

Sunday Business

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TWO BUILDINGS, ONE ADDRESS

Planning ahead in Stratford

School part of transit-focused redevelopment that will bypass historic buildings, officials say

By Hugh Bailey

Two schools, both out of use, share the same address in Stratford. One inspires an emotional response, the other does not. The latter will be demolished, while the former, a historic building, will stand.

A number of residents profess to be confused.

Last month, the state was awarded funds to be put toward cleaning and razing a former school at 1000 East Broadway. The building that fronts on East Broadway was built in 1914, and today houses Board of Education offices. But it's the newer Center School, which dates to 1965, that is to meet the wrecking ball. The plan for the site is mixed-use, transit-oriented development based around the nearby train station.

News that Stratford history might be leveled was met with an outcry. The confusion was abetted, residents say, from other events around town, including talk of a revived eminent domain statute



and a plan to sell the sewage-treatment plant.

Officials say they've done what they can. "The town has involved the public at every step," said Amy Knorr, town supervisor of economic development, citing hearings, steering committee meetings, site visits and public workshops about the transit-district planning.

Transit

Stratford's plan to take better advantage of its transit assets is similar to many other local communities. Metro-North's New Haven Line runs through the center of town, and local officials want to make it easier for people to live and work within walking distance of the station.

But town officials have stressed that buildings in the town's Historic District will not be subject to redevelopment. "There are a number of areas near the train station that have been targeted as underutilized," Knorr said, including the newer Center School. "The Historic District is not included. We're not going to touch it."

Surveys of local resi-



Timothy Guzda/Staff graphic with contributed art and file image



Metro-North maintenance workers on the job near the Stratford train station last year.

dents have shown support for higher-density, walkable development, officials say. According to a feasibility study prepared for the town by a panel of advisers, housing and commercial development would have the best chance for

success, with retail and entertainment options being less viable.

"While such ground-level uses contribute to a diverse and walkable district, they cannot typically be supported through transit patrons alone; these

uses will require nearby parking for most patrons in order to be successful," the 2010 report reads.

The study focused on the area with a half-mile of the train station, a neighborhood bisected by Interstate 95 and the train tracks but

connected by Main Street.

The schools site is well within the half-mile circle.

Both Center Schools were built using materials now known to be harmful, but which don't pose a danger unless they're disturbed. Old buildings with asbestos in the window caulking, for example, can be used for years without danger, but in the event of renovations or demolition, the harmful substances must be removed.

Eminent domain

Tom Yemm, former chairman of the Historic District Commission, was among those vehemently opposed to anything happening to the 1914 building. "If I heard definitively that the historic building was not going to be touched, I'd back off," he said.

Yemm tied questions over the schools to larger issues in town, including a challenge to the sale of the town's sewage-treatment plant, which is to be the

subject of a referendum, and a push to revisit the local eminent domain ordinance last winter.

"Everyone supports (transit-oriented development) in theory," he said. "Most people are quite in favor of it. But it shouldn't be accomplished through eminent domain."

Local officials say that was never in the cards anyway.

Still, on Jan. 26, the Town Council's Ordinance Committee met to discuss a measure that would have permitted the town to take over private property for economic development projects. The meeting took place despite a state of emergency ordered by both Mayor John Harkins and Gov. Dannel P. Malloy because of heavy snow.

In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Kelo v. City of New London* that the benefits a community can realize from economic growth qualified private

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redevelopment as a permissible public use. In effect, the nation's highest court ruled that eminent domain could be used not just for highways and schools but to hand property over to a private developer for a project that would ostensibly benefit the community.

In response, Stratford,

along with hundreds of other towns, changed local ordinances to ban the practice, reserving eminent domain only for clearly public uses. The January hearing was an attempt to revisit that change.

But the public outcry had not abated in the last decade, leading the Ordinance Committee to unambiguously reject the plan.

Town officials say it would never have been used downtown, and the

question is now moot. "It's off the table," Knorr said.

Downtown shopping

Aside from the school site, the only other active proposal in the half-mile train-station radius concerns Christ Episcopal Church's plan to make its property off Main Street available for a 44-unit townhouse development. The town has also opened more than 100 new parking spaces at the train

station.

Vincent Chase, whose family owns the Colonial Square Shopping Center not far from the school property, said he was approached last year about selling his land, which he declined. The eminent-domain proposal came up soon after, adding to his suspicions, he said.

The measure's defeat left him relieved.

"The wording of the ordinance was very broad.

It could have affected anyone in town. Not only me, but anyone," he said.

Chase, a former state representative who is running for Town Council this year, said there were many questions about redevelopment at the school site.

"We don't know what the town's plans are," he said. "To sell it? Put apartments in there? No one knows at this point."

Knorr said that's part of the process. After the

school has been remediated and demolished, the town will gauge interest from developers. She said it's far too early to know exactly what will be built there.

The greater plan calls for mixed-use development with a multifamily residential component. "Whoever the developer is will need to have public input," Knorr said.

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