

STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS
FRED CONZE, CHAIR
DARIEN PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION
DECEMBER 7, 2009

Good evening Madame Moderator, Members of the RTM, other elected and appointed officials, and the people of Darien. This annual “State of the Town” meeting gives us at the Planning & Zoning Commission the opportunity to look back and report upon our accomplishments over the past year, and what we can look forward to in 2010 and beyond.

Normally, during these presentations we save our acknowledgements to the end. This year, however, we would like to recognize two recent members of the Planning & Zoning Commission who left within the past few months - Robert Finke and Peter Bigelow. We want to take thank them for their service and wish them well knowing that they might be tuning into our “eye in the sky” – Channel 79-- to see what they are missing on Tuesday nights. We also welcome our two newest members of the Commission, Vickie Riccardo and Eric Voigt. We would also like to recognize the contributions of our P&Z staff and Town Counsel in assisting the Commission in fulfilling its responsibilities. There are many moving parts in the P&Z business, and we rely heavily on their support. We should also recognize other new land use board members including Wynne Shapiro of the Environmental Protection Commission and Anthony Simari of the Zoning Board of Appeals.

A look back to 2009:

As always, the key for our four local land use boards is maintaining the small-town residential character of Darien, while balancing it with the necessary and desired growth and the needs of the community. Because Darien is nearly fully developed, it makes this balancing act even more difficult.

Last January, the new Darien Library opened. You may recall that this property used to be occupied by a gas station and a car wash. The current building is an improvement over those former uses. Moreover, the fact that it is adjacent to an office park owned by now-Selectmen Jerry Nielsen provided a marvelous example of community cooperation. These neighbors saw an opportunity to meet overflow parking needs for the Library's larger events—which most frequently occur during non-office hours.

In one of the most significant actions taken in 2009, the Commission reviewed and approved--with some conditions and modifications--the application for redevelopment of the Allen O'Neill housing. This application was the subject of over nine hours of public hearings held on three nights, and received close scrutiny by our Planning and Zoning Commission. It was approved in March. While the project is currently in litigation, it is important to note the Commission's desire to have this redevelopment blend in with the existing neighborhood, and not impact traffic flows in the area. It provides additional housing in an area used for

affordable housing for many years. One needs to emphasize that this project is solely owned and operated by the Darien Housing Authority. Construction of this project will occur over multiple years.

While an application was submitted to rezone the Noroton Heights commercial district this past summer, that application was eventually withdrawn. We do not know if a similar application will be resubmitted, but it did bring to light the fact that the Commission is open to redevelopment of the block of Heights Road between Edgerton Street and Noroton Avenue. What now contains Stop and Shop and Walgreens and other buildings is prime for change. A more pedestrian-friendly layout and design is called for in the Town Plan, and we believe that a redevelopment will bring with it improved land use, cohesive architecture, and an increase in our commercial tax base. In fact, the Commission expressed its interest in taking a holistic review of that entire zoning district—which is bordered by West Avenue, Heights Road, Noroton Avenue and Hollow Tree Ridge Road.

In the spring, the Commission held multiple public hearings on a rezoning and related application for the property at 333 West Avenue, just near Patton Drive. This was essentially an 8 unit cluster development--keeping basically the same density that now exists in the neighborhood while creating additional common area and protected open space. While this particular development concept is unique to this area, and, indeed, the first one in our town as a whole, the new regulations which it implemented offers the benefit of preserving the scale and density of a number of existing neighborhoods.

Of course, some of the most notable decisions made by the Commission this past year were those regarding temporary portable lights at the Darien High School, for use by both four of the high school teams and Darien Junior Football; and at Holahan Field behind Town Hall for sole use by Darien Junior Football. While the Commission approved ten hours of usage here behind Town Hall, and about 15-20 evenings of lights by certain high school teams for 3 years, this does not resolve the issue on a permanent basis. This involves a delicate balance between a perceived need for these types of facilities and the potential impacts upon neighbors. The Commission is counting on the Board of Education and DJFL, working as good neighbors, to minimize the impact of these improvements while preserving the character of surrounding residential neighborhoods. It is clear that all parties to this issue are working toward that end.

The downturn gave the Planning and Zoning Commission time for long-range planning:

In 2009, the Commission used the downturn of the economy as an opportunity for some long-range planning.

After spending significant time on flooding and drainage issues, the Commission adopted stringent stormwater management regulations. These have been made part of the Zoning Regulations, and they also are referred to in the Subdivision Regulations. Staff and the land use boards have begun working with these new provisions, which puts the onus on property owners and developers to properly address stormwater quality

and quantity issues, and to clearly account for drainage as part of their development.

In the spring, the Commission also modified the zoning regulations to become more flexible on signage. As recommended in the 2006 Town Plan, the Commission now allows blade signs (which are hanging signs perpendicular to the building façade) within certain zoning districts. This allows property owners and tenants to have signage which is more noticeable for pedestrians, and coordinates nicely with some of the newer buildings recently constructed downtown. We have already seen the benefits of these new, more commercial-friendly regulations.

In June 2009, a Commercial Design Guidelines document was prepared. This document gives assistance to those wishing to redevelop or enhance their commercial properties. We have put forth a proposal to specifically refer to this document within our Town Plan. We believe that this new document is a great resource.

Inclusionary Zoning Regulations, which were studied in 2008, were adopted in January 2009 and took effect in May. This regulation requires those constructing more than five units at a time to either construct some affordable housing, or put equivalent funds into an Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Although this provision of the Regulations has not yet been used, it somewhat prevents the Town from sliding back in terms of the percentage of our Town's housing units which are affordable.

What we see ahead in 2010:

Overall, we are optimistic that as the economy recovers, the successful redevelopment of our downtown will continue. Whole Foods Market and the related improvements at exit 11 and Ledge Road will be completed in April. Completion of the improvements at the end of exit 11 is required before Whole Foods can open. Traffic signaling at these intersections should help traffic flow. While we do expect additional traffic, there is no doubt that this new building will provide an attractive entrance to Town—the previous Howard Johnson’s set up there had “served its time”.

We expect to see a number of new retail and restaurant tenants in downtown. A replacement building will be constructed on Grove Street across from the Melting Pot, and a new replacement office building will also be constructed on Old King’s Highway South, at the end of Center Street. A new coffee shop has opened on Grove Street in the space formerly occupied by JD Cosmetics. New tenants also will be coming soon to the first floor of the theater building to replace Ann Taylor Loft. Planet Pizza is scheduled to occupy the former Curves site in downtown, near Mechanic Street. A new restaurant building is now in the process of being completed where IHOP was. The tenant will be Chipotle Mexican restaurant. A new veterinary office has opened on Noroton Avenue in the former Burr Roofing site.

Sometime in January, the Commission expects to rule on the existing pending application to convert an office building at 397 Boston Post Road

into apartments, some of which will be affordable. We will also be considering potential changes to the 2006 Town Plan relative to open space. You will hear more about this in the months ahead.

Also, over the next few months, we also expect to see some of the existing vacant space in Town become occupied, as the expectations of property owners and potential commercial tenants change.

The Department staff continues to use the Town web site as a tool to get information out to the general public. That site is: www.darienct.gov. This work will continue on. We are also pleased that Channel 79 is able to get many of the local land use board meetings on TV. We know that there are many of you who follow along at home, just as we hope that many may be at home now watching these proceedings this evening. Channel 79 is an important link to our community and we wish to thank the people who make that happen.

Summary

While the workload of the Architectural Review Board, Environmental Protection Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals may have decreased slightly, they still face some complex and contentious applications. As always, the dedication of those volunteers is unmatched, as they, like the Planning and Zoning Commission, must balance responsible development against legitimate concerns of neighbors. Each of their decisions is important, and has its impact on the community, and upon the type of growth we may see now and in the future. I give my fellow Commission members and the other local land use board members credit for their public service and commitment to maintaining the residential character of our Town.

Overall, we are committed to the maintenance of Darien's residential character, to targeted value-added commercial redevelopment, to preserving the delicate balance between competing residential and non-residential land uses such as the YMCA and the Board of Education facilities and their surrounding neighborhoods, and to the effective management of storm water related issues. As we pursue these objectives, we will continue to be guided by the current Town Plan of Conservation and Development, which was approved and adopted by this body in 2006.

The Planning and Zoning Commission, as well as the other land use boards will continue to maintain this delicate balance between private property rights on the one hand, and the best interests of the Town, as a

whole, on the other hand. Our boards look forward to working with the RTM and the new administration throughout this coming year.

Thank you.

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