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Date: August 1, 2018 at 9:50:53 AM EDT
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Subject: Op-Ed - Zoning Decision

Dear Representatives Pia and McMullen, attached is an article I wrote to the Advocate regarding the recent zoning decision. I know you are all likely inundated with emails and comments from residents, but wanted you to have this as well. This comes from my personal perspective as a lifelong Stamford resident, nearby neighbor of the office park, and consultant for the office park owner. Link below and PDF attached.

Please let me know if you have any questions.
Thanks

<https://www.stamfordadvocate.com/opinion/article/Op-ed-Zoning-Board-crafted-a-thoughtful-13121178.php>

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Op-ed: Zoning Board 'crafted a thoughtful solution'

By Raymond R. Mazzeo Published 6:41 pm EDT, Tuesday, July 31, 2018

Jack Cavanaugh's July 12 column "The Zoning Board's flexible regulations" included many inaccuracies, omissions, and a general lack of understanding of the zoning process.

During the Board of Representatives' proceedings on July 18 and 19 relating to the recent Zoning Board decision to allow "Gymnasium and Physical Culture Establishments" in our suburban office parks, neighbors, attorneys, and some board members expressed similarly misplaced blame on "text changes" and zoning in general.

Like Mr. Cavanaugh and a few of the speakers, I too am a Stamford native. I was born here, raised here, educated here, married here (to another Stamford native) and am currently raising my young family here – within a few hundred feet of High Ridge Office Park. I am also a certified land use planner. My firm represents developers (including High Ridge Office Park), municipalities, homeowners, institutions, and nonprofits on a regular basis.

Calling this area a "residential neighborhood" is only half true. This stretch below the Merritt Parkway from High Ridge Road to Newfield Avenue includes a retail shopping center, a standalone office building, a 40-acre office park, a firehouse, an assisted living facility, a pre-K through 12th grade private school with multiple outdoor fields, and a community recreation complex complete with outdoor pools, snack bar, multiple tennis/sport courts and fields, a day-care facility, and a 600-person banquet hall. Most of these nonresidential uses have been in place since the late 1960s and predate most of the current homeowners in the neighborhood. It is the proximity to these types of amenities and liveliness, appropriately buffered and controlled, that made many of us want to live here. My street is bordered on three sides by nonresidential uses including the office park, the Italian Center, and King School. From my home we can hear the crowd cheers from King School during Saturday football games or afternoon soccer games. Not all audible sounds should be considered a nuisance.

In 2015, the Planning Board adopted the 2015-2025 Master Plan, which clearly recognizes that our office parks, like those around the country, are struggling. The first action items under both the Growth Management and Zoning Implementation sections are "Amend (update) zoning to allow for redevelopment of office parks outside Downtown for mixed-use (development)."

The only way to create change, in terms of land use, is through the zoning regulations. In response to this call to action, and after spending hours with neighbors and Land Use Bureau staff, the owner of High Ridge Park filed an application to amend the C-D District section of the Zoning Regulations to permit an additional use in this commercial zone, thereby implementing the Master Plan objective. The Planning Board supported the gymnasium use.

This application was originally submitted in February 2017. In June 2018, after six public hearings, hours of public testimony, preliminary studies, attorneys on both sides, revised language, additional restrictions, and the Zoning Board's own modifications, it was unanimously approved.

The concerns of the neighbors were not ignored by the applicant or the Planning and Zoning Boards. They were given much consideration and influenced the final decision of the board to create a regulation that is more protective of residential neighbors than anywhere else in Stamford Zoning. The protections in this regulation are unprecedented. The required setbacks and landscape buffers to residential properties are significantly larger than other Special Exception uses, including the Italian Center, JCC, Stamford Yacht Club, Newfield Swim Club and many other Stamford staples, which are all in single-family residential zones. The noise controls and the means of monitoring are the most stringent in our regulations for any use, including industrial. The new regulation limits parking to what exists on-site currently and requires a forfeiture of remaining development rights as just two ways to implement the direction of the Master Plan. This means *less* potential development, farther from the neighbors, with more screening and controls. Today, none of these standards exist for the C-D zone or the surrounding neighbors.

It was clear from the questions and comments of Board of Representatives members that their main goal is to protect Stamford homeowners. For that they should be applauded ... and so should the Zoning Board. Both devote their time to our city and its citizens without compensation.

Yes, the Zoning Board could have just denied the application altogether. That would have been the easy way out – a few vocal neighbors are happy, and the “big bad developer” suffers the loss. It also would have been detrimental to our suburban office parks, in conflict with the goals of our Master Plan, bad for our tax base, and negatively impact our city as a whole. Instead, they crafted a thoughtful solution and broke new ground in protecting residential neighbors, without dismissing the great need for redevelopment options for our struggling office parks. The Zoning Board members did their job, and I hope their fellow public servants on the Board of Representatives confirm it.

When it's all said and done, I truly believe that the City of Stamford, my neighborhood, and even those immediate neighbors currently in opposition, will all be better served by moving forward with the proposed use and the protections provided by the new regulation.

Stamford resident Raymond R. Mazzeo is a land use planner for Redniss & Mead, which represents High Ridge Office Park.

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