

Peace Dale Village Planning Workshop

Thursday, April 16, 2009

Location: Town Council Chamber, 180 High Street, Wakefield, RI, 7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

Vincent Murray, Director of Planning

Nathan Kelly and Doug McLean, Horsley Witten Group, project consultants

Also among those in attendance were members of the Village Planning Project Steering Committee and public officials from the Town's Economic Development Committee, Planning Board and Town Council.

Workshop Notes:

- The meeting commenced at 7:00 pm, approximately 30 members of the public were on hand, 19 persons signed the workshop sign-in sheet (copy attached, included staff and the consultants). Director of Planning Vincent Murray provided opening remarks, introductions of the consulting team and members of the Project Steering Committee, and a general overview of the project. His remarks focused heavily on the remarkable history of Peace Dale village and its evolution through the years.
- Following Mr. Murray's remarks the consultants (principally Nathan Kelly) presented a PowerPoint focusing on Peace Dale Village (a copy of the presentation is being posted on the Town's website).
- The Peace Dale village study area focuses on the central portion of the village commonly referred to the "flat's" that lie within the Town's Commercial Downtown zoning district (57 parcels comprising approximately 19 acres of land area). Although these areas are the central focus of the village study, the consultants are also looking at the regional context of these areas such as the infrastructure connections the surrounding neighborhoods and the impacts on nearby natural resources and green space features (Saugatucket River, South County Bike Path, etc).
- The consultant's presentation comprised an inventory, issue analysis, discussion of the merits of "village planning" and review of economic development, cultural heritage, natural resource protection, and sustainability within the village context.
- Themes of the presentation included: planning to enhance the historic village context, community character, diversity of housing and affordable housing in proximity to the downtown, the historic diversity and economic development value of the village setting, local sustainability, the efficiency of compact mixed-use villages versus suburban sprawl, the public health benefits of the area's walkable character, green energy issues (carbon footprint, water usage, and best management practices for enhancing water quality of the Saugatucket River and its connections to Upper Point Judith Pond), cultural resources, the great potential for adaptive reuse of the Rocky Brook and Palisades Mill complexes and other village buildings/sites, and infrastructure servicing the vicinity (including the William O'Neill Bicycle path, the "amazing" stone buildings and historic bridges within the village and green spaces associated with institutional settings, Peace Dale Guild, etc.). The village was characterized as having "good bones" in terms

of historic infrastructure servicing it and the land uses present was described as a “funky mix”.

- The consultants also provided an overview of the Town’s comprehensive community plan policies for central Peace Dale and zoning regulations for the Commercial Downtown district noting that the basic zoning code for the district appears to fit the vicinity and generally functions well.
- The consultants noted that the building mix within the village both historic and contemporary displayed a lot of diversity in terms of sizes and scales as well as architectural attention to detail. These features help to define the character of the community. Mr. Kelly also discussed the eclectic business mix in the village center which he characterized as a combination of essentials and novelties, this mix is viewed as helping to reinforce the funky, artistic flavor of Peace Dale.
- The presentation also featured and was complimentary toward the façade improvement program and signage improvements that resulted from the efforts of the Peace Dale Neighborhood Revitalization Incorporated (PDNRI) and local businesses.
- Mr. Kelly discussed the pedestrian scale of Peace Dale as a distinct asset, but also noted that the road system servicing the area could be modified to be less auto dependent and more amenable to pedestrian and bicycle usage. In this regard he spoke of the broad distance to cross Kingstown Road in the vicinity of the Peace Dale Rotary. Here Mr. Murray noted that the RIDOT would be replacing seven (7) area crosswalks with a stamped concrete product that will have the look of granite blocks similar to the historic structures at the Guild, Library and Peace Dale Office Building.
- The presentation noted that Peace Dale has surprising elements, such as the rural character of the upper portion of Green Street, pleasing pedestrian scales visuals of buildings in groups that display a broad range of architectural styles and details (secondary spaces) and glimpses of the water resources that provide a “blue way” through the village.
- The presentation noted that significant progress that has been made toward revitalization and significant new investments in the area, but also noted that work remains to be done including: addressing of code issues for a number of area structures, better maintenance of dumpsters located on private parcels within the area and better management and creative use of parking resources in the core of the village.
- The presentation also made note of the presence and role of non-profit organizations within the area (i.e. The Jonny Cake Center and Welcome House) and public housing managed by the South Kingstown Housing Authority at Fournier Estates off High Street and Champagne Heights situated off of Curtis Corner Road.
- The consultants indicated that an outcome of the study would be to craft a vision statement for Peace Dale Village and establish redevelopment goals that reinforce the vision for the area.
- Mr. Kelly noted that Peace Dale had been the beneficiary of a strong grass roots revitalization effort and complimented the “honesty” and “forward thinking” planning effort embodied in the plan entitled: “Peace Dale in Action” from 2002.

He stated that this document and the efforts of the PDNRI tackled problems and opportunities for revitalization in the neighborhood head on. He added that these past planning and revitalization efforts would be the building blocks for the recommendations that will emerge from this planning process.

- Mr. Kelly spoke of the redevelopment potential of several key buildings and building complexes within the Village that are currently for sale (Palisades Mill, Rocky Brook Mill, former Finnegan's Fitness and Giro's Restaurant). He noted that change from new ownership of any of the above could come quickly and if managed well provide additional momentum to the neighborhood revitalization.

Following the consultant's presentation, a general discussion ensued with the attending community members. The major topics and themes that emerged from the dialogue included the following:

- The community revitalization effort needs to be inclusive of the residents of the public housing within the village. Presently there is a disconnection between these developments; both physical due to the design of these facilities and socially from a community inclusiveness perspective. Ms. Choiniard of PDNRI noted that her organization had been reaching out to the tenants and SK Housing Authority to improve these circumstances. She noted that tenants were in attendance tonight as well as a member of the Housing Authority Board. Discussion ensued regarding how to better connect the Housing Authority properties with the Village and Town at large. This may include removal of fences and physical barriers that separate the complexes from the adjoining neighborhood areas, landscaping, lighting and other rehabilitation efforts.
- Maureen Egan of the Housing Authority spoke of their efforts to gain HUD approval to reconfigure Champagne Heights and Fournier Estates under the "demo-dispo" program. She noted that this program was highly complex but would enable the Authority to reconfigure and reconstruct a different mix of housing on these sites that would be more connected to and compatible with the community. Ms. Choiniard noted that the residents of the Housing Authority Complexes were becoming more active through their tenants association and were working to change the image of public housing in the Town.
- Drainage issues in the village center (and on High Street) were also discussed at length. Staff noted that ageing infrastructure (State of RI) and the lack of consistent maintenance over time has exacerbated this problem and the Town's repeated attempts to get RIDOT to focus resources on this have not been successful. It was suggested that the Town, local business community and PDNRI work together as a coalition of interests to communicate with the State to get this issue the attention it deserves. Mr. Kelly noted that there may be grant opportunities to address the drainage issues through the EPA (Section 319 Stormwater Management Program).
- Parking, or its lack, was viewed as a constraint to adaptive reuse of the mill complexes within the village. Attendees agreed that the mills represented a tremendous resource for the area depending on how they evolve in terms of reuse. Area realtor Peter Spinella noted that manufacturing was changing and a strict

manufacturing reuse of these complexes was unlikely. He felt that zoning and development regulations needed to be more flexible to encourage investment and reuse of these facilities. This should include the allowance of some degree of housing in the mix.

- The role of RIPTA in providing public transportation to village residents was discussed, attendees felt that this role might be expanded to provide more opportunities to residents without cars and that expanded service would reduce congestion, auto dependency and air quality issues. Expansion of service was viewed as an opportunity for village improvement and economic development.
- Local businessman Bob DonFrancesco stated that the Town should look at ways to reduce the cost of doing business. He suggested a program of “fee friendliness” by the Town, including the consideration of reductions of sewer fees and impact fees (school facilities and open space/recreation).
- Deedra Durocher of the Town’s Economic Development Committee noted that Town’s Tax Treaty program and suggested it could be marketed as a means to redevelop the mill complexes and other commercial parcels. Mr. Kelly suggested that the Town might develop a more formalized means to increase the development community’s knowledge of and access to the tax treaty program.
- The time necessary and complexity of getting permits for new businesses was discussed. It was suggested that the Town act as liaison with State agencies on behalf of local businesses to make the process more efficient.
- A concern was raised about the old Subaru sign in Peace Dale in terms of its apparent abandonment. It was requested that the building official review its status.
- Events within the village, such as those sponsored by the PDNRI, were seen as keys to community building and neighborhood revitalization. Ms. Choiniard mentioned events such as movies, the Peace Dale arts stroll, the Arts Gala and the field day event at the Housing Authority.
- Mr. Kelly inquired about what essential services were needed in the village center to help sustain its vitality? Attendees noted that there was a good mix and that additional restaurants and reuse of Farmer’s Fix It, Wakeco and Scuncio properties would provide an opportunity to add new uses to the existing business inventory. Audience members stated that consistent evening business hours would help local merchants succeed.
- Expansion of the existing community based police program, increased foot and bike patrols was suggested.
- Mr. Kelly suggested the consideration of broad based design guidelines for new construction and/or substantial rehabilitation of properties. Such guidelines would be in place to ensure that the scale and fabric of the village was respected and that new buildings and facilities would be compatible with the historic development pattern. Audience members seemed to be receptive to this concept as a means to protect and enhance Peace Dale.
- Mr. Kelly also noted that the zoning ordinance might include some degree of incentives to encourage appropriate reuse, redevelopment of buildings and facilities within the village.

- Participants in the workshop expressed a generally positive view as to the revitalization of Peace Dale and the future for the village.
- Mr. DonFrancesco suggested that the Town focus on a program that will result in “quick wins” for the community. He cited the successes of the façade improvement program as this type of “quick wins” and that such an effort can be contagious for the village.

Concluding the discussion staff and the consultants thanked the workshop participants, noting that a second workshop/meeting would be held in the near future discussing findings and recommendations for the village. The workshop adjourned at approximately 9:00 p.m.