

## **West Windsor Transit Village – A Treatise**

Over the years in America the good sense of building a town around rail stop has been proven. Today, it is even more beneficial to have people living in a community close to a rail stop...it takes cars off the road, encourages walking, builds community, and reduces pollution. It is called Smart Growth and it often takes form as New Urbanism.

West Windsor, with one of the busiest transit stations on the North East corridor, is an ideal candidate for the development of such a new community. Hillier Architecture was hired to execute a development plan that would enable the creation of such a community through determination of the best land uses and zoning. Behind those determinations there are basic concepts and terms that warrant further description and explanation than can be given in the verbal presentation. I am please to share those with you with this treatise.

J. Robert Hillier, FAIA, PP

### **Land Use vs. Site Design**

The creation of a redevelopment plan involves identifying the infrastructure roads that will both connect and divide the land up in the most efficient and effective way so that the traffic flows more easily and the imposition on intersections is balanced. Within the pattern established by the infrastructural roads, land uses should be designated. Such designations could be retail, commercial, office, laboratory, green space, residential, mixed use with residential or offices above retail stores. All are possible designated land uses.

Public uses such as green space, park lands, recreational areas or even specific sites for municipal buildings are also part of a land use plan.

Density, coverage, floor area ratio, the amount of impervious surface along with setbacks and heights further define through zoning the specifics of the land use. It is then up to the individual land owners to develop their specific Site Plan within the context of the established land use and the zoning parameters as specified.

There will be cases where the zoning may require a consistent setback along a street or a road in order to establish a sense of a street frontage over time. This is often referred to as Form-Based Zoning.

In order to demonstrate the land use and give the viewer a sense of the scale of the community, generic building blocks representative of the particular zoning have been placed on the land use map but do not represent a specific Site Plan or a specific design. They simply prove that the land use being recommended will work in accommodating the appropriate buildings.

### **About Green Space**

It is hoped that 50% of the entire redevelopment area will be designated as green space protected forever. This green space will be made up of environmentally sensitive areas, the buffer protecting those areas, particularly useful or meaningful woods or meadows. There may be cases where land designed as green space is, under current zoning, capable of being developed. In such cases, transferable development rights (TDRs) can be used to take the developable floor area ratio (FAR) from the land designated as green space and sell it to a developer on another piece of land thus allowing that developer to develop his land with greater intensity. The price of the development right is negotiated but is usually set at the going market rate on an FAR/square foot basis. For instance, land on Route 1 now sells for approximately \$35 per FAR/s.f. or per square foot of building that one is able to build.

### **Why Density?**

Density is not simply about intensifying land use. Density is about intensifying land use in particular places where it makes sense so that other land can be more sparsely developed or preserved as green space.

This approach can work on a township wide basis or simply on a redevelopment zone basis. As an example, let us say that you have 20 acres of land which is zoned for 1-acre single family lots so that you could get approximately 18 homes of 3,000 s.f. on that land. Let us say that, instead, I would want to develop 36 condominiums or townhouses of 1,500 s.f. at a rate of 12 units per acre. That would mean that I could put all of my units on 3 acres and with the appropriate buffers and common area would only use 5 acres of the land. The remaining 15 acres would be used as either private or public green space. Furthermore the 36 housing units could be arranged in a creative way to create more of a sense of community, and because people would be living closer together they would feel less isolated and more a part of a community.

If one were to look at a typical single-family lot, you would come to realize that the front lawn is really part of the public space, in essence, a part of the street. The side yards, the narrow space between two single family houses is hardly ever used with the back yard being the truly private space of the house. By increasing density and throwing off this unused green space, one is able to consolidate and put to better use the public space of the front yard and the lost space of the side yards.

### **What is Affordable Housing?**

Too often affordable housing is thought of as low income. Actually, "affordable housing" is housing that is important to any community's workforce (teachers, policeman, and hospital workers) since they can afford to buy or rent it. The cost of the housing or the rental rate is set by a formula using the average median household income for the community in which it is located. In West Windsor that income level is about \$73,000.

In the recent past the COAH (Council for Affordable Housing) formula was that 1 out of 8 or 12½% of each housing development had to be affordable housing units. It was also possible for the developer to pay a fee for the affordable housing instead of actually providing it and that money was used to build affordable units in denser, low income towns and cities.

Recently, the COAH requirements have been increased so that every type of development, be it retail, offices, research facilities or institutions has had to provide affordable housing as part of each development proposal. The ratio of affordable housing to market housing in many towns in New Jersey has changed from the 12½% (1 in 8) to 20% (1 in 5). And most towns are now requiring that any housing developments actually include the affordable housing units within their development for better assimilation and balance.

From a statewide standpoint, affordable housing is absolutely critical to the economic development of the state since the employers who provide jobs want to locate where their workers can afford to live because they know that this dramatically impacts the price of their products or services. For example, as a business person, if I have to pay my employees a higher salary so that they can afford to live near where they work, then the products and services that I sell will also come at a premium and therefore be non-competitive. The lower cost of land and the lower cost of housing in the "Sun Belt" states has led to their economic bonanza. American business moved there from the northeast because they can pay their people less and therefore, sell their products and services for less.

### **Affordable Market Housing**

There is another aspect for affordable housing that is worth discussing and that is “affordable” not only in a state imposed system, but also in the market rate system. It is critical that those who do not fall below the “affordable” wage threshold such as young professionals, seniors, and graduate students are still be able to afford to purchase a market rate house. This comes back to density in achieving market rate affordable housing.

Most housing developers say that 20% of the final sale price of the house should go towards the purchase of the raw land for the site for the house. If one can double the density on a piece of land, the cost of the land per housing unit is cut in half and that carries through to cutting the sale price of the housing unit also in half. Of course, the unit is smaller, but there is no question that there is a pent up need in the demographics of this market for smaller units.

As an example, if land is selling at \$100,000/acre and is zoned as 1-acre lots, the developer would have to assume an approximate sale price of \$500,000 - \$550,000 for the house that he would put on that property. If the sale price of that house in the market place was \$200/s.f. that would mean a 2,500 s.f. house. If, on the same acre he could develop 3 housing units the land cost would drop to \$33,000 per lot and his sale price would be more in the range of \$165,000 - \$180,000. And at the same \$200/s.f. sale price, it would amount to a 900 s.f. housing unit, certainly adequate for an elegant 1BR or a substantial 2BR living unit.

The amount of building would be the same, the tax revenue would be the same, and there could be fewer children so the net revenue would be higher.

### **Why 1,000 Units of Housing?**

The Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) of New Jersey has been asked to revisit their calculations on the number of housing units that should be provided in proportion to any new development in the municipalities of New Jersey be it, offices, manufacturing, retail, institutional use, or other housing. Even under the existing statutes the minimal number of affordable housing units that will be required for the development in the redevelopment zone is in the range of 200 units. In other words, West Windsor will be obligated as the re-development area is built out to provide at least 200 affordable housing units.

In other municipalities in the State of New Jersey, there are two standards for the ratio between affordable housing and market rate housing. Traditionally, there has been a requirement that the affordable housing make up 12½% (1 unit in 8) of any housing development. Recently, some towns, such as the Princetons and Somerville, have required that 20% (1 in 5) of the housing units within any housing development must be affordable.

In our belief that West Windsor would not want to create a “Ghetto” with a population that was exclusively in the low and moderate income category that was eligible for affordable housing units, we chose to use the lower ratio of 20% (1 to 5) and that is how we got to 1,000 units.

Understanding the concern about the number of school children that 1,000 housing units might generate, we have suggested that 20% of the housing units be age restricted to 55+ and that all of the housing be in 1 and 2 bedroom apartments oriented towards either senior “empty nesters” or young “empty nesters”. Though statistics from around the state would indicate that this mix and type of housing would generate 200 school children, we used the figures of Mr. Stan Katz of the West Windsor – Plainsboro School Board that had indicated that the 1,000 units could possibly generate 300 school children because of the high quality of this school system. Given the timeframe in which the housing could be built, there will be a deficit in the school system which will provide more than enough room for these 300 school children. In other words,

due to the aging of the West Windsor population and the current school capacities, there will be excess capacity in the school system by the time the transit village housing is built.

That said, in the presentation for June 4<sup>th</sup> we will present through our consultants, ERA, proformas for West Windsor studying the economic impacts of 0 housing, 250, 500, 750, and 1000 units.