

The Times

Transit Villages: Time To Get On Board Why West Windsor Plan Stands Above Others

Sunday May 6, 2007

Emotions are running high these days in West Windsor, where a proposed transit village around the Princeton Junction Train Station has sparked a controversy that could lead to a major shake-up in local elections next week.

Opponents of the plan cite concerns about increased traffic, additional schoolchildren, higher property taxes and broken promises from the state when it comes time to actually build the transit village. The experiences in Washington and Hamilton townships are often invoked as cautionary tales.

Are these fears overblown? Almost certainly.

New Jersey's four premiere land use organizations—the Regional Planning Partnership (RPP), the Regional Plan Association (RPA), the Municipal Land Use Center (MLUC), and New Jersey Future (NJF)—have all kept close tabs on the transit village project in West Windsor because we hope this plan could serve as a model for the future landscape of the Garden State.

There is no question that New Jersey needs more center-based or transit-oriented development (TOD), since this is one of the few ways the state can ensure long-term prosperity by accommodating needed commercial and residential development without trampling over our remaining open spaces and farm fields.

Transit villages are also an excellent way of reducing our dependency on cars. Indeed, a federally-funded study conducted by RPP found that if towns along the Route 1 corridor built more Town Centers or TODs, instead of the kind of development allowed by current zoning, there would be as much as a 60 percent reduction in the growth of automobile trips.

Why West Windsor's Story Is Unique

The reported experience of the half-built Town Center in Washington Township and the battle over the proposed development at the Hamilton Train Station have raised concerns for opponents of the transit village in West Windsor.

But what happened in Washington and Hamilton townships is different enough from the situation in West Windsor as to be irrelevant.

First, Washington's still-unfinished Town Center was begun at least ten years ago as an overlay to its Master Plan, not as a redevelopment zone, as in the case of West Windsor. This means West Windsor will have more control over the developers of the site. In recent years, negotiations between Washington Township and some individual developers with constantly changing plans have held up the final decision-making on a bypass and other infrastructure for so long that state agencies have withdrawn the commitments that they made years ago—the money has been used elsewhere.

Concerns over losing funds for the infrastructure needed in West Windsor's redevelopment plan are overblown: the Department of Transportation has indicated it has already set aside money in its budget for infrastructure related to the transit village project. Trouble can be kept at bay if West Windsor maintains its diligence in keeping the state's attention and continues to focus on implementing its plan.

Second, the Town Center is not to blame for the fact that Washington Township has had to build a high school. In fact, independent studies confirm that Town Centers and TODs produce fewer school children than ordinary subdivisions.

Third, Hamilton's experience has been rocky, in part, because the public outreach was not as extensive as West Windsor's, although both communities have been exceedingly careful about ensuring a transparent, step-by-step public involvement process. In West Windsor, before a redevelopment consultant was even sought, Mayor Shing-fu Hsueh spent several years in the community consultation process. The proposal went to the Planning Board, had many public airings, and involved a number of other officials before the Mayor proceeded. In addition, West Windsor has made it clear that the Township is the leader in the redevelopment process, not the consultant.

Transforming West Windsor's Princeton Junction into a place that residents can be proud of—with contaminated sites cleaned up, an amphitheater built for the farmers market and other amenities added—has been a goal sought by a majority of the Township's residents for many years.

But a vocal minority poses a threat to the project. It is the hope of NJ's leading planning groups that the majority of West Windsor's residents can see beyond the controversy and realize that they have a unique opportunity to set a precedent for the state—in addition to improving the lives of the thousands of people served by the Princeton Junction train station.

This op-ed was jointly written by Dianne Brake, President of RPP (www.planningpartners.org), Carlos Rodrigues, VP and NJ Director for RPA (www.rpa.org), Martin Bierbaum, Executive Director of the MLUC, and Teri Jover, Acting Interim Executive Director for NJF (www.njfuture.org)