

INDUSTRIAL ZONES COMMITTEE ACTIONS

DECEMBER 6, 2004

ATTENDANCE: Walter Briggs, Chairman; Tom Failla; Paul Littell; Tim Massad; Corrine Weston; Paul Kuehner; Kathleen Shea; Tanya Court; Mayor Knopp (9:10).

STAFF: Michael Greene; Dorothy Wilson.

OTHERS: John McClutchy; Tom O'Leary; Rocco Romeo.

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 8:35 a.m. by the Chairman and everyone introduced themselves.

INTRODUCTION & DISCUSSION OF MISSION

The Chairman said that the industrial zones have been here for a long time but are shrinking and have been deteriorating. The Planning Commission is redoing the Master Plan and they need to include what they can do to promote industry in Norwalk. Most of the industrial zones have been so zoned since 1929. Mayor Knopp, who will be at the meeting later, has suggested that the Chairman of the State DECD be asked to speak to the committee at the next meeting so they can have an understanding of what is available from the State. They will also hear from the developers in the area who own industrial property and any other people the committee feels they should be talking to. The Chairman said he would like to hear the thoughts of committee members.

Mr. Greene reviewed the industrial zone map. Industrial zones comprise approximately 10% of the city. In the past, multi-family houses had been allowed in industrial zones, but this led to shrinkage. There are conflicts inherent in siting residential uses next to industrial zones.

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS OF COMMITTEE

Mr. Littell asked what the timing was in opening the 90 acre Norwalk site referred to by Mr. Greene to non-industrial. Mr. Greene said it was because they knew they would not get a 90-acre industrial use. The question is how far to go.

Ms. Shea asked if there is a history of industrial permits moving into the city in the past ten years. Mr. Greene said it would be a very short list. Ms. Shea said it would be important to determine what has stopped industry from moving in. Perhaps the City should interview people to find out why. She noted that Stamford, through the Mayor's Office, is very public about trying to retain industry.

Mr. Littell asked if this committee could be proactive. The Chairman said that is definitely within the purview of this committee. This is part of the Plan of Conservation and Development.

Mr. Greene asked if Stamford has a marketing plan. Ms. Court said that Mike Freimuth, from the Mayor's Office, is the local point of contact. Mr. Greene said he had been told that he had to be subsidized in order to compete with the other locations.

Mr. Failla said maintaining infrastructure is important to this area. No one is set up for this in this area, although they are in other parts of the country. Mr. Kuehner said they should have a list of and meet with the industrial businesses that are still here. Some of the infrastructure problems will be very difficult to overcome.

Mr. Greene asked what issues a company like Diageo brings up. Mr. Kuehner said commuting, housing and being able to consolidate under the same roof were very important issues.

Ms. Shea said that Shelton spends a lot of time and effort in promoting their community. They will be one of the biggest problems for Norwalk to overcome.

Discussion took place on the impact of commuting on the workforce.

The Chairman asked if Norwalk restricts anything because of its zoning. Mr. Greene said the only thing they don't allow are those uses with noxious noise, pollution, etc., and those they don't want.

Mr. Littell asked if there are any solutions to the transportation problems. Ms. Court said that the Governor needs to provide a new revenue source for funding for transportation; the solutions are well known. The Legislature views this as a Fairfield County problems, but it is really a State problem. Increasing the gas tax, a sales tax and gateway tolls as a revenue stream are some ways to raise the money.

Mr. Greene said there is an affordable housing issue. Ms. Court said that they work together.

Ms. Wilson said that the dredging of the harbor is a big transportation issue in Norwalk. Mr. Littell commented that this is an incredible situation.

At 9:10 a.m., Mayor Knopp arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Massad said they have said they need data on jobs created, jobs lost and the types of jobs that they are talking about. They should generate a list of the data they need and decide who can obtain that information. Mr. Failla said he could provide this information. There are 2,300 electricians in Fairfield County but 15,000 in the State. He pointed out that part of the problem is that they don't encourage young people to become tradespeople in this area.

The Chairman suggested they contact Mr. Greene by e-mail regarding questions they have and to provide input. Mr. Greene will then attempt to obtain this information.

The Chairman asked Mayor Knopp about the marketing of Norwalk as an industrial area. It was noted that Ms. Kabel would be present at future meetings. Mayor Knopp thanked everyone for their participation. He said that SACIA has developed excellent data about Fairfield County. Regarding marketing, in 1990 or 1991, the City did a marketing outreach study. A strategy of job retention was developed and the position of Director of Marketing was created. They have an RFP about their marketing approach that has been sent out. GE has an internal corporate branding approach, which the City is interested in. The Mayor worked with the new President of the Connecticut Development Authority when he was in the Legislature, and he met with her a month ago. She is very enthusiastic and wants to focus on Norwalk and like-sized municipalities. Part of the issue is what to do in terms of State economic centers. Connecticut has adopted a cluster approach. One cluster is pharmaceuticals, for example. The issue is which cluster Norwalk would want to use. One question is what the Stamford/Norwalk cluster would be and how zoning relates to that.

Mayor Knopp also said they should be strengthening their video and film production. There is a lot of high velocity development taking place in this industry.

Mr. Massad asked when an employer leaving the City would come to the Mayor's attention. Mayor Knopp said they try to do outreach when it is brought to their attention but there is not a lot they can do if a company is going to move out. They try to be much more active in terms of new companies coming in. They let it be known that they consider themselves to be "business friendly". They participate in State incentives, such as a five-year, 80% property tax abatement in which the City absorbs 40%, the State pays 40% and the company pays 20%.

Mayor Knopp said that there is an eastern migration taking place now.

Mr. Massad asked for a benchmark number in job growth. Mayor Knopp said he has asked SWRPA for figures. Norwalk is a tremendous net importer of employment. There are 17,000 people who live and work in Norwalk and 24,000 who work in Norwalk but don't live here. He said he felt this was a property tax question. Big box properties are low priority but companies like Diageo are high priority. They grow the Grand List without negatively impacting quality of life.

Mr. Failla asked how many people commute from Norwalk to other points. Mayor Knopp said he would have that data provided to the committee.

The Chairman said this had been a very productive meeting.

SET FUTURE MEETING DATE

This committee will meet again in January, on a date and time to be decided. The Chairman said that meetings would not last longer than 1-1/2 hours. He said that this committee might go into the summer.

Ms. Wilson will provide members with copies of the Master Plan, which the Chairman said was in the process of being consolidated.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 9:50 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Cheryl Telesco
Telesco Secretarial Services

