

Preliminary Text for Vision Statement

Related to Development of the Gilbert and Bennett Factory Site

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Page 1 of 5

I. Introduction:

Master Planning is an essential ingredient in any large-scale redevelopment, and the Zoning Regulations of the Town of Redding require the preparation of a Developer's Master Plan to establish the "big picture" planning of the Gilbert and Bennett factory site. There are a variety of ways for this Master Plan to take shape. It may be put forth by a public-sector agency from the Town government, or from a special-purpose agency such as a Redevelopment Authority (if such an agency were to be established), or it may be generated in the traditional manner, by the owner of the property for review and approval by the Town.

In order to achieve consensus on how this Master Plan should be created, and to catalyze the full range of decisions that the Town must make for guiding and regulating development on the Gilbert and Bennett site, this Vision Statement has been prepared by the Town of Redding's Georgetown Master Plan Committee.

The site of the former Gilbert and Bennett wire mill, having been discontinued in use as a manufacturing facility in 1987, has awaited redevelopment for more than a decade. The Town of Redding has become increasingly concerned as the original developer's approved Master Plan has expired with no development having taken place. During this period of inactivity the factory's physical plant, which makes up the core of a National Register of Historic Places Historic District, has steadily declined in condition and the real estate taxes have slipped into arrears. Meanwhile, the absence of redevelopment activity has also meant lack of progress in cleaning up environmental problems that had arisen from 150 years of manufacturing activity.

The Town places a high degree of importance on seeing the Gilbert and Bennett site preserved, both for its historical value and for its function as the centerpiece of a traditional village environment. Moreover, the Town hopes to see the former factory property gradually return to its former status as a reliable source of non-residential tax revenue. Since the Town of Redding has unusually limited depth in its commercial tax base, the fate of the Gilbert and Bennett site looms large in the Town's financial planning. There is concern within the Town that redevelopment on the Gilbert and Bennett site be mindful of the Town's financial interest as represented by its uncollected taxes, along with the Town's longstanding planning priorities of natural conservation and historic preservation.

Inappropriate development could be destructive to the Town's general interests by reducing the diversity of the town's tax base and by damaging Georgetown's fragile village townscape. Successful and appropriate development, on the other hand, can be the key to a bright future for the village and for the Town of Redding. Corollary to this, the Town recognizes the practical and financial difficulties that have stymied redevelopment in the past, and knows that it must take a realistic and active role in aiding private developers who will take the financial risks.

To help catalyze appropriate redevelopment, the Town has established the Georgetown Master Plan Committee with representation from the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Finance, the Water Pollution Control Commission, the Planning Commission, the Zoning Commission, and the Conservation Commission. This body has investigated various methods for guiding development, and has interviewed a wide variety of development entities that may have special expertise relevant to the Gilbert and Bennett site.

Among the potential methods for guiding development and establishing a Master Plan, the Master Plan Committee has focused on the following:

(1) Direct ownership by the Town:

Based upon the property tax arrears and/or the present owner's desire to sell, the Town could take direct ownership of the site. This would give the Town maximum control over the development outcome, although it may expose the Town to unmanageable liabilities related to presently-unknown environmental cleanup costs. The extent of environmental liability may be influenced by the method by which the Town would assume ownership; for example, ownership resulting from a present owner's abandonment would bring a more favorable liability condition than ownership resulting from a positively-negotiated transfer. The Master Plan Committee has recommended against pursuing direct ownership.

(2) Development by an Owner/Developer, coordinated through a Redevelopment Authority:

The Master Plan Committee has found that the creation of a Redevelopment Authority under State enabling legislation would be the optimum means of placing the Town in a position to control production of the Master Plan and to calibrate the redevelopment effort with the Town's interest, without entering into ownership of the property. A significant amount of preliminary work thus has been carried out by the Committee, with the advice of Counsel, to write a draft ordinance establishing a Redevelopment Authority. A Redevelopment Authority could fully Master Plan the redevelopment, utilizing the Town's land-use agencies and/or outside consultants to determine the best uses, density, phasing, environmental and historical efforts, marketing of the finished product, etc. The Master Plan Committee has received advice that the town's environmental liabilities could be suitably controlled under this scenario.

The negative side of the establishment of a Redevelopment Authority has been the necessary increase in the Town's bureaucracy and administrative costs. Also, concerns were expressed that, because the state enabling legislation gives Redevelopment Authorities a high degree of autonomy, such a body eventually could come to be politically at odds with the Town as a whole. In the end, the Master Plan Committee recommends holding the creation of a Redevelopment Authority in reserve, as a necessary and desirable step if an overall private developer cannot be found who is prepared to work in close coordination with the Town's interest.

(3) Close Coordination with an Overall Private Developer:

After speaking with a number of development entities, the Master Plan Committee found that there may be one or more redevelopers who are willing to take the primary financial risks, while coordinating their efforts closely with the interests of the Town. The Town's leverage in such a private effort would arise from the Town's financial interest, represented by its existing tax lien. If a private redeveloper values tax deferral and/or abatement highly enough to closely coordinate his interest with that of the Town, then a positive outcome might be obtained at a particularly low risk and expense for the Town.

The negative side of this scenario arises from the fact that the Town's leverage in determining the outcome will be significantly lower than in the other redevelopment scenarios, being limited to a tax revenue agreement and the town's traditional regulatory infrastructure. Thus, a tightly crafted agreement with the redeveloper will be necessary.

The remainder of this report seeks to outline the potential elements of a tightly-crafted redevelopment agreement, based upon the scenario of coordinating the Town's interests with those of an overall private developer.

II. The Town of Redding's Interests:

The primary goals of the Town for the Gilbert and Bennett site, as expressed in the 1998 edition of the Town Plan of Conservation and Development, are to see the site adapted for productive and appropriate new uses, while preserving the historical integrity of its buildings, conserving and restoring its natural riverfront location, and enhancing the overall environment of Georgetown as a traditional village.

Consistent with townwide policy in regulating development, the inclusion of active or passive recreation uses within an open-space component of the development is seen as a normal part of any planning process. This provision of public-benefit elements in private-sector development is a widely-established method of offsetting the community impact from development activity. In the case of the Gilbert and Bennett site, dedication of landscaped riverfront areas to public-benefit ownership and use can assure permanent public access to the natural beauty of the site.

Also, since the principal natural amenity of the site is a waterway, governmental or public-benefit ownership is more favorable from the point of view of liability management. Thus the public can be afforded access to the water's edge without burdening the economic viability of the redevelopment effort.

The preservation and enhancement of Georgetown village, and the solving of technical problems such as traffic, parking, water supply and sewer distribution, etc. are seen by the Town as extending beyond the Project site to include all of the residential and commercial properties of Georgetown village. The redevelopment of the factory site is seen as a key component – although by no means the only component – in implementing these larger goals.

The Town envisions a future in which the buildings of the former Gilbert and Bennett factory will be seen less as components of an independent, fenced enclave or campus, and more as the natural center of a larger community. Toward that end, it is anticipated that the Project should include the mitigation of negative community impacts from development such as traffic generation. It is anticipated also that the Project could include integrative community benefits such as shared parking for nighttime uses on Main Street, traffic calming and control measures on Route 107, public access to a landscaped open space along the Norwalk River, etc.

III. The Private Developer

The Master Plan Committee does not feel that the Town's plans and priorities are at odds with the profit-making needs of a private developer. Thus the ideal developer for the Gilbert and Bennett Factory site would have goals that are highly consistent with the Town's plans and priorities. Among these are the following:

- (1) Development should occur on a staged basis, utilizing cash flow from the developed portions of the site to help capitalize re-use of undeveloped portions. This will permit the pace of development to be matched to the absorption rate of desirable new uses, and will permit the environmental cleanup and other infrastructure costs to be incurred at least partly on a "pay as you go" basis.
- (2) Preservation and adaptive re-use of the site's historic structures should be a major feature of the redevelopment, and no new construction should be planned. Instead, the ample floor areas of the existing buildings should be the focus of redevelopment activity. The total amount of floor area on the site is expected to be reduced as modern shed buildings are removed to reveal the historic structures beneath.
- (3) The structural deck covering much of the site's Norwalk River frontage should be largely removed, exposing the river with potential benefits including environmental improvement, better flood control, and re-integration of the river with the Georgetown village viewscape.
- (4) The uses anticipated to be included in redevelopment of the site should be primarily commercial (i.e. office, retail, and light industrial) rather than residential. This is a key factor for the Town in replacing the commercial tax base lost when the factory discontinued operations, and also appears to be a more feasible concept for re-use of industrial buildings in which the cleanup cost for conversion to residential uses may be unfeasible.
- (5) The developer should intend to operate as a principal throughout the period of redevelopment. The Town's long experience in regulating development has shown that it is not only the "what", but also the "who" that must be considered if the most reliable development outcome is best to be assured.

IV. Potential Understanding Between Town of Redding and Overall Private Developer:

The Town and any overall private developer should establish a mutual intent in their individual actions related to the Project. Both Parties should be prepared to agree as follows:

- (1) The Project will require flexibility by all parties, and an active sense of partnership between the public and private sectors. The Town and the developer should be prepared to combine their respective interests in such manner, with each recognizing the valuable contribution of the other in bringing about appropriate redevelopment.
- (2) The Town should establish a specific program of tax deferral for past and present real estate tax payable amounts, and should include in this program a provision for tax abatement based upon meeting mutually-established Project goals.
- (3) The general goals of the Town are as described above in Section II of this Vision Statement. These relate to diversity and viability of the Town's tax base, environmental cleanup of the site, historic preservation of buildings, enhancement of livability and townscape in the village of Georgetown, and devotion of a portion of any Project to public safety and recreation investments offsetting the impact of development.
- (4) The general goals of an overall private developer should be as described above in Section III of this Vision Statement. These relate to using staged environmental cleanup and staged development, the use of a long-term cash-flow based development program, redevelopment of preserved historic structures rather than new construction and of commercial rather than residential uses, demolition of recently-built "shed" structures, exposure of the riverfront as an amenity, and continued participation as a principal throughout the course of development.
- (5) The Town and the developer should be prepared to meet the following specific goals:
 - (1) The Project will include the eventual environmental cleanup of the entire area of the Project property and its existing improvements.
 - (2) The program and design of the Project will be based upon demolition of extraneous "sheds", with restoration and re-use of the remaining structures including primarily the historic structures. No significant new construction is planned.
 - (3) The Project will result in eventual return of the entire Project property to full tax revenue status based upon realistic and equitable assessments.
 - (4) The uses to be included in the Project are to be primarily office, retail, light industrial/r&d, and institutional.
 - (5) All Project plans are to conform with the applicable Town zoning and conservation regulations, and with the general and specific goals stated in the

1998 edition of Redding's *Town Plan of Conservation and Development*. It should be acknowledged that an element of Town zoning is the production of a Master Plan for approval prior to any specific site development, and also that the Town's requirements for traffic, parking, and pedestrian movement will be met in full.

- (6) Any negative public impacts from the Project should be mitigated as part of the Project planning. These are expected to be primarily related to traffic and parking. Among the anticipated mitigation measures is the provision of shared usage of any Project parking for other businesses in Georgetown. It is anticipated that this shared usage of parking will be intended mainly for nighttime activity, in coordination with daytime usage by Project tenants. Thus, no overall increase in the amount of Project parking is anticipated.
- (7) As an additional mitigation measure related to traffic and parking, the Town and the developer should explore traffic calming and safety measures on Route 107 as an element of shared public/private investment. These measures may include the provision of a pedestrian tunnel under Route 107, signalization of intersections, and traffic calming measures at the Main Street/Route 107 intersection.
- (8) Mindful of the natural beauty of the site, and the special liabilities that arise from public access to the river, the Town and the developer should plan for public-benefit ownership and/or maintenance of the river environs. This should contribute to mutually beneficial property conditions that will maximize the quality of conservation efforts while limiting or eliminating developer liabilities resulting from public access to the river.
- (9) While acknowledging the short-term need for cash flow from the large modern warehouse structures at the northern end of the site, the Project is intended to include either their eventual demolition as part of the conservation and open-space planning, or their conversion to non-profit public-benefit use.

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