Public Hearing Minutes
East Haddam Village Revitalization Project
Centerbridge Group Presentation
Nathan Hale Ray High School Auditorium
YouTube Live
Thursday, May 20, 2021

Attendees Present:
Board of Selectmen: R. Smith; C. Quinn
East Haddam Village Revitalization Commission: W. Gerrish; M. Kolek; J. Curtin; R. Dill; M. Walter
Board of Finance: W. DiCristoforo; B. Dutch; J. Corbett; W. DiCristoforo; T. Gelston; H. Thomas
Centerbridge Group: J. Riley; M. Wilson; J. Pollard: K. Pollard
Also Present: Members of the public in person and via virtual media.

First Selectman Rob Smith opened the meeting at 7:00 p.m. and welcomed all participants. He reviewed what the Town's residents would be voting on in the referendum concerning this project stating that the vote would be whether or not to empower the Board of Selectmen to negotiate a definitive agreement with the Centerbridge Group for the transfer of ownership and development of the parcel of land at 1 & 7 Main Street.

Mr. Smith noted that the vote would not be to approve any of the actual plans for the site. He advised that the developers would have to submit their plans through the Planning & Zoning Commission's process for review and approval as well as a number of other local and state agencies.

Mr. Smith stated that, due to the number of requests to attend the meeting which could not be accommodated because of social distancing requirements, a second meeting will be scheduled in June. He summarized the process for the meeting, stating that an opportunity for the public to voice their comments and questions would occur after the Centerbridge Group made its presentation.

Mr. William Gerrish thanked the participants for coming out and reviewed some of the history of the Village Revitalization Committee (EHVRC) and its work. He reviewed the criteria that was established to evaluate any organization that responded to the Town's RFQ and RFP and stated that the Committee had unanimously recommended the Centerbridge Group based on their qualifications and development proposal. He noted that the Committee was originally established in 2009 and stated that he believes tonight's presentation is an important step forward in the process.

Mr. Gerrish introduced Mr. William DiCristofaro, Chairman of the East Haddam Board of Finance, who introduced the members of the Board of Finance.

Mr. Jeff Riley, Principal of Centerbrook Architects and Planners, introduced his partner, Mary Wilson, and provided some background on Centerbridge Group, LLC (CBG) and its partners. He stated that they have been working on the Goodspeed Landing project for six years. He noted the plans call for 94,000 sf of mixed-use development on 3.72 acres, and is estimated to cost $51M of private funding to develop.

Mr. Riley provided the history of the East Haddam Village and reviewed the Town's goals for the site, as set forth in its Plan of Conservation and Development. He emphasized that the sale of the property will not be finalized until all building permits are secured. He stated that, other than CBG's proposal, the options for the site are to turn it into a park at the citizens' expense or do nothing to it and neither option would provide any tax revenues to the Town.

Mr. Riley played a video presentation which provided information regarding several of CBG's similar projects and their plans for developing the 1 & 7 Main Street site.

There was a break at 8:07 p.m. and the meeting reconvened at 8:15 p.m.

The following public comments and questions were presented at the meeting:

- Ms. Charlotte Gelston stated she feels the perspective in the presentation is not accurate and expressed her concern about the size of the green space, increased traffic flow and parking problems. She stated she feels the plans include "high density" permanent living spaces and said she would prefer a scaled down project. She also expressed concern about how the businesses will sustain themselves without a significant increase in traffic.

- Mr. Casey Carle stated that he supports the plans and thanked everyone involved in the project. He said that he expects the plans will evolve into a reasonable sized project but expressed concern about how the development work might overlap with the planned Swingbridge repair work. He noted that the CTDOT is doing a good job communicating when significant traffic impacts will occur and he asked (1) if the projects will happen at the same time, and (2) if CBG will communicate similar information on detours, etc. with the public. Mr. Riley estimated that the Goodspeed Landing project is 3 years away from its heavy construction phase and stated that he cannot provide an answer about re-routing traffic at this time; however, he stated that he has worked on many complicated projects and the issues have always been resolved.

- Mr. Albert Viscio provided some personal background information, stated he is in favor of the project and noted that it will be incumbent on the Town to put "the right stuff" in the referendum question. He also noted that he has seen numerous development projects get delayed and look to the municipality for help via tax increment financing (TIF). He stated that he does not feel the risk for the project should be put on the Town's tax payers and, therefore, he would not support a TIF for this project.

- Mr. John Olin stated that he feels the project "blurs the boundaries between art and reality". He stated he does not favor top-down direction for developing the site but prefers "community development". He stated that the presented plan is an "artificially imposed extravaganza".

- Mr. Jonathan Silvers expressed his concerns about the proposal and stated he does not feel the project is based in reality and noted that many businesses have closed due to the pandemic and stated that he believes the developers haven't calibrated the plan for a post-Covid environment. He also stated that if the proposal goes forward, density and traffic in the Village will become "nightmarish". He stated he would prefer the site be turned into a park and suggested the Town take a step back to allow the opponents of the proposal to put together their own film showing the environmental reality of the project.

- Mr. Mark Walter noted that the Village revitalization project has been on the drawing board for many years and stated that the caliber of CBG's work is outstanding. He noted that the project may seem very large; however, in reality it will most likely be implemented in phases and will have to go before all the Town's Boards and Commissions to secure approval. He stated that the Town has a rare opportunity to re-create the Village center and expressed concern that the buildings on the Village will die if the sale of property to CBG is not approved. He stated that he strongly supports CBG's proposal.

- Ms. Lisa McNellis stated that she feels the proposal is a great opportunity, but she is concerned about overwhelming the space. She noted that the re-development may be "hell to go through" but believes it will be worth it. She stated she hopes the projects happens.

- Ms. Kim Dodge noted that the Goodspeed Theatre doesn't pay property taxes and discussed the sewer project. She expressed concern about increased traffic in the Village and the project's impact on existing Town businesses. She said that she supports converting the site to a park.

  Mr. Riley confirmed that one of the options for the site is for the Town to fund the creation of a park on the property but noted that a park would not generate any tax revenue. He stated that some people consider their proposal a "pipe dream" but said that there needs to be a big picture vision and then everyone must work hard to make it a reality.

- Ms. Amalia Shaltiel stated she prefers a community-based vision not a "Disneyworld" proposal. She expressed concern about the new tenants replacing existing businesses and stated she is very much against the proposal.

- Ms. Terri Anderson-Murray stated that the proposal is very much "out of East Haddam's league" and way to big. She noted that East Haddam is a bedroom community and expressed concern about the scale of the proposal. She said she feels there could be compromise between the proposal and what some other Town's people want.

- Mr. Dean Pelletti thanked the EHVRC and CBG for the presentation and noted that this is a first step. He noted that the expense to remove the old Town garage and perform the related hazardous waste clean-up would be covered by the developers. Mr. Pelletti stated that he likes the general idea of CBG's proposal but expressed concern about the scale of the proposed development and noted that the planners must be cognizant of an increased traffic flow. He pointed out that no other developers have come forward with a plan for the site and recommended the citizens give CBG a chance to carry their vision forward. He thanked CBG and the EHVRC for their efforts.

- Mr. Walker Burrow asked if "No Compete" agreements or other concessions would be made with existing businesses in the Village.

  Mr. Riley stated that the developers have no intention to put any of the existing merchants out of business. Ms. Pollard stated that their vision for a tenant mix is desirable of small locally owned businesses and they have no intention to "cut the pie". She stated they want to draw more businesses to the area so that is a more enjoyable experience for residents and visitors.

- Ms. Elena Kotowski noted that she currently has to drive at least half an hour to do any shopping and stated that she supports the project and is pleased about the potential for increased tax revenue. She stated that the potential for increased traffic will not impact the majority of East Haddam and suggested adding a skywalk across Main Street in the Village would make it safer to cross for pedestrians.

  Mr. Riley stated that the Town's 2019-2029 Plan of Conservation and Development notes that there is $97.6M local spending potential; however, only $16.3M is actually spent in Town; consequently, there is potential for this project to capture a large part of that spending that is going out of Town. An unidentified attendee refuted Mr. Riley's statement noting that most of a

household's spending is consumed by housing, food, and gasoline. He stated that a big-box anchor store would be needed to capture a significant portion of the Town's spending potential. Mr. Riley stated that the project is not intended to be a shopping center but rather residential with some retail and restaurants. He stated it is would be a tourism destination with the Goodspeed Theatre, the River Cruises, Gillette Castle State Park, as the anchors.

The attendee later provided more clarification regarding his comment about capturing additional spending dollars noting that he was not suggesting adding a large anchor store to the project.

- Ms. Jenn Hayn stated that she lives and works in the Village and noted its beauty. She stated that she works at Julia Balfour and the team there is very excited that the Town has initiated these meetings. Ms. Hayn said she likes to walk to the post office and shops and down by the river; however, at night she generally goes to Essex or Chester for an evening out and would like to have some more local alternatives. She stated that she would like to have more things to do in Town. She thanked everyone present for participating in these conversations and encouraged everyone to continue to communicate and work together.

- Mr. Mark Walter stated that parking has always been a challenge in the Village. He noted that there is a large state-owned lot across the river and suggested that water-taxis could be used to shuttle people across to the Village. He noted the federal government's current focus on infrastructure improvements and stated that the RiverCOG could be helpful in securing state and federal funding for related projects; however, the Town needs to lock in plans to take advantage of those opportunities.

- Ms. Erin Trawick stated that she travels across the Swingbridge several times a day for business and noted that delays at exit 7 off of Route 9 (the intersection of Routes 82 and 154) are more problematic from back-ups when the bridge is opened for water traffic. She noted that there are a number of seasonal and weekend residents that have transitioned from urban residences to East Haddam due to the pandemic and many of them travel out of Town for restaurants and small shop experiences, spending their dollars in Chester, Essex, Old Saybrook, etc.

- Mr. Chris Read noted that small towns everywhere are losing population and property tax revenues and stated that he supports the project because it will grow the tax base. He noted that it would be important to consider the impact on taxes both with and without the project going forward.

- Mr. Jonathan Silvers asked if the developers will be asking for a tax abatement. Mr. Riley responded that CBG will ask for all of the normal development incentives but those incentives have not yet been discussed in any detail with the Town. Mr. Silvers stated that the Town should be prepared for a tax abatement as a component of the project and Mr. Riley responded the Board of Finance must consider the net positive impact on the Town's finances.

  He also inquired about who will bear the cost of infrastructure improvements and First Selectman Smith stated that the Town will be responsible for infrastructure improvements; however, they will be looking into grants and possibly a TIF to fund same. Mr. Smith noted the ballpark estimate for the Town's responsibility is $5M.

  Mr. Silvers stated that he is deeply concerned about the "aspirational vision" of the project vs. the public's need to shop cheaply. He expressed concern about previous development failures in Town and Mr. Riley reiterated that the sale of the site will not go forward until the financing is in

place and all building permits are secured. Mr. Pollard pointed out that the proposal is not exclusively a retail center; the proposal is a for a mixed-use center with a residential component, gathering spaces, and limited retail. He stated that the vision is for the Village to become a tourist destination.

- Ms. Debra Mott stated that she supports the project and noted that the proposal is a wonderful first step. She noted that, before moving to East Haddam, she visited many small towns that were "desolate" because people stopped having a vision for them. She noted that she is pleased that the vision presented maintains a small town New England village look and understands that the project may get tweaked along the way. Ms. Mott asked citizens to keep in mind that the people involved in the proposal are not trying to harm the Village and encouraged them to continue to share their ideas for the Village.

- Mr. Jef Wolter spoke about the loss of old Moodus and stated he feels that the Town has not been very good at development. He provided some personal background, including his involvement with the Goodspeed Theater and on Town Boards and Commissions. He stated the Goodspeed Theatre is not taking a lead on re-developing the Village but would benefit from having a "development partner". Mr. Wolter stated he supports the project but emphasized the need to approach the options seriously. He stated that if citizens want a park on the site, they should present a formal proposal; however, if the Town moves forward with the vision presented at the meeting, it must address all the potential issues comprehensively.

- Mr. David Carbo stated that he liked the vision and the access to the river. He stated that he is concerned about the safety of the crosswalk and the seasonal nature of the Goodspeed Theatre, the Essex Steam Train, the river, etc. and how the shops will weather the off-season months.

Mr. Gerrish read the following written communications regarding the proposal which were received electronically:

- Laurel White
  For the record I am not in favor of this proposal. I want the town to own that property for town use for things like music on the river and farmer's market and the arts league etc.
  thank you.

- Dot and Caley Millen
  My daughter, Caley Millen, was the writer of the NYT travel article about our town as one of 50 best places. We spoke about the plan for the town and we concur that it has the effect of a carnival. It is an over-the-top, busy, scattered architecturally annoying concept design that makes our town look more like a play land than the lovely, New England town that it is.

  The plan is so dizzying, it reminds us of an arcade. The presence of our town's charm is lacking, attacked by an almost comical plan of development.

  Yes, we can modernize, but we do not need tasteless, unattractive apartments on top of buildings. Why is the land along the water to be utilized for a select few who can afford to reside there-three stories for the wealthy. It is our treasured Connecticut River (A Nature Conservancy Last Great Place) and should have an overlook, a place for all to visit, not just the select few. The current plan is very sad, indeed.

If we wish to bring more tourists about, we need to retain the feel, look and heart of our town, not bring it down to junk rinky-dink status. The proposed architecture is eclectic and distasteful - it is an atrocity. We are better than this.

Why not enhance our small town look to that like our neighbor Chester....or Woodstock VT... towns that siren in visitors from all over due to charm, calm, yet modern, quaintness.

Time for another go at it - it must be redesigned.

- William Riley
  My name is William Riley. My wife is Dr. Susan Forster. Our address is 2 Creamery Road. We wish to record our opposition to the proposed riverfront development just north of the swing bridge. It seems to us that it will unnecessarily add traffic to an already congested bridge and downtown, add competition to existing businesses, some of which are already struggling, and convert what could be an attractive riverfront vista such as a mini park, into an entirely unnecessary additional mini shopping center.

- Elizabeth Wardwell
  We do … agree this development would be wonderful for more business and just for more of a downtown area for East Haddam. I think it would reflect positively for East Haddam and a more desirable place to live and not just viewed as a red neck town with a bunch of strange people. Thank you.

- Nancy Schroeder
  I cannot attend the meeting in person, but want to make my opinion and questions known to the Board. I usually support change in many areas of life, but I have four major questions and concerns about this project.

  The scale of the artist's rendering makes the square footage near the bridge seem much larger than it is --- especially the wide exit area from the bridge --- and includes properties not owned by the Town. It appears to be beautifully artistic but not realistic.

  What would be the Town's investment required to complete this plan, or would it be privately funded? What guarantees of timely and "to plan" completion would be given to the Town by the developers? It should not be the speculative burden of the taxpayer.

  What research has been done regarding which shops and restaurants would commit to renting space here before the project goes ahead as described? Will those proposed shops and restaurants require incentives to carry them through the winter? People cite Chester as a destination that East Haddam could emulate, but even Chester does not have 40 restaurants and shops in its downtown area.

  Has a traffic and parking study for this plan been done for the projected increase of visitors? We are already expected to have traffic constrictions caused by the bridge repair. There is traffic backup on both sides of the River on "normal" days when the bridge is open. Has the State been consulted about handling traffic projections? Can we be informed by the condition that there is not enough parking for crowds at Music on the River events?

  Taxpayers have a right to know many more facts and details well in advance of any referendum.

Mr. Riley made a closing statement and noted that he and his partner's only intention is "to do something wonderful for the Town" they live in. Mr. Smith thanked the participants, the EHVRC and the BOF for their work on this project.

The presentation meeting ended at 9:30 p.m.