

HARTFORD REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

SPECIAL MEETING / PUBLIC HEARING

OCTOBER 21, 2008

**UNION STATION
1ST LEVEL MULTIPURPOSE ROOM
ONE UNION PLACE
6:00 P.M.**

JOURNAL

CHAIRMAN CASARES: Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the public hearing regarding the redevelopment plan for the Downtown West Section II Union Station/Walnut Street Project here at Union Station. If you're going to speak tonight please sign in.

I. Roll Call

CHAIRMAN CASARES: Start with the roll call. Commissioner Arena?

COMMISSIONER ARENA: Present.

CHAIRMAN CASARES: Commissioner Bonafonte is absent

CHAIRMAN CASARES is here. Commissioner Harris is absent. Commissioner Lopez-Hernandez?

COMMISSIONER LOPEZ-HERNANDEZ: Here.

CHAIRMAN CASARES: Commissioner Leonard-Woods is absent. Commissioner Sierra?

COMMISSIONER SIERRA: Here.

II. Projects in Planning

A. Public Hearing - Downtown West Section II Union Station/Walnut Street Project

1. Presentation by Harrall-Michalowski Associates Regarding the Proposed Plan for the Downtown West Section II Union Station/Walnut Street Project

CHAIRMAN CASARES: On the agenda is the public hearing for Downtown West Section II Union Station/Walnut Street Project. We have a presentation by Harrall-Michalowski Associates concerning Downtown West Section II Union Station/Walnut Street Project.

MR. MICHALOWSKI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Downtown West Project is one of three initiatives that the city is undertaking adjacent to the core of the downtown

area. Downtown North just had a public hearing last week; a portion of Constitution Plaza; and the Union Station/Walnut Street Project that we're here to discuss tonight. The new dynamic in Hartford that is going to have a positive effect upon the core of the city is the reintroduction of an enhanced commuter capability in the form of the New Haven-Springfield rail capability and the New Britain-Hartford bus way. These are going to extend the market reach of the city and provide an opportunity to introduce an easier mode of travel into the city, producing an increased number of pedestrians on city streets which in turn provides many market opportunities to be taken advantage of. These projects start to address providing transit oriented development opportunities that take advantage of this emerging infrastructure development.

Let's first start out with the boundaries of the project -- of the proposed project area. To the north is Walnut Street, down Edwards Street and Spring Street, essentially to the Interstate 84 right of way, and then back to the intersection of High and Walnut Street. This area is approximately 16.7 acres in size. It contains 13 properties. 40 percent of this area is vacant. There are only four principal structures within this area, of which two meet the requirement for deficient or seriously deteriorated, and thereby make the area eligible under Chapter 130, the redevelopment statute of the General Statutes of the State of Connecticut. And it's under that program that the redevelopment plan has been developed.

The goals of the project, or I should say the general framework for carrying out the project, builds upon the planning work that was done in the Hartford 2010 plan, and the more recent Urban Land Institute planning effort that occurred several months ago. The redevelopment plan is kind of the tool, the implementation tool to move these concepts forward to reality. To a large extent the project is being proposed because the private market has failed to produce any significant investment in a strategically located area adjacent to Hartford's downtown. So in a sense it's the city as a last resort developer to try and promote investment to occur in this area.

The goals are several for the area. It's to provide an opportunity for transit oriented development. It's to provide a mechanism to develop that link between Asylum Hill and downtown; that pedestrian link that has been discussed under several different planning scenarios in the past. It focuses obviously on the removal of obsolete and blighted buildings. It tries to capitalize on this new commuter capability and pedestrian traffic that should be occurring in this general area. In the implementation of these two transit investments by the state largely there are need for transit hub support spaces that aren't fully defined at this point. So the project would provide opportunities to gain some site control to address some of these emerging infrastructure needs.

The project proposes the purchase, the acquisition of two parcels within this area; Capitol West building at 1-7 Myrtle Street, and the adjoining parcel owned by the department of transportation at 70 Spring Street; the assemblage of this parcel proposed by the plan.

Redevelopment projects typically have road and infrastructure components to them. In examining the potential of this area it was determined that the infrastructure that is in place at this point should be adequate for most development scenarios. If there's a requirement for additional infrastructure after specific development proposals are brought forth they can be addressed at that point in time when more detail is known. So the plan itself does not propose any specific infrastructure investment in terms of utility systems or road systems that are in or adjacent to the project.

Now, the land use controls are a key component. The plan itself has general guidelines, but largely proposes to use the existing zoning designation for the area. The entire project area is located in the B-2 downtown development perimeter district. That has proven to be a relatively flexible tool with a reasonable array of land uses that are permitted and a structure to consider development proposals. So the plan essentially incorporates those. And that will be used to consider land use proposals going forward.

One of the issues I think that has evolved in redevelopment plans in the past is being too specific and missing market timing opportunities. None of us seem to be wise enough to pick that moment in time by getting our ducks in a row, and the market moves on. Providing a general land use approach should provide the opportunity to address market conditions as they evolve in the future.

The site to be assembled is approximately 1.33 acres. There are a number of possible reuses for the area from a transit oriented mixed use development to parking facility that can support the operations of Union Station and some of the job activity up in the Asylum Hill area. Also, there have been some consideration it may provide an opportunity to bridge this elevational difference. We're going to be moving a greater extent of people from basically a lower elevation where Union Station exists to the jobs at the higher point. How do you do that in a convenient way? There have been several different proposals we have seen advanced on how that make take place in the vicinity. This location may help to facilitate that.

The redevelopment agency has long had a request for proposal process in place where it has solicited developer proposals for land that it controls. That will be used in this project. That process is well-established and will be the vehicle to request investor interest in the project area. So that is a very quick overview of the project and how it will work. Any questions, Mr. Chairman?

2. Public Hearing

CHAIRMAN CASARES: Any comments from staff? To the public. Do you want to call the names off, Glenn?

MR. GEATHERS: Lewis Wise; Rogan Nassau, LLC.

MR. WISE: Where would you like speakers? Thank you. My name is Lewis Wise. I am an attorney with Rogan Nassau here in Hartford. And I am here tonight on behalf of the owner of Capitol West, the owner being Myrtle Realty, LLC. And I want to respond to many remarks that I just heard, and discuss generally the redevelopment plan that you have before you.

First, the gentleman said one of the reasons why this plan has been formulated and it's moving forward is because the private sector has failed to invest a significant amount in property within that area. So I just wanted to give you a little background about the Capitol West property. As some of you know, my client acquired this property three or four years ago. It was already vacant and deteriorating. And my client decided that it wanted to renovate/rehab the building for loft type residential units. And my client spent significant sums pursuing all of the necessary approvals for that type of a project, and received approvals for approximately 100 loft type units at that location.

Since then my client has spent a considerable amount of money on the building itself. It may not look like it from the outside, but he spent something like half a million dollars removing asbestos, and approximately another half a million dollars removing all the garbage in it and gutting it. So it is now ready to be renovated. That process has ended.

And in fact, right now my client applied for building permit several months ago to begin the process of replacing the windows, designed in part to address the appearance of the building, because we are well aware of the fact the city would like something done with the exterior of the building quickly. It took several months before the permits were issued. The permits were issued a while ago. And as we speak the windows are being installed. I can't tell you how far they've gotten, but they are in the middle of that. Despite this process my client is committed to at least finishing that aspect of the renovation.

Obviously, there have been delays in completing the approved project that is the loft units, and there's no question about that. But everybody has to realize, and I think most of you probably do, since the approvals were granted a couple of years ago there have been a number of market forces at play here that have made it very risky shall we say to proceed with that project. At that time my client became aware of the fact there were

numerous other residential development going on downtown in the area. And the obvious question was, how much could the market absorb when it came to new residential units, particularly one that's not in the downtown area? That was an obvious concern. And more recently there has obviously been a downturn in the economy. But I'm here to tell you my client is committed to proceeding with this project.

And quite frankly, I think, and I hope you will agree, that it is preferable to retain that building, than to tear it down. Because it's structurally sound. There's no question about that. Nobody in the city would disagree with that. It's structurally sound. It's close to the transportation area you're talking about which makes it in some respects a very good place to live for people who are going to be commuting, utilizing these new transportation facilities. And it's also close to some of the major insurance companies and downtown. So it just seems to me that rather than tear this building down if we can work out a partnership here it makes much more sense for my client and also the city to try to see this project through to fruition.

Now, when I say it's preferable, preferable to what? Because this is really not a redevelopment plan that you have before you. The goal of this exercise we're going through as far as I can tell from reading the plan and listening to the gentleman before me is basically to demolish this building.

A redevelopment plan is supposed to set forth with some specificity your vision, the redevelopment plan's vision for the area. In fact, if you look at the statute you're operating under, 8-125 defines a redevelopment plan. It says it's a plan that includes; and one of the things a plan must include is "the location and extent of the land uses proposed for and within the redevelopment area, such as housing, recreation, business, industry, schools, civic activities, open spaces, or other categories of public and private uses." In other words, some sort of a concept plan, a concept site plan.

I happen to be involved now, coincidentally; I'm involved with a redevelopment plan in the town of Rocky Hill. And their redevelopment agency is pretty much at the same point you folks are. And this is --excuse my scribbling on it-- a concept site plan. This is the property. It shows you where the parking areas are, proposed retail, proposed residential, and other uses, green space in the middle. That's what the statute contemplates for a redevelopment plan. If you look at this redevelopment plan it doesn't do that. It sets forth vague goals for this area.

And if you look at pages 3 and 4 of the plan that's the guts of this. And it says, for example, on page 3, if I can find page 3 --

CHAIRMAN CASARES: In the essence of time we'll give you two more minutes.

MR. WISE: I didn't know there was a time limit.

It says the primary goal of this project --I'm not sure what the project is other than demolition -- "is to remove obsolete and blighted buildings from a critical perimeter area of the downtown and create a development opportunity for mixed use and transit oriented development that will support the initiation of commuter rail and bus service at Union Station, bridge the physical barriers between the insurance industry campuses and the western end of downtown..." et cetera, et cetera.

These are broad goals. It doesn't give you a map of your vision of how that's supposed to occur. And that concept plan then becomes the basis for the RFPs you're going to be soliciting.

And then on page 4 with respect to my client's building it says, "In terms of future land use it is envisioned that the Capitol West office building be redeveloped as a transit oriented development, possibly including structured parking and a pedestrian connection with the corporate campus across Spring Street to support Union Station's transition to a commuter rail and bus station."

This is not a redevelopment plan. This is a statement of goals. This is something you come up with when you decide to adopt a redevelopment plan. This isn't the plan itself. So it just seems to me that this plan does not really satisfy the statutory requirement. And therefore, it seems to me at the very least if you're going to proceed there should be some meat put on the bones here of this plan. Look, the bottom line -- I know you want me to stop. The bottom line is we know the city and you folks are frustrated by all the delays. And you're further frustrated by the exterior appearance of the building. The appearance of the building is being addressed now and will hopefully be finished soon. My client is committed to pursuing this project to conclusion, and is now doing so, now spending money to get this project completed.

So I'm urging you not to adopt the plan, obviously. But if you do proceed with the plan, or another more specific plan as we discussed, I think it would be in everybody's interests if you folks made it clear to my client that before you're going to begin any eminent domain proceedings you're going to give my client a reasonable amount of time to show significant progress towards completing the plan that's on the books. And you tell my client that only if there has been no significant progress within a reasonable period of time there will be eminent domain proceedings. Without a commitment from you he may be somewhat reluctant to continue to put money into the project if at some time you wind up taking the property by eminent domain. That's why I ask for that kind of commitment.

And I think under the law a redevelopment plan is good for five years.

MR. MCGOVERN: Ten.

MR. PANAGORE: Acquisition period is five years.

MR. WISE: So you're not under the gun to take the property client wants to work with you and the city, and believes that the plan he got approved for this property is far better than anything that's contained in the redevelopment plan, which is basically demolition and use it for another parking lot.

So unless you have questions for me I think that's it.

CHAIRMAN CASARES: Thank you very much for your comments. Thank you.

MR. GEATHERS: Jennifer Hadlock, HOPE.

MS. HADLOCK: Hello, my name is Jennifer Hadlock, organizer with Hartford Organizing for Power & Equality. I thought I was just signing in. However, after listening to the speakers I do feel the need to speak. I'm very concerned the redevelopment agency consider the residents of the city of Hartford first. And that was not mentioned by Mr. Michalowski. And I think that should be the number one priority, not the commuters, but the people who already live here. And how will any development affect them? And since there isn't a plan of what is going to happen to that area that should be considered before you talk about knocking things down.

MR. GEATHERS: Bernie Michel, Asylum Hill.

MR. MICHEL: Good evening. It looks like we have a pattern here. I also thought I was just signing in.

I'm somewhat familiar with this plan and the area because it does adjoin Asylum Hill. And I'm chairman of the Asylum Hill NRZ. That property has been a blight for the city and affected the residents for quite sometime. The number of cars that go by there on a daily basis that are on their way through Hartford take an impression of Hartford from what they see from their cars. And I think that in and of itself is a real reason for a needed change, whatever that change is.

If the current owners can actually bring about a significant change in a brief period of time -- And I'm not sure what they mean by that. They've been at it for a while and we haven't seen too much -- that wouldn't be a bad thing. But I don't know what on the horizon has changed that make 100 loft type apartments any more commercially viable today than what they have been over the last couple of years. And a quick trip around Asylum Hill will show you a number of for rent signs with the apartments already there. I don't know what economically we would need to see in the city to see demand for that type of property. But we'd like to see something there; redevelopment, transit oriented development.

It's clear there are going to be a lot more commuters coming when the bus way is completed, when the train comes from Springfield to New Haven. And I think there's a plan afoot to do a bus turnaround for the city busses so there's a real city center. I think this property could serve that working with Union Station which is already a hub, and have something that's working together. That's what I would suggest; make sure whatever is done with this, make sure it coordinates with all the other projects that are ongoing. But something needs to happen. It needs to change. Thank you.

MR. GEATHERS: That was the last speaker, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN CASARES: Any other public comments, people who didn't sign in who would like to speak? Hearing none the public hearing is closed. Thank you.

The hearing was concluded at 6:30 p.m.

Respectively submitted

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. B. Panagote", written over a horizontal line.

David B. Panagote
Director/Secretary