

PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION  
TOLLAND, CONNECTICUT  
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 30, 2010

MEMBERS PRESENT: Michael Cardin, Chair  
Marilee Beebe, Vice Chair  
Sue Errickson, Secretary  
Dave Barrow, Regular  
John Hughes, Alternate

MEMBERS ABSENT: Jack Scavone, Regular  
Benjamin Stanford, Alternate

OTHERS PRESENT: Linda Farmer, AICP, Director of Planning & Community Development  
Glenn Chalder and Heidi Samokar of Planimetrics, LLC  
Public

1. Welcome. Linda Farmer, Director of Planning and Community Development welcomed the public to the forum held at The Lodge. She introduced Heidi Samokar and Glenn Chalder of Planimetrics, LLC. She explained that the town has been working for several years on developing a vision for the Tolland Village Area (TVA) and specifically with Planimetrics since last spring. She then turned the meeting over to Heidi Samokar.
2. Public Visioning Workshop with Planimetrics – Tolland Village Area. Approximately 70 members of the public attended the workshop and Ms. Samokar asked for a show of hands to find out how many in the audience were familiar with the visioning process the town has been working on. There appeared to be a good mix of people who were very familiar, somewhat familiar, and some who were completely new to the discussion. She also determined how people learned about the public workshop this evening. People learned of it from the town web site, flyers, email notifications, print or web news sources, letters to property owners, and word of mouth.

Ms. Samokar said that Planimetrics would be helping the town with zoning regulations and design guidelines for the Tolland Village Area—the area near Exit 68 off I-84. She explained that last winter the town worked with another consultant on initial concepts for the TVA and since then Planimetrics has been refining the vision and concepts based on input and new information. She first walked through the history of Tolland’s development. In the late 1700’s, Tolland was the county seat with a court and jail and the Green was therefore a busy town center with hotels, taverns, and private homes. However, when in the 1890’s the court moved to Rockville, the Green emerged as a predominately residential area with few commercial activities. Interstate 84 was built in the late 1940’s cutting through Tolland and with it brought more residents. From 1960 to 1970, the town saw a 166 percent growth in population.

Ms. Samokar said the PZC is trying to look forward another 40 to 50 years and has been taking a closer look at residential densities in town and studying the Tolland Village Area. In recent years, she said, the town reduced their density standards to help Tolland to remain a rural community. She said the PZC also recently updated the town’s Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD), a ten-year land use strategy for the town. Planimetrics was the consultant that helped the town with the update and during the process they conducted a statistically

accurate telephone survey of random town residents. One of the questions that they asked in the phone survey was if residents supported the concept of a walkable town center, to which 2/3 of the town supported the idea. Ms. Samokar said the POCD update also involved looking at future housing needs and in those public workshops they learned that many residents felt there were not enough condominiums, smaller apartments, and two and three-bedroom smaller single family homes available in town. She also said it was found that while in 1980, 58 percent of households had children, by 2008, only about 34 percent, or 1/3 of households had children. So the demographics are changing in town.

Ms. Samokar described the vision that has been developing for the TVA. It would include a mixture of uses including shops, offices, homes, and civic uses. Residents have also expressed that they would want it to be a “place” rather than separate isolated buildings and it should be walkable and human scale. She said there was also a strong demand for a community gathering place for civic or social activities, with a variety of housing options. The desire would be for it to help increase the tax base. An important question is whether this can be done while enhancing the character of the town and also protecting its natural resources.

The present zoning in Tolland does not allow this type of development to happen, Ms. Samokar said, and the question some might ask is why this particular area is being targeted for such development. She said there are three reasons. The first is the location. It is right off the Interstate with a good central location close to the Green, but not so close as to change the look of the Green. The area already sees a good deal of vehicular traffic that could be taken advantage of and is in an ideal location for creating pathway linkages to get people to other parts of town. Secondly, the TVA is the gateway to the community. Third, it is already zoned for business use. There is interest in maximizing the tax base in this area for increased services and for job creation.

Ms. Samokar walked through how they would go about determining the zoning regulations to encourage this vision. She said they start by developing scenarios and concept sketches with a landscape architect. They need to understand the challenges and opportunities in the TVA and determine the potential for housing, business space, and other needs. They also need to plan for the needed infrastructure. The next step is to communicate the concept to the community, and finally to draft zoning regulations and design guidelines.

In a Powerpoint presentation, Ms. Samokar showed the concept plan as it presently exists. She said it came through loud and clear from some existing business owners that they feared their businesses would be pushed out to make way for the new vision, and this concept plan shows existing businesses remaining where they are. The concept plan has some key components including a Main Street, destination uses such as a hotel, and civic uses that could be a draw to the area. The TVA concept plan also includes a residential component that would create a customer base and that would create a buffer to businesses and other residences. There is also a need in the plan to protect water resources. Ms. Samokar said the scenario presented is an optimum one and assumes that a market exists for this type of development, that there can be coordination between property owners, and that the financial return will outweigh the costs to prepare the site.

Ms. Samokar said the coordination would need to come between mostly private land owners. However, the town would play important roles as some town-owned land could be involved. The town would also be developing the zoning regulations and providing development approvals. They may also play additional roles in facilitating the vision. She ran through the

building blocks involved in how the TVA would need to develop. First, the town would need to adopt zoning regulations and guidelines, and this, Ms. Samokar said, will be the building block the town will be working on for at least the next year. After that, the landowners would need to make decisions about whether they would want to go forward. If they did, they would begin with feasibility market studies, preparing plans, going through the permitting process, and finally building. She envisioned that this type of development would be phased in over the course of 20 or more years, with a best guess that the first to develop would be the housing over the next two to five years. She said if the commuter lot was moved, then that might open up the area for the next phase for commercial development. A hotel and anchor building such as a pharmacy on the Main Street might be the next phase.

Ms. Samokar reviewed the potential benefits of developing the TVA. Economically, the town could enjoy an increased tax base. They could capture dollars from those who take Exit 68 off the highway and there would be more services available locally. The community could enjoy an added civic space, more diverse housing options, and a trail network. Lastly, planning now would guide growth in town to the area that most makes sense to do so. It would be a proactive approach to development and could be a win-win for both the town and landowners.

The forum was opened to public comment. Residents were not asked to identify themselves or their addresses, and so I named them only when I knew who spoke. George Mantak said he felt by developing this area, it would help to preserve open space elsewhere in town and help to provide the needed funds for the town to purchase added open space.

Another resident said the development might bring in a younger group of people that would help set up the next generation of Tolland residents. He said it could also be a showcase for 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, suggesting that parking spaces could include chargers if electric cars start to take off. He also suggested adding more across town public transit to help control the volume of traffic.

John Hughes said the added residential area would help to support Tolland businesses. Another resident said the location could capture traffic traveling to UConn, whether they are residents at the school, employees, or people going to UConn events.

Ms. Samokar said they still need to work out details such as market feasibility of such a vision, infrastructure needs and who would pay for it, and impacts of increased traffic and the need for road improvements.

Barbara Danforth noted that population is not increasing in town presently, and if it continues that way, she asked who would live in this new housing. Another resident noted that Storrs/Mansfield is doing something similar but is further along in Tolland, and said they should think about how their plan might impact Tolland. Another resident asked if the town is looking at attracting young professionals, what incentive do they have to come live there? He said he would rather the draws to the area be in place before housing was created, and therefore, phasing of development would be very important.

Another resident asked how much vertical the town would want to consider. He said at four to five stories of buildings, development would move away from a rural concept. Kathy Bach, said the suggested Main Street area could not give the town what they need. She said they do not want a Blue Back Square (West Hartford) type of development in town., and she said the Evergreen Walk development in South Windsor purposely was designed without a residential

component. She said the plan looks attractive on paper but questioned if it would survive in Tolland in the current economic climate in the State. Ms. Samokar recommended to those who want more information on the developing plan to visit [www.tolland.org/pzc](http://www.tolland.org/pzc)

The public was next invited to participate in a Visual Preference Survey. Ms. Samokar showed a series of 79 slides broken into four categories, “Main Street” streetscapes, “Main Street” buildings, “Main Street” hotels, and houses. Participants were asked to fill out a form rating each slide on whether they liked the look and if it would fit into Tolland. The ratings went from a negative 3 (like least) to a positive 3 (like most). There was also space on the form to provide brief comments about their reason for the ratings. Ms. Samokar said they would collect the forms after the survey, compile the data, and use it to build a 3-D computer model of the TVA populated with the styles of buildings residents preferred.

After the survey, Ms. Samokar discussed buildings and streetscapes that received high ratings and low ratings and their reasons for their choices. Many residents found attractive streetscapes to include such features as textured sidewalks, trees, public spaces, outdoor sitting areas. Inviting looking storefronts and lamppost styles also played a role in what was found attractive. Participants were also asked what made a streetscape unattractive. Some pointed to above ground power lines, narrow and linear sidewalks, lack of vegetated buffers, and fences that were uninviting looking. Several people noted they liked the concept of outdoor seating at restaurants as long as it was aesthetically pleasing and not too crowded or close to parking.

Main Street buildings that got high marks included smaller, New England style buildings with attractive rooflines and colors. Participants favored buildings that projected an historic feel and that had a green buffer between other buildings and parking. Some noted they would like to see attractive landscaping and stone walls incorporated. Varied architecture and textures also got high marks. Less desirable features included stark, flat, massive buildings and buildings with entryways that appear mall-like. Buildings with an overly commercial, square look were found to be uninviting, as were buildings that projected an urban, inner-city feel. Some participants expressed liking the concept of residences above ground floor businesses.

Main Street hotels that got high marks were those which incorporated New England styles, including stone walls, porches, gazebo areas, and awnings. Wood-sided, two-story, inn-type hotels that could fit well in a residential neighborhood got higher marks, while tall, linear, flat buildings with “no charm” received lower marks.

There was a great variety of housing types to rate in the visual preference survey. Features that received high marks were homes with plenty of green/landscaping, front porches, offset placement (staggered) on lots, designs that were cohesive yet not monotonous, homes with varied architecture, styles, and colors with sizes of homes related to the space between them. Homes that received lower marks were those that projected an urban and/or commercial look and those with little landscaping.

Ms. Samokar said they would be tallying up the scores from the survey and would put a full summary on the town website, along with comments. Over the winter they will work with the PZC to analyze the data, build a 3-D model, and develop zoning regulations and guidelines.

She opened the meeting up one last time for final comments. One resident said he would like to see varied water features, such as bridges incorporated into designs. Another resident asked why the town needed this development at all. He had arrived late at the meeting, and Ms. Samokar

gave him a brief review of the desires of the town that emerged from the POCD. Another resident suggested any development include physical buffers to hide large parking areas. Bob Stewart noted that many of the photos in the survey were on flat sites and any development in Tolland would need to take into consideration that this is not the case in Tolland.

Another resident said he was unsure if the town was trying to specifically attract young professionals or maintain the existing base. He said he feels there is still a disconnect, and if they do want to attract young professionals, they will need to research what that demographic would be looking for. He said he could not see wanting to mix seniors with young professionals as the two groups have different wants and needs. Another 20-something homeowner said while there are plenty of townhouses in Tolland, there are not so many small, new homes, which is something his age group would like to see more of.

Ken Hankinson said the TVA will be developed and with the present regulations that are in place, the area could develop undesirably. He said the PZC needs to get ahead of the curve and develop zoning regulations that will drive desirable development for the town. Another resident said he would like to see any development in the TVA to be LEED certified. He emphasized the importance of sustainability. Stu Danforth said the houses on the Green could easily fit into Old Sturbridge Village setting and he feels that homes that are reproductions of similar homes would be very attractive to buyers.

Another resident expressed concern about what would happen to people who own property in the TVA. Ms. Samokar said she would hope the incentives created will provide those property owners with more development opportunities. Kathy Bach asked if there has been buy-in yet from all the property owners. Ms. Samokar said they have all been invited to see and provide input on the concept plan, but there is still more work to be done.

3. ZBA Referral – ZBA #10-11 Norwegian Woods, LLC – Variance request to replace existing 12 sq. ft. free standing sign with another 12 sq. ft. sign when 9 sq. ft is permitted. Michael Cardin, Chair, seated John Hughes for Jack Scavone. Ms. Farmer explained that Norwegian Woods would like to replace their sign and the permitted sign size for a Special Permit use in a residential zone is now 9 square feet. She said they plan to have the sign lit and provided a picture of similar Sumner-Chapman property signs. Ms. Errickson said they have a narrow driveway and with the speed of traffic on the road, the applicant feels a smaller-sized sign would pose a safety risk. Mr. Cardin said he felt the replacement sign would fit the character of the area. Ms. Beebe said the requested sign would not increase the non-conformity. Ms. Errickson noted they have been looking at their regulations and increasing flexibility and this situation is a good example where flexibility would be desirable. After a brief discussion, there was consensus to recommend a positive referral to the ZBA to grant the variance request.
4. Adjourn. Sue Errickson/Marilee Beebe motion to adjourn the meeting and pay the clerk at 9:40p.m. Motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully submitted,

Annie Gentile  
Clerk

