SE Town Board Work Session Recap 8/13/09

Hi All,

Well, well., well... If you're living in Southeast guess what's looming in your future? And I do mean looming. C'mon, take a guess... a wild guess.

A six (6) story, 200 room hotel! And if that's not bad enough it'll be accompanied by 250,000 square feet of retail. Where, you might ask? That's easy. Where else but on property currently zoned 'Rural Commercial' (RC). Because nothing says "rural" like almost a half million square feet of shopping and 200 'upscale' suites.

My head is gonna explode.

Seriously we have yet another overblown, out-of-scale, unnecessary, worthy-only-of-Danbury, brought-to-you-by- the-always-debonair-Harold Lepler project in the works. It will be located across Route 84 from that beacon of great design-the 'Highlands/Home Depot' shopping center (I guess because that's been so successful, what with Linen's and Things long gone).

At the regular Town Board meeting last night the entire dog and pony show was sadly predictable including the usual cast of characters. Presenting the latest travesty was Mr. L's landscaping firm of choice, LADA (shockingly minus Terry Hahnwho must be on an August break), as was Southeast developer's attorney-de-jour, Rick O'Rourke. My only advice here, buy stock in Keene and Beene.

Oh but, the story boards were fabulous! The stores will be on two levels and pretty much 'invisible' from the road. The hotel however, looking very 30's glam, could be seen from (and I'm just guessing here) the northeast corner of Vermont. Seriously, if I heard correctly the hotel, excuse me, the 'upscale hotel' is being built on, what else? A ridge line. On the bright side the roof can probably house yet another cell tower... Can't have too many.

The bottom line here is that the SE Town Board will most likely become the 'Lead Agency'. I was told that this was because of the 'scope of the project'. But really, that's complete bullsh\*t. The TB will be lead agency so that those pesky little things called variances will not be needed. Stay with me here. It's the latest trend in SE and everybody's doing it! It's actually 'fast tracking' and it appears to be working.

So, if this parcel is not rezoned as requested how many variances would be needed? Ahhhhh, let me count the ways...

For example: The allowable height for buildings in SE is now 35'. But this proposal calls for over double that number- 72'. But no problem here because the lead agency gets to determine what will be allowed on this spot- zon... errrrrr, rezoning. Because once this parcel becomes Highway/Commercial the TB calls the shots- and, the sky's the limit. Or at least 6 stories of it.

No building on our ridgelines? No problem. See above. No more big-box stores allowed? No problem, see above. Only accessory-use retail allowed? No problem, see above. No additional sewer systems allowed in the county? No problem, hook into one conveniently associated with the applicant- across the street. I think by now you get the picture.

The specs are pretty straight forward:

- The site is approximately 50 acres
- 'Upscale' Hotel, Restaurant and Conference Center: 200 Rooms, 6 floors (72'- over double the allowable) with a footprint of 35,000 square feet equaling a grand total of 210,000 square feet- minus the basement.
- 200 Parking Spaces for the hotel. No mention of how many for the retail side.
- Retail, Retail, Retail! Two (2) levels with 'large and small' stores totaling 250,000 square feet

The 'promises' are:

- Mixed use development
- Use of 'gray water'
- 'Looking at green design'
- Low level lighting
- Money, money, money!!! Both Tax \$\$\$ and yet to be legislated 'Hotel Room Tax'
- Sewer at Terravest
- Traffic Analysis

Just for fun let's take it from the top.

## **Upscale Hotel:**

We've all heard this one a jillion times. Remember Mr. Camarda's pledge in Carmel? Now not even a flea bag motel is in the offing. Seriously, are you telling me that someone really wants to spend an expensive evening overlooking Home Depot, Route 84 and Ace Endico? And before I forget, the complex is a mere 170 from the cliff's edge- albeit chain-linked off.

### Retail:

A big, box store? Let me guess? Costco? (with apologies to Costco if I'm wrong) Well no one was saying, but I'm thinking this is a brilliant strategy for both Camarda and Lepler. Here's how it works. Lepler tells Southeast that if we don't move fast we lose Costco to Patterson Crossing. Camarda tells Patterson/Kent that if they don't move fast Costco goes to SE. Brilliant! Kudos to Costco and both applicants! Truly ingenious!

'Mixed Use' development: Somehow the true definition of 'mixed use' development has been lost on Putnam. 'Mixed use' actually means, well, mixed use. For example in a true 'mixed use' project there would be some housing- preferably some affordable housing. Perhaps lodging, some entertainment, recreation, retail, restaurant and even services. Here mixed use means hotel, retail and one chain (but 'upscale'!) restaurant. On the plus, kinda-mixed side you'll be only minutes (depending on traffic) from Southeast's 'Open Space'- hey, has anyone even been there yet?

## **Green Design:**

Oh, just knock it off. We've been talking about green design for over five years and all we've gotten for our trouble is a few sky-lights and already-in-the-code lighting. No matter what you here no 'green codes' have been enacted.

#### Low Level Lighting:

See above. Still I love when applicants trot this out as though they were building LEED's platinum.

#### Money:

# Sewer:

At Terravest? Enough for the fully expanded Ace Endico? 64 Senior Housing units? The county building? Etc, etc, etc? And if there is capacity will it be 'a dollar a flush' like the Highlands? I mean, it's not like those tenants were thrilled with the service.

## **Traffic Analysis:**

Oh, let me guess... No impact at all. In fact we'll be turning the two lane Route 312 overpass into a one lane dirt road!

Sadly, after one lame, but pictorially dazzling, presentation the Town Board voted itself lead agency. The most depressing part was the rush- I mean, no one I know (save obviously the Town and Planning Board) was aware of this

project before last night. And whether you're for or against it I think we can all agree that a 6-story building and more bigbox retail on already jammed 312/84 junction will impact most residents of Southeast. Interestingly Supervisor Rights voted against the resolution. I've no idea why and it pains me to think that he was right.

Bottom line: You might think that our comprehensive plan was at least worth the paper it was printed on- but it's not. Not by a long shot. Just look at the rezone Brewster Honda is asking for and now look at 'The Crossroads' at 312. Think there might be a pattern here? Between all the meetings and Boards I see Rick O'Rourke in front of I'm beginning to think it's 'Groundhog Day'.

Whew- that's it for now- I've gotta go take a valium. As always feel free to e-mail me with any questions you might have.

With Best Regards, Lynne Eckardt