

May 17, 2007

New plaza envisioned downtown

Study group hears plan for Bank of America site

By Rachel Kirkpatrick



The proposed new pedestrian-friendly plaza behind Bank of America on Elm Street features revamped passageways leading toward Park Street and South Avenue. On the right is an innovative underground parking structure.

Take a look behind Bank of America.

There's the parking lot — the responsibility of the bank — and two alley ways that connect to Park Street and South Avenue.

For such a central location, the current area appears neglected. It's lined with Dumpsters and a dilapidated garage filled with miscellaneous garbage.

But look at that same area and picture a "green" plaza: A town center for civic and social activity equipped with outdoor seating, space for new retail businesses, offices and residential apartments, as well as an innovative underground parking structure.

Armed with a project three years in the making, a team of local individuals are working to transform the area, presenting the idea for the first time in the public arena at the Downtown Study Committee meeting Friday morning, May 11.

The committee posed questions and provided recommendations for the group.

In an interview with the Advertiser Friday, New Canaan native Ted Bonner, landlord to the property occupied by the bank and the sociological adviser of the group, explained the driving force behind the "eye-opening" idea, as committee members commented.

One of the problems at hand is the fact that Bank of America is under a 100-year lease, signed with a predecessor of the bank in the 1950s, when Mr. Bonner's grandfather owned the property.

"You can never foresee how plans change, you can never foresee how the dynamics of communities change," Mr. Bonner said.

It was difficult to get the bank to comply with the lease details, or to even get a hold of a high level employee, he said.

Meanwhile the roof needs to be replaced and the building itself hasn't had maintenance in 50 years.

"As the fish kept getting bigger and bigger, it became clear that this building fell off the radar. They just didn't know what was going on," Mr. Bonner said.

"You get to a point as a property owner, where you're left in a bind: Do you take on Bank of America, or not?" he said.

With support from the Town and the abutting landlord's approval, the solution would be to create pedestrian-friendly zones out to each street, "reinvigorating" surrounding businesses by improving automobile and pedestrian access.

Stairs would lead down from the lot by Bob's Sports and a designated enclosure equipped with a trash compactor would address the public health issues aggravated by the Dumpsters.

Certain delivery trucks would be able to access the passageways, keeping them off of Elm Street.

The Bank of America building would be renovated to include a second-floor, which Mr. Bonner discovered it was designed for,

citing steel I-beams and double layer-brick.

Abutting businesses would have the option of creating rear entrances which could increase revenues. Tax incentives may make the proposal more favorable, Mr. Bonner said.

He hopes groups such as the Garden Club and the Rotary Club would become involved in the project.

At the meeting Friday, Mr. Bonner, along with local attorney, Joseph Rucci, described what towns across the nation are undergoing, most recently Darien.

Called "urban redevelopment," it is about strengthening the "fabric" of the community with design, using the principles it was founded on to address the health and vitality of the people, as well as the economy.

As Laszlo Papp, committee member and P&Z chairman, pointed out, it was the intention of the forefathers to design the Magic Circle as a park and walk destination.

New Canaan's village is a popular destination, but the downtown can sometimes feel like a series of crosswalks where pedestrians compete with cars and trucks.

"All of these things that used to be a part of the village — which is walking, socializing, having everything in the center of town — we've sort of forgot that traditional model as we became more over reliant on the automobile," Mr. Bonner said.

Mr. Bonner attended a Regional Planning Association meeting in New York City on "what is about to be an environmentally friendly revolution," because public health and energy issues are so severe.

"The thing that was most shocking is that there was probably four of us from Connecticut," he said. "Connecticut is just behind the curve on this. I think we're one of the first projects to really try and push the environmental and public health issues."

One of the ways the project addresses environmental concerns while providing parking is to install an innovative underground parking structure where the current bank parking lot exists, which would provide roughly 148 spaces underground and 28 above.

Surface level parking lots "heat up the environment dramatically," Mr. Bonner said.

According to research, if all of the parking lots in the United States were combined, it would cover roughly the entire Northeast.

"Parking garages are aesthetically not pleasing," he said, "it's a structure that does not compliment social living."

Not to mention they produce safety and environmental issues, and reduce property values, he added.

In Savannah, Ga., Mr. Bonner said, above-ground parking structures are being demolished, replaced with underground parking, in an effort to restore its sense of historic community.

All that would be seen above ground is a carport. Run by a valet system, people could drop their cars off and call when they are ready to come pick them up.

The parking facility complies with the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), "more than any other lot in New Canaan," Mr. Bonner said.

There are new technologies being utilized all over Europe and some areas of the United States that allow a person to simply swipe a card, and the car is parked automatically underground.

The car would then be ready for the user within four minutes.

If the town wished, a public/private partnership could be formed to maintain the garage, although the group is able to support the entire project with its own capital, Mr. Bonner said.

Some committee members were concerned with increased traffic pulling out onto Cherry Street.

But the varied uses of the buildings nearby, Mr. Bonner said, would create a steady flow of traffic and with the new parking structure, break up the time between cars pulling in and out by a couple of minutes.

"There's a reason why people don't want change," Mr. Bonner said. "People are very cynical of the process in which their communities are developed — planning boards who are not that interested in how to create effective change, property owners and developers who are trying to ram through projects without much consideration for the great impact of the community, and then there's typically a group of citizens that are just not heard."

New Canaan, he said, is dynamic. There are many groups involved in the community, such as Staying Put in New Canaan, and fresh faces on the Planning & Zoning board.

"This should only be the beginning for the Town," Mr. Bonner said, describing how New Canaan might continue to implement "green" ideas such as bike paths. "There's so many directions where they can go just to make what we call 'multi-mobile

transportation' — then their congestion and environmental problems go away.”

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[Top of Page](#)

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