

Norwalk neighbors consider new master plan

By Nancy Chapman [1 : 11 am EDT July 5 2017](#) [2 Comments](#)

NORWALK, Conn. – It's time for Norwalk to come up with a vision of itself, activists said, in discussing the upcoming update for Norwalk's master plan.

Neighborhood leaders attending a recent Coalition of Norwalk Neighborhood Associations (CNNA) meeting grilled Planning and Zoning Director Steven Kleppin about the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD), offering suggestions and seeking a plan to prevent a "runaway train" of disliked developments.

"The one question that has to be resolved is, 'What do we want Norwalk to look like?'" Bob Wagman, a West Norwalk resident, said. "This group was kind of formed to do that, address the issues that are common to all neighborhoods ... What do the people of Norwalk want the place to look like? Once you answer that question, which isn't an easy answer by the way, you can work down from there what you want to do."

Others among the 18-19 people present had different thoughts; East Norwalker Deb Goldstein said outcome-based budgeting could make the POCD more helpful while Rowaytonite Lisa Brinton Thomson pondered the conundrum of how specific the plan's goals can be. Golden Hill resident Jim Clark pushed a theme of the current administration, a desire to make the next POCD less of a pie-in-the-sky document than the current one.

Interesting thoughts offered by Kleppin include the news that the New York City Planning Department is encouraging its neighboring cities to plan together rather than competing against each other. Kleppin also said he thinks a 5-year plan would be better than the 10-year plan required by the state, because things change.

Since the 2008 plan there's been a recession, the retail model is "blowing up around us" and now Millennials have different ideas about what they are looking for, he said.

The Common Council last week approved a \$195,000 contract with Stantec to assist in the development of a new POCD, with a 16-month time window to complete the work once the contract is signed. It's estimated that approval would take another two months.

Kleppin explained to CNNA last week that the city will have an outreach coordinator for the effort, and plans to use a Boston website as a model for a user-friendly POCD website here.

There are Redevelopment Agency studies underway, which will develop specific ideas while the POCD will talk about general actions, and cannot get "that granular," Kleppin said.

"You highlight the challenge there," Brinton Thomson said, explaining that some spots, like Wall Street, have specificity while others are "up here at a fluffy level," and 10 years after the 2008 POCD nothing has been done.

The Redevelopment plans are five months along, Kleppin said. The POCD will reference them, which will be good when Norwalk seeks state grants because it will show the thought involved and the state doesn't like "out of the blue scenarios," he said.

Clark recounted his time as Board of Estimate and Taxation chairman, when the BET requested that then-Planning and Zoning Director Mike Greene account for the scope of master plan.

He said that is an impossible question to answer because this is an aspirational document only. That was his answer, in public," Clark said. "We want a document I believe that is, of course, aspirational in one sense but not aspirational only. We want to have those aspirations point to certain goals, and then those goals, we can develop strategies."

Clark said that, in response to Green's comments, he had called Connecticut Office of Policy Management (OPM) Assistant Division Director Daniel Morley and asked about the POCD.

"He said, 'Really those are just guidelines. If you have good reason to do it different just tell us.' It gave me the sense that if you wanted to develop a document with a little more specificity you could do that, if we so chose," Clark said.

The current master plan is too broad, as it's trying to do everything, Kleppin said, explaining that department heads are going to be interviewed and instructed that capital plans should be aligned with the new POCD, as much as possible.

Multiple Norwalkers spoke of a "holistic approach."

"I feel like we are in a runaway sled that is just roaring down the road and nobody can catch up with it, nobody seems to have any idea of what the whole city should look like. It's just spot zone this, special permit that, follow the developer down the road," Leigh Grant said.

Sarah Hunter said that instead of there being a vision for East Norwalk "a developer grabs the land and then tries to sell you on their visions. Then they have already gotten so far down the path that ... developers win and then neighborhoods become complainers."



Planning and Zoning Director Steven Kleppin listens last week to a Norwalker at the Coalition of Norwalk Neighborhood Associations (CNNA) meeting in City Hall.

"We should have that input from the start because we have the vision," she said. "That should go into the POCD."

But with Redevelopment plans for pieces of the city and a POCD it "feels like two steps forward and one step back," she said.

"The synergy is going to be fine," Kleppin said. "I think the two plans will marry up well."

"Will the people and the decision making? I am sure the paper will," Brinton Thomson said.

Council members recently suggested that the POCD attached potential costs to its goals.

"The POCD is not giving them the type of guidance they need," Goldstein said, suggesting that outcome based budget planning would make that possible.

Norwalk has a challenge that other cities don't have, Clark said.

"We are different cities that are combined," Clark said. "...That makes a heavier lift for you with the Plan of Conservation and Development.... How do we create a POCD that recognizes the value of all the parts of our city? It's a tough job."

Each neighborhood will be profiled, including a vision for the area, Kleppin said, asserting that the folks in Triple A districts won't want their neighborhoods to change much, but will be worried about intrusions. Then the question is how the downtown core would affect them.

Those residents won't be inclined to think about the density downtown, Clark said.



Silvermine resident Heather Dunn complained that nothing was done to improve the parking at the Norwalk Public Library, leading Brinton Thomson to ask, "It is we're too broad, or it's literally 'a parking lot for the library' rather than the Wall Street district?"

"You're asking all the right questions, except it's a lot of questions," Kleppin said. "One thing, for me, New Canaan was easy... Norwalk is like a spider web."

"A lot of it is still small town," Leigh Grant said, asking, "Would looking at it as districts be the best way?"

It starts with a vision, and, "If you get people to buy into the vision then the elements that support the vision should get general support," Kleppin said.

Goldstein questioned the assertion that other neighborhoods don't care about the city center.

"That is not actually true because the city requires a heart where services are taking place and not just City Hall," she said, calling parking a consistent concern.

"We all do have some common goals," Goldstein said. "...We haven't even had the basic conversation, when we are busy putting development and density in this part of the city, about whether we really want to be a bedroom community to New York City, because that's a very different vision.... A semi-small city that services the people who live here who shouldn't have to go across state lines to go shopping or banking or even for employment. That is just one pivot point that the city has to have a conversation about."

It's a "chicken and egg thing," Kleppin said, referring to the state losing big companies and the jobs they offer.

"We, as a community, have to make Norwalk a place where people want to live ... It shouldn't be just because housing is cheaper than Stamford," Kleppin said.

If Norwalk has things to do, great schools, activities on the weekend and good restaurants, "I think the jobs would follow that," Kleppin said. "There's only so many incentives you can give companies. I would want to have a company locate here because (it's a great place)."

Kleppin said he'd just attended a national planning conference in New York City and a meeting the day before with leaders from Norwalk, Bridgeport, Stamford, New Haven and major New Jersey cities.

"I was really surprised that the head of New York City planning said that they wanted all of our municipalities to succeed," Kleppin said. "They said they need all of us to all succeed because it's such a global competition now. So, have already started talking about mutual cooperation on planning and business planning ... they talked about identifying sectors of strength for particular areas so we are not all chasing (the same industries)."

If Norwalk has the right components businesses will locate here, he said.

Diane Cece, leading the meeting, said business is a component of a holistic plan.

"Our economic development is really reactive.... We can't be proactive unless we have something to go out to the business community with," Cece said. "Without that vision, it's just a hodgepodge."

"I don't know how it's all going to work or if it can work but I think the idea that there is a conversation going on is a positive," Kleppin said.

"I try not to take a defeatist attitude," Cece said. "...We really need to make this effort. We can't let this go by because in the absence of anything else this is what we have. We have been trying for years and years and years to say that that plan is called the plan. It's not called the recommendations, it's not called the suggestions, it's called the plan and if we want to call it the plan then we have to develop it. Then we have to hold their feet to the fire to say 'this is the plan.'"

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Rick [July 5, 2017 at 10:19 am](#)

Thank you everyone for attending and having a productive meeting.

"You're asking all the right questions, except it's a lot of questions," Kleppin said. "One thing, for me, New Canaan was easy... Norwalk is like a spider web."

I hate to suggest otherwise but where New Cannan has a few Firetree like cases and the news coming out of New Cannan may tell another story, lets not enjoy a victory lap until all the facts are in. In fact there is a Firetree player in New Cannan causing a lot of concern right now.

The cart before the horse will allow a repeat of things that are destroying our city.

A new problem has risen on Quintard ave leaving most of us saying hlow could this happen again where are our elected officials?

Norwalk worst scenarios repeat themselves ,suggesting the here and now approach may be what Norwalk needs to do now ,news over the weekend confirms that.

Norwalk can no longer wait and see ,it proves to be the wrong strategy.

Another runaway train was found this last weekend maybe finding a way to stop those may save time and money I seriously doubt all the facts the city has made it to the table this last meeting.

A new cloud is over city hall

The Common Council last week approved a \$195,000 contract with Stantec to assist in the development of a new POCD, with a 16-month time window to complete the work once the contract is signed. It's estimated that approval would take another two months.

https://www.americanbar.org/publications/under_construction/2016/winter2016/lessons_from_the_trenches.html

Guess no one ever heard of Burt Hill inc?

Planning and Zoning Director Steven Kleppin new nothing about this?

I strongly suggest a class in searching the net is given to our city leaders soon now that history has repeated itself.

Its hard to trust any public employee when the clouds roll in.

Jim Corrigan [July 6, 2017 at 1:22 am](#)

Thanks for the info. Norwalk officials are rubes compared to these slick companies, like Stantec, that fleece the town. Stop building new apartments. Stop funding the massive illegal population.