

**JOINT SPECIAL MEETING OF THE NORTH BRANFORD TOWN COUNCIL,
PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**

Thursday, January 22, 2004

Town Council Chambers
7:00 p.m.

PRESENT: Mayor Michael Doody, Deputy Mayor Vincent Candelora (arrived 7:30 p.m.), Councilor Mary Bigelow, Councilor Donald Fucci, Councilor Ashley Joiner, Councilor John Lappie, Councilor Joanne Wentworth, Planning and Zoning Commission members Joseph Faughnan, Matthew Mullen, Frances Lescovich, Charles Gunn, Harry Dulak and Delcy Newell, Economic Development Commission members Al Clemente, Judy Murphy, Dawn Pearson and Kevin Grant, Chamber of Commerce members Marie Burkle and Steve Montesano, Town Manager Karl Kilduff, Town Planner Carol Zebb and Planning Consultant Brian Miller

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Doody called the meeting to order at 7:10 p.m.

2. OVERVIEW OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY BY CERC

Brian Miller, planning consultant working with the Connecticut Economic Resource Center (CERC), was present to review the Economic Development Study prepared by CERC for the Town of North Branford. The main components of the plan included an analysis of civic capacity, a technical analysis of economic conditions and real estate market conditions.

With respect to civic capacity, Mr. Miller indicated that a business survey was sent to 393 businesses in North Branford and 124 businesses replied. This also included a review of the infrastructure capacity and land use patterns. The findings of the survey showed that Town government was perceived as pro-business but that this was not incorporated into the organizational structure of the Town's boards and commissions. The quality of life was an important issue and it was felt that economic development must not compromise the quality of life in North Branford. Mr. Miller discussed highway access, noting that while it is not a

problem for existing businesses, new developments have been attracted to neighboring communities. He spoke on the two geographical identities of the Town, pointing out that large areas of the town are unavailable for development. Mr. Miller stated that the study showed that the physical infrastructure of the Town is limited for economic development due to the lack of sewer and water and the congestion on Route 80. He noted the need for an agreement as to the potential type and location of economic development desired by the Town and pointed out that the predominance of residential and undevelopable land has made economic development more difficult in North Branford.

Mr. Miller then highlighted the Targeted Industry Analysis contained in the plan. Under Regional Economy, Mr. Miller identified the types of industries with potential growth in this region that included some manufacturing but mostly services in health, education, social, etc. He pointed out that most businesses in North Branford are service-oriented businesses that employ less than ten people. Mr. Miller stated that he saw some limited opportunities for small scale retail development in Town.

Mr. Miller addressed the Recommendations contained in the plan. He stated that the Economic Development Plan should be adopted by the Town Council and Economic Development Commission and accepted by the Planning and Zoning Commission in order to gain commonality of direction. He noted that the enhancement of the tax base is the primary economic development effort and that all economic development should have a positive fiscal impact on the Town. Mr. Miller pointed out that there is no staff with the primary responsibility for economic development and that currently the responsibility for economic development is shared between the Town Manager and the Town Planner. One of the recommendations in the plan is that a staff person or consultant is required to solely work on economic development for the Town.

In order to enhance the Town's image as business friendly, it was recommended that an economic development coordinator be hired and that the Town undertake review of the land use and zoning regulations.

Mr. Miller suggested that the Town needs a strategic marketing plan. He pointed out the need for a business retention program and the need to continue to work with the Regional Growth Partnership. He felt that the establishment of a business retention program would be beneficial and should include business visitations, a data base of existing businesses in North Branford, and regular contact by a staff member in order to help anticipate the needs of the existing businesses. He suggested that an economic development coordinator could work with property owners and real estate brokers to market industrial and commercial properties as there is a limited amount of property in North Branford which can be developed for economic development.

An additional recommendation is that the Town should use property tax deferrals as one component of an overall economic development policy. Mr. Miller stated that the Town should set a policy for tax deferrals which should be consistent and not done on a case by case basis. Any property tax deferrals should be defined by the goals which the Town is trying to promote. Other incentives include infrastructure improvements, financing assistance, fee waivers, technical assistance and property acquisition.

Mr. Miller pointed out that high speed communication is an important part of continued economic development. He also noted that an effort should be made to encourage local

shopping by North Branford residents.

Mr. Miller stated that these are broad general recommendations for the Town but that a specific action plan is required. He also noted the need to update the Town's Plan of Conservation and Development.

With respect to Land Use Recommendations, Mr. Miller stated that an inventory of all commercial and industrial properties in Town should be maintained and updated on an ongoing basis. This can be used to respond to business and development inquiries. A land developability inventory should also be maintained which is useful for planning purposes. Mr. Miller spoke on the need for the formulation of a policy for prospective new businesses that may need sewer and water. He noted that current conditions along Route 80 are not conducive to business development due to aesthetics and access issues.

Mr. Miller reviewed the possible redevelopment of the former Town Hall site adjacent to the ball field. He noted the potential for the making of a Town Center with pedestrian linkages on that site which could cluster commercial activity. A concept plan for this could be created and zoning regulations could be evaluated to assure a pedestrian oriented pattern of development, not only for the former Town Hall site but for other areas of North Branford as well.

The plan indicates that the best opportunity for development of an industrial park is the 50 Fowler Road site. Mr. Miller indicated that some access improvements are required for the development of this site. Age restricted housing is another option for the site. Mr. Miller felt that the Town should take a more active role with the property owner to encourage development of that site.

Mr. Miller indicated that standards of the I-2 and I-3 zones should be relooked at and that the Northford Center Design District regulations should be reviewed as well.

The property at 1289 Foxon Road is another parcel which offers development potential. Mr. Miller spoke on the need for access management for properties along Route 80 to discourage additional curb cuts. He felt that the zoning regulations should include provisions and incentives to upgrade older commercial properties.

The final analysis is the capacity of the Town to encourage economic development. He noted that the Town must work toward common goals.

Mr. Faughnan, Chairman of the Planning and Zoning Commission, questioned how the Commission handles the "not in my backyard" syndrome and deals with the concerns of the citizens of the Town. He spoke on previous problems experienced with the neighbors adjacent to the Rivezzi property at 1289 Foxon Road.

Mr. Miller confirmed the limitations of the Town in that residential development is located throughout the Town. He indicated that the residents should be made to feel a part of the process, not reacting to a threat once a development wants to come in. He suggested neighborhood workshops, looking at potential properties in Town and getting public input prior to a developer coming in and seeing what can be done on that particular parcel of property. He pointed out that there are not many economic development parcels available in Town, so this should not be a huge undertaking.

Marie Burkle, President of the Chamber of Commerce, was concerned with investing in elderly housing due to the ups and downs of that type of market.

Mayor Doody departed the meeting at 7:50 p.m.

Mr. Miller addressed the issue of age-restricted housing. He stated that this type of housing keeps residents in Town and offers another housing choice.

Ms. Burkle was also concerned with bringing in upscale bio tech companies and services with employees that have a greater income than the average North Branford resident.

Mr. Miller noted that most residents currently work out of town and that this is the trend in the region. He felt that North Branford is being impacted by businesses located in Wallingford. He confirmed that taxes and affordability are issues but that these could have a positive effect as well.

Al Clemente, Chairman of the Economic Development Commission, spoke on the survey sent to the 393 businesses and the low response received. He felt that an important issue is to reach out to the existing businesses.

Mr. Miller concurred that the existing businesses should be a top priority in economic development as they are currently taxpayers and employers in the Town. He spoke on the need to foresee issues and problems and help to keep these businesses in Town.

Mr. Gunn reviewed the recommendation regarding curb cuts. He questioned what incentives could be used to get businesses to share driveways.

Mr. Miller suggested that the zoning regulations could be changed to allow for higher coverage and decreased setbacks if curb cuts are shared. He also spoke on the need for an incentive program for businesses to improve structures, noting that once one business improves their property, the next business will want to do so, too.

There was discussion on how the Town could offer a loan program for businesses. Mr. Miller addressed this issue. He spoke on the need to see what this would cost the Town and what the benefits would be of increased tax revenues. He felt that the loan should have a direct fiscal benefit to the Town. Mr. Miller spoke on the variety of benefits of low interest loan programs. He also suggested that the Town could offer partial grants to businesses to make improvements on their property but that specific guidelines must be in place. Utilizing these programs shows the need for an economic development coordinator to make these programs known to businesses.

Mr. Mullen, Vice Chairman of the Planning and Zoning Commission, questioned the development of the Fowler Road site. He spoke on the infrastructure which is needed to develop this site and questioned whether the Town should undertake the development of the infrastructure prior to having a developer in place.

Mr. Miller spoke on his experiences with this. He noted that the Town can assist developers with design work and other types of things as well as with the development of the infrastructure.

Steve Montesano, a member of the Chamber of Commerce, questioned the viability of the Town purchasing land and building an industrial development.

Mr. Miller felt that this type of venture is less beneficial to the Town due to costs. However, he pointed out that the Town would have complete control over the development and that there are State programs for assistance. He suggested that a joint partnership with a potential developer would be more beneficial to the Town.

Mr. Montesano was concerned with money being spent on the purchase of open space and not being placed into industrial development.

Mr. Miller pointed out that the service-oriented businesses are where the potential growth is. It is up to North Branford to capture as much of the economic activity in the area that it can.

Town Planner Carol Zebb spoke on the limitations of what is suitable for development in Town. She pointed out that although the road systems are linked to major arteries the Town is still perceived by businesses to be quite a distance from major highways.

There was discussion with respect to the recommendations contained in the plan.

Mr. Mullen asked what the projection is on how much the Grand List needs to grow and how fast.

Town Manager Karl Kilduff distributed a Draft Schedule For Implementation of CERC Recommendations and Responsible Actions. He noted the need to update the Plan of Development and provide a build out analysis. He also spoke on the need for the adoption of the CERC plan by the Town Council and Economic Development Commission. The Council requested that this item be placed on the next Council agenda.

Mrs. Lescovich, Secretary of the Planning and Zoning Commission, noted that this is a rural community and spoke on the need to attract small businesses which would fit with the character of the Town. She concurred with the need for residents to shop within the Town. She felt that the concentration should be along Route 80 which needs the most improvement.

There was discussion on the need to encourage residents to shop in North Branford.

Ms. Burkle stated that the Chamber of Commerce is working on several programs to enhance business in North Branford. One suggestion is to present welcome baskets to new residents highlighting the businesses in Town. She also encouraged businesses to join the Chamber of Commerce in order to obtain assistance in promoting their businesses within the Town. She stated that the Chamber wants to work together with both the Town and local businesses.

Councilor Wentworth stated that she felt that the CERC report is a step in the right direction.

There was further discussion on the CERC plan.

Town Manager Kilduff noted that North Branford does not have a system in place for economic development. He spoke on the need to have a master plan and a singular point of contact. He felt that the selection of a part time economic development consultant would be beneficial in fulfilling the Town's vision. This individual's sole job would be to work on a marketing strategy for the Town while reaching out to businesses, both existing and potential.

Mr. Gunn questioned if the business surveys showed any particular areas of the zoning regulations that the businesses perceived as a problem.

There was discussion on the regulations and zone changes which have taken place over the years.

Judy Murphy, of the Economic Development Commission, spoke on the need to have residents shop in Town.

3. DISCUSSION AND ACTION RE: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Council requested that this item be placed on the next Town Council agenda.

4. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: Councilor Wentworth moved, seconded by Councilor Fucci, to adjourn the meeting at 8:45 p.m.

VOTE: Passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosanne Krajewski,
Clerk to the Council