

NEW HAVEN CITY PLAN COMMISSION ADVISORY REPORT

RE: AMENDMENT TO CITY'S COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF DEVELOPMENT, Mill River District Plan

REPORT: 1488-08

PUBLIC HEARING HELD ON JANUARY 15, 2014, TRANSCRIPT AVAILABLE FROM POST REPORTING.

ADVICE: Approval

BACKGROUND

New Haven's economy is witnessing a revival of its industrial base and requires state of the art infrastructure and economic catalysts to properly encourage growth. For the city to increase its competitiveness in the 21st century, it needs to direct growth to shovel-ready districts that are well-suited for manufacturing and distribution businesses. The Mill River District is one such target area, given the District's history as an economic center and its adjacency to Downtown and regional transportation infrastructure. The District is also a key source of employment for nearby residents and has historically served as an urban environment where residents walk, bike, and take mass transit daily. The District represents one of the last remaining places in the city with large parcels of underdeveloped land and buildings able to capture the commercial and industrial economic growth in the region.

The City of New Haven's Office of the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) of New Haven have partnered on the development of a Mill River District Planning Study to promote a diverse economy with jobs at all skill levels. The multiphase study aims to expand the City's commercial and industrial base and better connect adjacent neighborhoods to the Mill River District, creating a viable planning framework tailored for growth in the light industrial sector. The Plan aims to outline a set of planning interventions that encompass site recommendations, new regulatory tools, and infrastructure improvements.

The Mill River District Plan identifies a number of economic opportunities in one of the city's primary industrial zones which houses more than 3,000 jobs, many held by New Haven residents who live nearby. Mill River already operates as a vital economic center for the city and houses large parcels of underutilized land attractive to commercial and industrial companies emerging within the region. The Mill River District Plan capitalizes on the district's attributes for development that include: industrial and food manufacturing that typically start small and grow as the customer base builds; and linking creative capital positioning with a strategy to build cottage and custom manufacturing. A vision to build on existing activities in the district has emerged and is organized around three economic development strategies:

- **Industrial Village:** This concept supports the development of small scale manufacturing and assembly operations that have storefronts for their goods and manufacturing in the rear (this promotes a form of manufacturing that we are starting to see more of). This concept would be enhanced by the development of a Tech Shop to reduce the risk for entrepreneurs interested in making physical goods by providing them with manufacturing equipment and access to trained students and displaced workers.
- **Home Improvement Marketplace:** Mill River has a strong home improvement base comparable to big box retailers with a mix of specialized services in plumbing, lighting, tile and paints.

The city wants to build on this strong base and the Plan calls for creating a pedestrian friendly marketplace to serve as a magnet for additional home improvement uses, wholesale and retail activity. This expansion would activate under-utilized and vacant spaces for “pop-up” or kiosk to increase foot traffic and improve the overall character of the district, promoting people to walk or drive to these specialized home improvement purveyors.

- **Mercantile Food Market:** Based on the growth in the local food movement, New Haven’s historic relationship with food manufacturing and the city’s need for additional grocery merchandise, the concept of a mercantile food market has emerged. New Haven’s economy suggests a growing level of economic and business activity in food production at the Long Wharf and Mill River districts. Food production businesses have been clustered in New Haven because of an experienced high quality workforce with easy access to larger markets in Boston and New York. The concept suggests blending wholesale food terminal located at Long Wharf with retail and production outlets concentrated in the Mill River District. A well-designed and well programmed food mercantile market can be a major attraction for tourists as well, which is an added benefit.

The Mill River District Plan calls for new zoning districts based on performance criteria that promotes a variety of complimentary uses and conforms to modern modes of production and manufacturing, not by the old fashion use categories. The waterfront location does present some challenges as it relates to storm surge and environmental remediation however, it is essential that coastal communities in CT begin to address these issues to protect the in-place investment and in the case of Mill River, a significant job base. The Mill River Plan begins to lay out the various options open to communities to deal with these issues and a good place to start this discussion. It is also an important part of the City’s multiple sector approach to economic development that includes bio-medical/life sciences, education, technology/new media and manufacturing industries.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned in Section 296 of the Charter of the City of New Haven, it is the duty of the City Plan Commission “to prepare a comprehensive plan for the systemic and harmonious development of the city.” This duty is codified in the Charter of City of New Haven, Section 179 (c). In addition, the plan is prepared in a manner consistent with Connecticut General Statutes, Section 8-23 and must be updated at least once every ten years. It takes into account the State Plan of Conservation and Development, pursuant to Chapter 297.

The current Comprehensive Plan for the city (adopted in October 2003) indicates that the Plan shows the Commission’s most desirable use of land within the City of New Haven for residential, recreational, commercial, industrial, conservation, and other purposes and for the most desirable density of the population in the city. Any amendments proposed to the Plan shall be submitted to the City Plan department for administrative processing and the Executive Director may submit an amendment on behalf of the Commission or on behalf of the City Plan Department. The Plan identifies Mill River area as an industrial area intended to promote manufacturing/production activities, and more intense employment generation in a manner consistent with light industrial zoning uses. The proposed amendment to this Plan describes a strategy for the development of the Mill River industrial area conforming to modern modes of production and manufacturing. The Mill River Plan also begins to lay out the various options available to deal with waterfront issues which have become significant in recent years.

Since the City’s economy has been witnessing a revival of its industrial base and requires state of the art infrastructure and economic catalysts to properly encourage industrial growth, the Department

concur with the amendment proposed to the Comprehensive Plan and thus encourages the creation of new zoning districts based on performance criteria to promote the creation of a variety of complimentary uses in this part of the city.

FINDINGS AND ADVICE

Based on the information provided above, the City Plan Commission recommends that Board of Alders approve the proposed Mill River District Plan and adopt it as an amendment to the current Comprehensive Plan of the City (adopted in 2003) pursuant to Section 8-23 of Connecticut General Statutes and Section 296 of the Charter of City of New Haven.

ADOPTED: January 15, 2014
Edward Mattison
Chair

ATTEST: 
Karyn M. Gilvarg, AIA
Executive Director