

**MINUTES OF THE PLANNING AND ZONING POCD SUBCOMMITTEE SPECIAL MEETING HELD
Wednesday, April 14, 2021 AT 6:30 P.M.**

Call to Order was at 6:33 pm.

Roll Call: J. Castignoli, J. Kader, P. Kearney, J. Mortimer, J. Quish, J. Griffith, D. Sulkis, M. Greene

Invited guests: John Knuff, Steven Levin, Jon Meshel, Scott Pollock (CT Post Mall)/ Nicklaus Morris (Milford Crossing/Bridge33 Capital)

Topic for discussion: Shopping Center Design District (SCD) Corridor Design District

Chairman Quish asked for an introduction of the guests. He reviewed parcels in the SCD district, saying the zone had been created to accommodate a business model that is changing as malls are being reimagined. He said his goal for the meeting was to keep it casual for an exchange of ideas that explores collaboration between the city and business. He asked for owners to provide background and describe challenges they face.

Mr. Levin (founder and CEO of Centennial, owner of the mall) thanked the POCD for including them in the session. He reviewed the history of his company's involvement with the mall, having acquired it about 5 years ago. He said traditional malls have been struggling and that mall owners with sufficient capital, a longer time horizon, and vision are redeveloping these projects for the next 30 years by addressing how people live, work, and play now and will do so in the future. He said he was hoping to transform the CT Post Mall in similar fashion to several of their properties in Chicago, Orange County, and Virginia. He said these projects have provided his management team with experience in creating successfully reimagined malls. He said that a mall the size of the CT Post simply cannot find enough tenants if all spaces must be used for shopping and that the trend around country is to transform these large campus environments to mixed use destinations that bring in uses other than shopping. He said shopping is still a meaningful part of the project, but the campus design should be an integrated place that can also attract office tenants, medical tenants, or university tenants such that the working environment also provides amenities like restaurants, recreation, and entertainment. He said the leading trend in adding new uses to malls is incorporating residential spaces. He said Centennial is not looking to convert the mall to a residential community, that it will remain a major commercial, million-square-foot-plus campus, but rather the ability to add some residential space will drive office companies to locate on the campus. He said he wants to make "The Post" a dominant destination for Milford and surrounding communities, but more of an 18-hour-per-day destination—a place to bring your kids, enjoy an art-walk, listen to live music, dine, see a movie, shop, and generally experience entertainment. He shared a rendering of a more integrated proposed project than the previous presentation in 2020, and the subcommittee members generally reacted favorably to it. **Chairman Quish** said he recognized the need to partner with investors to create a beneficial asset to the city. **Mr. Levin** said that an opportunity exists for the Post mall because neighboring communities don't want to invest or can't afford to address failing malls. He said the only solution is to have capital and create a use that is exciting for the long term. He said the Centennial design team had taken to heart the board's response to the previous proposal and were working toward an integrated vision for the old Sears location.

Nick Morris, Milford Crossing Plaza, said he is supportive of the redevelopment effort described and the idea of an integrated campus nearby is good for his tenants and the community in general. He said plaza management is focused on keeping Milford Crossing full of retail tenants and would be happy to collaborate on integrating with the mall's vision in any way that is mutually beneficial because all of retail is in the process of being reimaged. **Chairman Quish** asked if there is pressure on big box stores in the plaza. **Mr. Morris** said Milford Crossing is not immune to departures or bankruptcies, but at present, the tenancy rates are satisfactory. He said the plaza has not encountered problematic zoning factors, although there has been some long-term thinking about potentially carving out a new pad and diversifying. He stressed that the plaza is largely occupied with tenants that are renewing. He said plaza ownership are not developers by nature, particularly when tenants are already performing well.

Mr. Sulkis presented a map of the SCD zone featuring the Post Mall and Milford Crossing with East Town Road in between. **Chairman Quish** asked board members for comment. **Mr. Castignoli** asked for proportions of residential to commercial; **Mr. Levin** said he couldn't project that now because the focus for Phase 1 redevelopment is on the old Sears parcel. Ultimately, he said he wants to rebuild that end of the mall toward Macy's and Boscovs, adding space for offices, health sciences, tech, and another residential project. For now, though, the goal is to demonstrate that the mall can survive as a going concern and to that end, he would like to add 300 apartments. He said he would love to have a complete plan for approval, but the team does not have those answers now. He said that the Phase 1 project is what is being proposed and tested around the country. **Chairman Quish** confirmed that the new rendering describes an indoor/outdoor environment. **Mr. Levin** said the goal is to respond to demand as it arises and to create energy and excitement around the property. He said some good malls are going back to the banks daily and reminded the group that USAA is committed to being an investment partner for the long term. He said mall ownership would not make money on this project in the near term, but that they have put \$200 million into the mall already and want to see it succeed. He stressed that he believes the community will enjoy and embrace the proposed amenities. **Chairman Quish** said he understands the rapid pace of

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change but thinks the board will resonate better with a master plan that incorporates flexibility, environmental sustainability, reclamation of wetlands, and net zero carbon emissions. **Mr. Levin** said there is a master plan and a vision for next 10-15 years to form a basis for a long-term plan, but that the development must be on a path. **Mr. Meshel** said the property is critical to the town, and that if the vision laid out by Mr. Levin is done correctly, Centennial would like to work together. He noted that failed malls are being bought by Amazon for fulfillment centers and said he thinks that would be a devastating outcome. **Mr. Levin** stressed that he is committed to avoiding that outcome by making the campus a place for the community to go. He noted that Amazon and other entities are buying malls as distressed sales. They said they know that adding lots of apartments is a hot button that creates pushback to new apartments, but they feel that pushback will be reduced if there is a pairing with parks or other uses with social and recreational benefits. Mr. Levin said the proposal would feature a \$7-8 million-dollar public space with no anticipated return but that creates a new sense of place. **Chairman Quish** said retail has changed and noted that the property has great access to major highways, to the shoreline, and to downtown. He said he wants sustainability, does not want to compete with downtown, but to bring local area people to Milford and to use creative transportation to connect with other destinations around the City like the beach or downtown.

Ms. Kearney said she wishes to exhaust all possibilities for Sears and that she is not opposed to Amazon, a superior court building, or a branch of Yale or some other university. **Mr. Levin** said that reality is that the traditional mall is broken, and he feels that people go wrong by taking a Sears box and just putting a new tenant in it despite an old footprint and an old, tired image. Mr. Levin said he is reaching out to Yale to consider a health center, but Yale will not be interested in setting one up in an old retail footprint where the mall looks the same. Once the new tenant is in the old space, leases will preclude building a welcoming plaza or European outdoor café. He reviewed the amount of money Centennial has spent just to keep Dick's Sporting Goods in the mall now.

Mr. Mortimer asked what the major stumbling block to the mall management's vision was; the answer was board approval to take Sears down and build the mixed-use project that will start transforming the campus into what it needs to be with the worst case scenario being to do nothing. **Attorney Knuff** said that the SCD regulations are a solid fit for the most part, with so many permitted uses. He said the main problem with current regulations is the prescribed format for residential uses being restricted to garden-style apartments. He contrasted other City areas zoned RMF to point out how completely different they are from the mall. He reviewed aspects of the approach used in the previous presentation and said he still considers the requested zoning changes rather modest. **Chairman Quish** said the newer image presented to the POCD subcommittee looked much more like mixed use than the previous presentation. **Attorney Knuff** said he thinks minor adjustments could be made to co-locate residential and retail or commercial in same building. He said true mixed-use buildings require both a residential and a commercial component, but the question becomes what the correct ratio is. **Mr. Sulkis** said he thought the concept floated at this meeting was well received because the rendering depicted a space that is truly integrated with the mall instead of being in a separate block of buildings. He suggested reducing the incongruity of allowing so many commercial uses yet being so restrictive of residential uses, saying the regulations could be tweaked to support that integrated vision. The group discussed how the combined contribution of the POCD and Regulations Subcommittees could be brought to bear and commented on how productive this more relaxed forum was, as well as the eventual goal of opening certain meetings for community input. **Mr. Castignoli** agreed with Mr. Sulkis' assessment of this vision being much more integrated with the entire mall. **Attorney Knuff** said he appreciated all the comments and agreed that the new vision is a decided improvement. **Mssrs. Levin** and **Meshel** said they would be happy to continue a dialog in the more relaxed format and reiterated their commitment to recreating the mall campus as a wonderful destination.

Chairman Quish said he was unsure about when to bring in public comment but would like a robust master plan to underpin that phase. **Mr. Levin** said he also wants a master plan for the mixed-use project and would like to present it to the POCD group. A time frame of 3-4 weeks was established. **Chairman Quish** underscored his desire to see a plan that highlights sustainability; **Mr. Levin** said sustainability was also his goal and that he will show the group something to be proud of and that the community would like to see. **Attorney Knuff** suggested that a visit to the Regulations Subcommittee might be helpful or possibly a joint meeting of the 2 committees.

Approval of Minutes of 3-24-21 was unanimous.

Adjournment was at 7:35, next meeting is April 28th.