

Board approves West Side rezoning plan, but shortens boundaries

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STAMFORD -- After four public hearings beginning last fall, the Zoning Board has approved a rezoning initiative aimed at spurring development along one of the West Side's main commercial corridors.

In a 3-2 vote Monday night, the board finalized a zoning amendment that will redesignate a portion of Stillwater Avenue, between West Avenue and Stephens Street, as a "village commercial district." The zoning category will permit greater density and building heights of four stories, with five stories on lots of at least 1 acre near Stamford Hospital.

The stretch now contains a mix of commercial neighborhood and residential zones, with building heights ranging from two to four stories. Advocates of the plan said the additional density was critical to attracting private developers to invest in the area.

As approved, the boundaries of the plan, however, falls short of what proponents wanted.

The West Side Neighborhood Revitalization Zone, a collective of commercial and residential interests including Stamford Hospital and the city's housing authority, had pushed to rezone past Stephens Street, up to Mill River Street. This would have included the Hampton Inn, whose owners have expressed a desire to expand and stood to benefit from the rezoning. They also argued that rezoning along Smith Street, which connects to Mill River Park, would help facilitate a gateway between the West Side and the downtown.

But the board's chairwoman, Audrey Cosentini, argued the rezoning closer to the park would not have been compatible with the neighboring residential streets.

The decision to change the boundaries was opposed by the two board members, Harry Parsons and Maria Nakian, who ultimately voted against the revised plan despite being in favor of the rezoning.

"I think they made a major mistake," Parsons said Tuesday. "The city doesn't have finances to advance development. The private sector has money to keep the momentum in improving it. They've cut it off."

Saying the application had been "vetted very thoroughly," Cosentini said she believed the plan approved by the board would be sufficient to bring about new development.

She also said Smith Street would not serve as a gateway to downtown as long as the West Main Street Bridge, which in the past served as a passageway to downtown, was pedestrian-only. In the past, the bridge was open to cars, and some businesses on the West Side have proposed returning to that practice.

The West Side now becomes the third neighborhood, after Springdale and Glenbrook, to have a village commercial district. The zoning category was created by the city several years ago to establish a set of uniform design standards for pedestrian-friendly development.

Although he vigorously tried to make the case for the more expansive rezoning, Richard Redniss, the planning consultant who worked on the application, expressed optimism about the approved plan.

"We hope we hit the right balance to create incentives and opportunities to accomplish the goals of the West Side NRZ," he said.

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