



WEST WINDSOR TOWNSHIP

SHING-FU HSUEH, MAYOR

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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As the Township moves forward with the next phase of planning for the redevelopment area, I'd like to thank Mr. Hillier and his staff members for their outstanding efforts in defining the overall objectives of the redevelopment process and bringing together hundreds of different ideas into a full "concept" plan for the next step. Now the Governing Body and Planning Board must work diligently to form a "consensus" plan that can be accepted by the majority of the community.

This April marks the third year of the ongoing process to develop and transform the 350 acres surrounding the Princeton Junction Train Station from disconnected and generally unsightly surface parking, non-existent infrastructure, traffic congestion, and contaminated properties, into a vibrant and sustainable West Windsor Transit-Oriented Town Center.

The goals of the emerging redevelopment plan include the improvement of traffic circulation, the creation of a "downtown" with a retail focus, the remediation of contaminated properties and construction of accessible and inexpensive parking for the 20% of our Township population who use rail transportation to commute to work. Transit-Oriented Development is also intended to reduce auto dependency and to concentrate residential and commercial development around a transit facility with a bicycle/pedestrian friendly design.

It is important to point out that all of the infrastructure improvements that are so essential to making this a viable project are costly: constructing the Vaughn Drive connector; building safe and efficient parking structures for Township residents; establishing an emergency services substation; developing a Community Center and amphitheatre; and/or creating a direct east-west connection for a community that is now separated by the Amtrak main line. Through the redevelopment process, these types of costs should be financed by private capital or by federal or state grants, rather than by the taxpayers of West Windsor. To achieve this, it is essential that the redevelopment plan contain a mixed-use development, comprising retail, commercial, and residential elements, which will attract private investment and grant funding essential to make a West Windsor downtown a reality.

Several people critical of the preliminary "concept" plan developed by Hillier Architecture have aggressively disparaged the provision for 1,000 residential units on site even though some residential development is absolutely necessary to finance infrastructure development which would otherwise be borne by our taxpayers. We have to find a way to assuage fears and address housing concerns in order to move forward. It is clear that without widespread public support it will be difficult for any redevelopment to occur at the Princeton Junction train site.

After listening to public input and talking to a number of concerned residents throughout the community, I have asked Hillier Architecture that many of the infrastructure and design improvements set forth in the firm's preliminary April 19 plan be deferred, modified, or eliminated to reduce costs and the need for 1,000 residential units. This modification would still allow for the creation of a viable downtown with improved traffic circulation and better pedestrian and bicycle access with increased parking for West Windsor residents. With the scaling down of these improvements, I believe we can move ahead with far fewer residential units phased in over a 10-15 year period of time.



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My proposal would envision the following elements which are most needed and which will not create any tax burden for the residents of West Windsor:

First, we must move ahead with the Vaughn Drive connector as soon as possible. In that regard, I have already received a verbal commitment from the NJ Department of Transportation that this essential linkage between Alexander Road and Washington Road will be given priority.

Second, the plan should encourage a private developer to construct an accessible garage on contaminated property now owned by the Township by assuming the cost of remediation. In this way, West Windsor residents who have been denied a parking permit will have accessible parking at reasonable fees controlled by the Township while remediating contamination by using private capital to do so.

Third, the suggestion by Hillier that a “bowl” be constructed under the Amtrak main line to provide a direct east-west connection for pedestrian and cyclists is vital. To reduce the need for housing, the “bowl” could be reduced in size.

Fourth, consistent with creating a “downtown” on the west side of the tracks, and improving the in-fill along Route 571 on the east side of the tracks, Hillier’s plan for 150,000 square feet of retail surrounding this new “main street” should be pursued.

Fifth, recognizing that at least 150-200 residential units would have to be created in the affordable housing category, I am suggesting that the remaining units of unrestricted housing be reduced, maintaining a large percentage of age-restricted housing.

Sixth, Hillier’s recommendation that the Township, through the redevelopment process, establish ground rules to lease the commercial space before construction to ensure tenant occupancy in order to minimize any potential tax reduction has to be considered.

At this early point in the process, where we have a concept plan of what’s possible, we need to determine priorities and perform the critical analyses of differing combinations of elements. These analyses include traffic and economic, of course, but also schools, social and environmental, including sustainability.

It is my hope that this modified plan, with reduced and phased residential, will allow us to move ahead with a downtown which our community can truly support without reservation. I have every confidence that Hillier Architecture can develop such a plan and I look forward to ongoing dialogue with various homeowners associations and resident groups, Hillier, the Township Council, and the Planning Board to realize this objective.

Sincerely,

Shing-Fu Hsueh

Shing-Fu Hsueh
Mayor, West Windsor Township