

Hamden residents say, 'What if ...'

HAMDEN — Imagine Whitney Avenue with diagonal on-street parking, or Dixwell Avenue redesigned as a boulevard with islands filled with trees to slow down the traffic, or housing built atop businesses in Whitneyville or Spring Glen.

Tuesday, October 30, 2007 3:00 AM EDT

By Ann DeMatteo

Those ideas and more were generated over the four-day planning and development conference that ended Sunday night at Memorial Town Hall.

The "charrette" was run by Robert Orr and Associates of New Haven and Planimetrics of Avon, consultants hired by the town to rewrite the zoning regulations.

"It was better than I imagined it could be. There were so many exciting ideas. People came in skeptical and to my knowledge, nobody left there anything less than really excited," Town Planner Leslie Creane said Monday. "Regulations are being drafted that will allow the innovative ideas generated over the course of our four-day charrette to be implemented that right now, by the current zoning code, we couldn't do. We are drafting regulations that would allow the vision of the community to happen."

It will take about a year to put together a complete draft. Public hearings are expected early next year.

"This is the beginning of the process," Creane said.

More than 150 people attended an opening session Thursday night, at which Orr and other consultants presented the concept of "Smart Code," regulations that are used in communities where it is agreed that economic development is the No. 1 goal.

"We want to relieve homeowners from the increasing tax burden," Orr said. "Smart Code says ... if you want economic development, you have to decide how you want your neighborhoods to look and where you want development, and tell developers what you want."

The town would be broken down into five "transects," or settings that range from rural to urban, and within those settings, things like sidewalks, porches, facades, and terraces would be regulated for their appropriateness.

Residents spoke to planners over the weekend and they came up with drawings about how to pump up neighborhoods along Dixwell and Whitney avenues and State Street.

Drawings for the Town Center, Leeder Hill, Whitneyville, Spring Glen, Newhall, the upper Whitney Avenue corridor, upper Dixwell Avenue from the Wilbur Cross Parkway to Whitney Avenue, lower Dixwell Avenue from the Wilbur Cross to the New Haven line, Highwood and the State Street corridor were presented Sunday night.

Among the ideas are to restructure the Newhall neighborhood, to add housing that might attract young people and senior citizens on top of retail uses in Spring Glen and Whitneyville and to add various traffic-slowing techniques such as pedestrian crossings along major thoroughfares. Another goal would be to make various parts of town more pedestrian-friendly, and to take advantage of natural resources such as Lake Whitney or the Olin Powder Farm, by removing blockages that prevent public viewing of them.

Orr said all the ideas are just "what ifs" at this point.

In the near future, Bruce Hoben of Planimetrics will be holding workshops about residential neighborhoods, Orr said. The use-based codes will be updated and non-conformities will be eliminated.

Public hearings will also be held.

"We are looking for the final form to be ready a year from now," Orr said.

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