facades and be interesting, making your eyes look at multiple points, and he can imagine that that could be done great by a really excellent design team.

Ms. Torrano said because of the elevation from I-95, you are only going to see the top portion. She said she really likes the way the corner has been designed, because in the

previous renderings the activity was at North Water Street and that corner really wasn't activated to the degree that it appears to be now.

Mr. Cecil said the façade design uses the device of window wall systems as elements to animate the facades of spaces which cannot provide traditional windows into the retail interiors because of the nature of the uses and tenancies. These window like elements will include a range of display windows, transparent and translucent openings which will use lighting and interior design to provide a sense of depth and variety that activate the street and creates a sense of excitement for the project itself. The majority of the façade above North Water Street is facing into both levels of the mall with sky lighting on top to bring light down in, and you can see inside at nighttime and during the daytime as well. It is a very important feature of the design. .

The corners and edges have been carefully designed, and have some clever terracing and other things that make up level changes, and this rooftop garden that emerged as the CMSP was being completed is going to be really interesting and people are going to find their way to it and discover a view out towards the river and to the north of Long Island Sound that is going to be quite a benefit.

There are two types of public realm. There is the public realm plan and standards that are in the LDA, which are not the same as the public realm guidelines that are in the Urban Renewal Plan. The Urban Renewal Plan doesn't limit it to specific areas, but the whole system, and there are all of these places where people can get in and out and interact, and it is easy to conclude that the public realm has been extensively well addressed by the project.

Mr. Devine said he thinks it is going to be a landmark project and is going to put Norwalk on the map, but he has some concerns with the masses and the open walls. The design guidelines say that compatibility between new projects and existing architectural context is critically important, and he doesn't see any real consistency with what's already built around the area. It is totally inconsistent with what is already there.

Mr. Cecil said he thinks the way they read it is compatibility, not consistency. Two things can be very different but be compatible. As he looks at this, what they are trying to do is to invent a kind of architecture that feels consistent.

Mr. Devine asked if he could define sustainable design. Mr. Cecil you really have to look at the context and how it is being designed. Energy is a very significant focus in sustainability, and if you look at the amount of energy produced in their economy, an extraordinary percentage goes into heating and air conditioning and producing buildings, so you look at ways in which the production of the building can use less energy. You try to create environments where you are not using nonrenewable resources.

Ms. Torrano said she is really impressed with the thoroughness of the report, and it is very comforting to know the level that they have all looked at this project, and she thanks everyone for all the hard work they have done. It really looks great and she is very happy with the way that it has developed and how it is proposed. She can tell everyone has put a lot of time and energy into it and it was nice to hear that it was a collaborative process. The back and the corner are great and really change the whole feel from what it looked like before.

Chairman Serrano said he would echo that. He thinks from the outset they wanted to make sure that a thorough process was undertaken, but also that they were moving the process along as well.

Mr. Sheehan said the visual from Oyster Shell Park looking back to the back of the building is quite extraordinary from where they have been, and from a design aesthetic it certainly is a far different project.

Mr. Cecil said there is no question that there is work to be done, but every step has been a positive step. Visually this is an interesting place and it looks different if you are a long way away, and as you get closer it looks different, and that is going to be the magical part of this project.

**** MS. TORRANO MOVED THAT THE REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY COMMISSION, UPON REVIEW AND CONSIDERATION OF THE PEER REVIEW REPORT DATED MAY 20, 2016 AS AMENDED VIA MEMORANDUM DATED MAY 26, 2016 APPROVES THE FINDINGS THEREOF WITH THE STATED CONDITIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS, AND AUTHORIZES STAFF TO ADVANCE THE PEER REVIEW REPORT AS AMENDED TO THE NORWALK ZONING COMMISSION**

**** MS. COOPER SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further Old or New Business, upon motion of Ms. Torrano and second of Ms. Cooper, the Special Meeting of the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency was adjourned at 7:35 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Pacchiana