CITY OF NORWALK
REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY
SPECIAL MEETING
MAY 24, 2017

ATTENDANCE:	Felix R. Serrano, Chairman; Commissioners Lori Torrano, Lisa Cooper and Tom Devine
AGENCY COUNSEL:	Marc Grenier, Esq.
STAFF:	Timothy T. Sheehan, Executive Director
OTHERS:	Douglas Adams, GGP; Paul Madden, GGP; William Hennessey, Esq.; Georgana Rucker, Diane Lauricella, Sallie Marsico, Wini Mola, Members of the Press

PUBLIC HEARING ON PROPOSED MODIFICATION OF THE REED PUTNAM URBAN RENEWAL PLAN

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Serrano called the Special Meeting to order at 7:03 PM and announced that there would be two public hearings for the two components; the proposed modification of the Reed Putnam Urban Renewal Plan (URP) at 7:00 PM and the proposed modification of the Reed Putnam Land Disposition Agreement (LDA) at 7:45 PM.

Attorney Grenier said that the URP for the Reed Putnam area was initially approved in 1983, modified in 2007, and most recently modified in 2015 to allow a mixed use development. GGP has requested additional changes to the URP to allow for the removal of the hotel and also some zone change language to include public realm and entertainment as approved uses and to require retail and one or more other uses, one of which must be public realm. Last night the proposed URP was approved by the Norwalk Common Council in accordance with CGS Section 8-136, and now the Agency has to also approve the plan, and in accordance with CGS 8-127, a public hearing is a required component of that request for modification.

The documents that are in place in connection with the request are the redeveloper's request to amend the URP and the LDA dated April 13, 2017; nine legal notices published between April 17th and May 12th, a referral to the Planning Committee of the Common Council dated April 13, 2017, a referral to the Planning Commission dated April 27, 2017, and ultimately a Planning Commission Resolution in accordance with CGS Section 8-127 on May 17, 2017. There was also a public comment period including the statutory certification by Norwalk's IT Department confirming posting of the URP and the LDA on the appropriate websites, and there is the final URP, the final LDA and the Conceptual Master Site Plan. The public hearing is to provide an opportunity for the public to voice their comments regarding the proposed amendments to the plan.

Georgana Rucker said she wholeheartedly supports GGP's modification request because of the job opportunities it will bring to Norwalk, and also for the training they will provide for people, including seniors, to learn retail. She is also very pleased with the funding of $3.5 million to the City, which hopefully will be used to help South Norwalk maintain affordable housing around the train station and on South Main Street, and to make it look nice for the hotel and other companies that are going to come in. The people there just can't afford the capital improvements that are needed to upgrade their housing from a blight condition, so she thinks it would be a win/win situation for the City to reach out and help refurbish the housing on South Main Street.

Chairman Serrano said, for the record, the $3.5 million proposed funding is outside of the purview of the Redevelopment Agency. The Common Council has the authority with regards to how those funds will ultimately be disbursed.

Diane Lauricella said she knows the request to change the requirement from three uses to two, public realm and retail, has already been passed by the Planning Committee of the Common Council, but she is not in favor of the text changes. She has yet to get an answer to her question as to why things such as incubator space, YMCA or boys and girls club were not included. The hotel was placed in a way that would make it more expensive to develop, and the numbers just didn't work out, but why wasn't the hotel placed someplace else in the complex so that it wouldn't be so expensive to build? She has never been in favor of residential being part of this particular development, but she still thinks there could be other mixed uses. She doesn't think $3.5 million is enough considering all of the public benefits that came with this package of the Reed Putnam site. Their predecessor owners have highly benefitted by the public tax rebates, enterprise zone, staff time, etc.

Wini Mola, Little Fox Lane, said she is a lifelong member of their community and a past president of the Board of Realtors. She is there with her husband Joe, who has also been a realtor since 1982, and they both support GGP and the SoNo Collection in obtaining the modifications they are asking for. The property has laid dormant for over 25 years, and has been an eyesore all this time to those who traveled from Norwalk to SoNo and all the travelers on I-95. An upscale mall with Bloomingdale's and Nordstrom's serving as anchors and hundreds and hundreds of jobs and tax revenues will be the envy of their surrounding communities, and will become the phoenix of Norwalk and a new beginning, and hopefully more GGPs will come and invest in their community. They ask the Agency to support the modifications GGP has requested and help them obtain whatever final agreements and addendums they need to continue upon the foundation they have now started to build and complete this magnificent project.

Attorney Bill Hennessey with the firm of Carmody Torrance Sandak and Hennessey, said they represent the redeveloper of these three lots, parcels 1, 2 and 4, which are the last lots to be developed in the Reed Putnam area. Their prior approvals entitle them to build pretty much the project they are requesting approval to build with the exception of the hotel component, which will be removed. There will be no substitute use in its place. They have obtained the permits to do the work, which is ongoing now as a result of the Agency's approvals. His client presently has the right to build a building of 1,070,000 SF in size, and they propose to build exactly what was approved. There is no diminution at all in the retail areas or the public realm areas. They submitted under date of April 13th a fairly comprehensive package of papers that they hope satisfies the Commissioners that not only is the hotel infeasible, but office and residential are also not feasible on this site, and it is their desire to push forward with the retail and the public realm piece.

Doug Adams, Sr. Director and Developer for General Growth Properties, said this has been a four-year long journey, even longer for some with the previous developer. They hoped last year that they would not be back in front of the Agency, but they were unable to execute on the hotel and so they are back in an effort to save the project and move the project forward otherwise unchanged. They are on a very compressed time schedule to hold fair and open meetings and hearings where everyone has a chance to weigh in, and hopefully they will end up with a positive resolution in the timeframes they need to continue construction.

Ms. Sally Marsico said this was a four-year process that required GGP to invest themselves in the community and to get to know their community and the members of their community and the quality of the people that live here, and as a result she thinks they will probably approach their project in a less distant way for having invested themselves here. She thinks all of the members of the GGP team, especially Doug Adams, have done a great job and she appreciates all their work. She spoke at length at the Common Council meeting last night on two topics she is particularly focused on, the signs and the public realm. Everybody knows that she is very opposed to the electronic billboards. She has looked at many renderings of the building that were in the newspaper and in GGP's offices on Washington Street, and there was no indication that these signs were going to be there, so they came as a surprise to her. GGP has asked for approval to eliminate the hotel, which she thinks is appropriate for them to consider doing, and in return she would ask GGP to let them revisit the signs. She is very pleased that GGP is committed to the public realm. She hasn't heard the numbers on the public realm, and she would be interested to know what is the square footage on public realm and what are the components and how are they broken down, so that she as a citizen can get a little more confidence in how this might be utilized.

Mr. Sheehan said as to the uses that are allowed under the URP, there were many, many meetings on Saturday mornings and afternoons with members of the Common Council and the Planning Commission in reviewing what would be incorporated into the revised URP that governed this project as GGP took control of the site, and at the end of the approval process, institutional uses are allowed, so the YMCA could be accommodated within the plan, and incubator use would ultimately be considered an office/commercial use, so that would certainly be accommodated under the uses as well. And with regards to the concerns relative to signage, the Commissioners spent two meetings in a comprehensive review of the signage plan that was developed by GGP. There was third party review that was done by Steve Cecil, and Steve Cecil spent two meetings with the Commissioners and the public reviewing his findings relative to the signage, and the signage that is contemplated has basically become part of the design of the overall building. It is clearly different signage than Norwalk is used to, so he is sure there is a level of concern associated with it, but again there was clearly a process that was gone through. It meets the criteria by which the signage plan developed by GGP was reviewed and was in accordance with the URP Design Guidelines. Those were debated for months and there was certainly public awareness that those design guidelines were being advanced. The meetings were open for public comment and there was no public comment made at either meeting and ultimately the determination of whether it was going to be allowed or not rested with the Zoning Commission. Mr. Sheehan said he would be happy to sit down with her and review the plan and show specifically what they have recognized as being made part of the public realm.

Mr. Adams said he thinks the requirement is 56, 000 SF and they were at about 85,000 SF. Mr. Sheehan said he thinks part of the confusion is there was an assumption that the reduction of the square footage relative to the hotel was then going to reduce the commitment to public realm, and that did not happen.

Chairman Serrano closed the first public hearing at 7:47 PM, which was the public hearing for the URP, and opened the second public hearing, which is for the LDA amendment.

Attorney Grenier noted that this is the Agency's public hearing in regards to proposed amendment #5 to the LDA. There is no statutory requirement to hold a public hearing for the same, but they are having a public hearing so the public can weigh in regarding the proposed changes. Some of the changes deal with the removal of the hotel as a use, the payment of the $3.5 million, and the definition of the mall classification, which there has been a lot of debate about. He thinks everyone would agree, given the fluidity of marketplaces, that both the City's interest, the Agency's interest and the redeveloper's interest are aligned so that they could move quickly to adapt, and the redeveloper acknowledges that the anchors of high quality are expected to be Nordstrom's and Bloomingdale's, which is no different than what they represented to the Agency and the City a few years ago when they started this project.

Last night the Common Council proposed changes to the LDA, and one of the changes was at the request of Councilwoman Faye Bowman with regard to the $3.5 million, which was debated, and there is now a new Whereas Clause that will be inserted at the end of the current Whereas Clauses which will read, "Whereas the Common Council desires that the $3.5 million Exaction Funds will be used for improvements to neighborhoods surrounding the Project," and that will be something that will be coming up to the Agency next week and is something for the public to comment on as well.

Chairman Serrano reiterated that the Agency will not be taking a position with regards to infeasibility. It is just the outright modification request that is before them.

Chairman Serrano asked if anyone wished to comment on the amendments to the LDA.

Diane Lauricella said she doesn't blame the applicant in any way for asking to remove the hotel component. She actually thinks that the City needs to step up its game and take a look at affording other choices in light of the fact that there were so many businesses and homes that were taken down initially with eminent domain long before any of them were on this Agency. She believes that GGP will do a fine job, but she still thinks allowing them to remove the hotel is a mistake. She would rather see other choices there. With regard to the $3.5 million, she does approve amendment #12 of the Whereas Clauses that Councilwoman Bowman added. Of course it is the City's role to decide how to distribute the money, but she hopes that the City uses the utmost care in making sure whatever the process of distribution, that it is transparent and fair minded. Lastly, she does not believe that the Council members that were involved with this project did enough due diligence. If they had there would have been a different outcome on both the removal of the third use and why there were only three choices on that third use of residential, hotel or office. She is glad that it was clarified that institutional use might still be a possibility as she would like it to be built in the complex.

Attorney Hennessey said in terms of the modification made last night by the Council, they of course have no objection to that, but the LDA really dealt with three things. One is the elimination of the third use, the hotel, the other is the substitution of payment of $3.5 million for that, and they have produced data showing that the present dollar value equivalent of that is somewhere between 18 and 22 years of tax revenue that would come out of the project, and the last thing is just the language around anchors of high quality. They don't view that as a change, they view it as a clarification. The Bloomingdale's and the Nordstrom's leases have been reviewed by the City attorney, and he is satisfied that they are binding leases. They have prevailed upon the anchors to provide a letter indicating that they are anxious to own them. One reason why his client is out there spending money before its final approvals is because it has an obligation to deliver the buildings to those anchors by October 2019.

Mr. Adams said he personally as well as the company support Councilwoman Bowman's modification, and they hope the Council and the Board of Estimate and Taxation takes that recommendation.

Attorney Grenier said he wants to be clear on behalf of the Commissioners and staff that the Agency has never concurred with GGP's interpretation that the proposed draft language was just a clarification, but they are certainly beyond that because they think it aligns the City's interest, the Agency's interest and GGP's interest in moving forward.

Chairman Serrano said if there is no one else who would like to make comments during the public hearing for the LDA, he will close the public hearing and move for adjournment.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further comments, upon motion by Mr. Devine, the Redevelopment Agency meeting was adjourned at 8:02 PM

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Pacchiana