

Planning & Zoning Board Chairman John Sini's 2017 State of the Town Remarks

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Good evening Mister Moderator, members of the RTM, town officials, and fellow community members here and watching via TV-79. I am John Sini. I will be serving as the chairman of the Planning and Zoning Commission for my second year and this will be my fifth year on the Commission.

Editor's note: This is Planning and Zoning Commission Chairman John Sini's State of the Town speech, delivered (along with speeches from three other town officials) Monday night to the Representative Town Meeting. We think the full speech provides readers with an insight into town issues. This is the text of the speech as sent to Darienite.com on Tuesday morning. Speech texts often differ in very minor ways from the spoken remarks, which will be rebroadcast by Darien TV79 on cable television and, later, on [Vimeo](#).

Like last year, I plan to share what is in store for Darien's future from a planning, development, and conservation perspective.

Before I get to business, I would like to give a big shout-out to Coach Rob Trifone's Blue Wave Football squad.

After some late season challenges, this group of young men showed resilience, character, skill, and grit under scrutiny and staged a dramatic win over a favored Greenwich team to claim the Class Double-L State Title

during Saturday's snow storm.

This is the football team's first three-peat state title in school history – a difficult accomplishment any measure for our boys and one that has delivered our community much pride.

I want to start formal remarks by giving you an update on our Commission's membership.

After generously serving for eight years, Eric Voigt decided not to seek a third term on P&Z. I would like to offer Eric special thanks for his of dedicated service to our town. I will certainly miss his humor, wit and guidance during the years we served together.

Steve Olvany, the commission's vice chair, Jim Rand, Liz Riva, and I were reelected to the Commission in November — Steve and Jim for four-year terms and Liz and I for two year terms. We also welcomed Jennifer Leahy as our newest member who was elected for a four-year term. Kevin Cunningham, the longest serving member of the Commission, is now our secretary.

I deeply appreciate all of their assistance in running our meetings smoothly, efficiently, and effectively. I couldn't do it without them.

The Commission's meeting schedule continued to be quite active in 2017 — logging 31 meetings. We also have scheduled another 31 meetings scheduled 2018.

As you can see from the slide, the Planning and Zoning Commission reviewed 124 applications in 2017 — 120 permits were granted among 80 different commercial, residential and municipal projects.

Only four applications were withdrawn and none were denied. This is a testament to our staff's ability to communicate and guide applicants in the right direction before going before the Commission with a formal application.

Of course, P&Z is not the only land use board in town. The Environmental Protection Commission, the Zoning Board of Appeals, and the Architectural Review Board were also busy, conducting a total of over 30 meetings in 2017. Their efforts are critically important for conservation and development activities throughout Darien and I thank all the volunteer members of the other land use boards for their time.

Our community is very fortunate to have such a dedicated team of Planning and Zoning staffers under the direction of Jeremy Ginsberg. Without their steadfast efforts planning and organizing our public meetings, site visits, applications, and conducting informal planning meetings with applicants, the four land use boards would struggle to fulfill their duties.

I would also like to thank Fred Doneit, the town's Senior Planner. He has been an integral addition to our staff and created tonight's power point presentation.

Much of the development progress that you are currently witnessing throughout town is related to the Commission's activity over the last 12 to 24 months.

I would like to remind everyone how privileged of a town Darien is given so much interest for redevelopment projects within its borders. Many towns throughout our fiscally challenged state would be tickled to see just one of the several construction sites we all are watching today in our town.

I would like to quickly review several of the key projects and site approvals of 2017 to remind you of the exciting activity in town.

The site plan for the Noroton Heights Shopping Center, better well known as Palmers, was approved in May. This mixed-use project will bring 59 one and two bedroom units and 25,000 square feet of retail/personal service space and 8,700 square feet of restaurant space on the first floor within its four-acre property.

The groundbreaking is expected in the spring of 2018. For all the Palmers Market customers, don't worry — there will be no change to the existing building as part of the redevelopment.

Just to the east, Federal Realty's redevelopment project, known as The Commons at Noroton Heights, was approved in September. This property will house 122 one and two-bedroom units and add an additional 30,000 square feet of retail/personal service and restaurant space. Its ground breaking is also expected this upcoming spring.

The zoning regulation changes that allowed these two projects to be brought forth were passed about ten years ago and the commission made modest revisions to the regulations in 2016.

The significant increase in Noroton Height's Business District's housing supply should attract empty-nesters, young professionals and Metro-North Commuters to the area. The commission worked closely with the developers to build flood mitigation systems and other drainage improvements in the area.

Likewise, we worked closely with multiple traffic experts to ensure traffic and pedestrian improvements -- specifically on Noroton Avenue and Heights and Hollow Tree Ridge Roads. So, not only will these projects bring beautiful pedestrian friendly developments with several open spaces, they will also deliver much

needed infrastructure improvements to the area.

It's no secret that traditional "bricks and mortar" retailers are facing challenges throughout the U.S. as consumers look to Amazon and other online retailers for their shopping needs. Darien is no different. This has led to challenges in filling our vacant store fronts and a change in the type of commercial business applications we are seeing in our downtown and other business districts throughout our community.

Over the last couple years, the Commission has seen a greater demand for personal service venues which have included educational uses, various types of exercise studios and even things like infrared saunas and salt caves.

The commission is committed to work closely with our commercial landlords to foster vibrant business districts throughout town, while ensuring that these businesses do not overwhelm our parking supply.

One of the redevelopment areas I am most impressed with is at 1950 and 1958 Boston Post Road near St. John's Church in the Noroton section of town. By early next year, the two mixed-use, two-story buildings should be fully occupied.

The tenants for 1950 include Johnny's & Company, which is moving from the Heights, a new casual eatery called Roost and Danny's cycles, which is already open for business. By early next year, we will know more about the business tenant for 1958 Post Road.

I would be remiss not to mention that, despite some concern related to our sign regulations, in 2016 the Zoning Board of Appeals ultimately approved a zoning variances for Shake Shack's signs, and the restaurant was up and running by January 2017. I will talk more about the Commission's efforts related to amendments of our zoning regulations a bit later.

While we approved zoning regulation changes to allow for substantial redevelopment of the Corbin Subarea — the block between Corbin Drive and Exit 11 — the Commission is now reviewing further map and regulations amendments that would allow for the inclusion of the northeast side of Corbin Drive. This would allow for more comprehensive, yet a less intense development zone than we originally approved.

We hope to see a more detailed site plan application for the subarea by late spring which is expected to offer open spaces for the community.

In one of my proudest moments in the eight years that I have served as a public official, in January the Commission approved permanent lights at the Darien High School Stadium Field. This was a 22-year community effort in the making.

The state of the art LED lights and sound system were installed before the fall season began.

While our eighth grade Darien Junior Football League players were the first to use the lights for evening

practice on September 8th, the varsity field hockey team was the first team to host a home game under the lights.

Since then thousands of community members have had the opportunity to come together numerous times under the lights for football, soccer and field hockey games — to spread their Blue Wave pride and more importantly, foster our community spirit.

I offer the town's deep appreciation to the many volunteers and donors tied the Darien Lights Brigade, an offshoot of the Darien Athletic Foundation, Dr. Brenner and the Board of Education for their efforts in making this dream happen for our kids and community.

The DAF has been one of Darien's most successful private-public partnerships in its history and there's still much more to come. I look forward to seeing the application for next project in the works — an on-campus cross country running path so that we can reduce the number of student runners training on busy roads like Middlesex, Hanson and Hollow Tree Ridge Roads.

Another treasured property in town is the Mather Homestead. Through the generosity of private donors and descendants of the Mather family, this national and protected town landmark will now be preserved and utilized for education purposes.

The special permit allows it to host events and gatherings to enjoy the property and share its history for generations to come. This coupled with the Land Trust's meadows has made this northeastern corner of town very, very special.

I would also like to quickly call out the efforts of the Friends of Gorham's Pond, who have completed dredging the upper pond area and have received a zoning approval to dredge the lower pond in order to make it a more vibrant environmental resource.

Any of you that have accessed Selleck's Woods over the past few months have seen the transformation of one of the buildings in the Parklands Office Park to a 105 unit assisted living and memory care facility.

Like retail, suburban office buildings outside of downtown business districts are facing challenges for tenant demand. Things like telecommuting and denser, shared offices are negatively impacting the demand for suburban office space.

The Commission recently approved a regulation amendment that would allow daycare and preschool facilities in suitable first floor office space. The Commission will continue closely monitor the office park situation in Darien.

The construction of the Hollow Tree Ridge Road storage facility is well underway, and we are expecting its completion by next summer. The project will also bring 16 privately managed commuter parking spaces for the train station.

On the municipal front, the Department of Public Works project is making great progress following the Commission's zoning and site plan approvals. It is scheduled to be completed by summer.

In late 2016, the Commission issued a positive mandatory referral report for the acquisition of the Ox Ridge property, which has traditionally been an open field but used for numerous activities through the decades. The Commission's findings cited that the purchase and use of the land for various passive and active open space activities was consistent with the 2016 Town Plan of Conservation and Development.

I want to share a bit of history with you about this property: I bet many of you don't know that New Canaan General Loren Keyes and Darien Skipper Lindley Hubbard's troops clashed on the grounds of Ox Ridge Hunt Club on Nov. 9, 1928. This was no ordinary battle, as it was the beginning of Connecticut high school football's most celebrated rivalry, since labeled the Turkey Bowl. You will be happy to learn that Darien won the game by a healthy margin of 26-6.

The Commission is currently awaiting a special permit application by the Board of Selectmen, which will outline usage of the town's Ox Ridge property. It is important to note that the Board of Selectman will be making the policy decision related to the site's use.

The Planning and Zoning Commission's role in this process is to ensure that any proposed uses are consistent with our special permit regulations within a residential zone, which will be covered during a public hearing. I'm sure Jayme will talk more about this later this evening.

And, just a few weeks ago, the Commission approved the redevelopment and transformation of the Ox Ridge Hunt Club to the Ox Ridge Riding & Racquet Club, which will allow the club to upgrade its equestrian facilities and add squash courts. The owners expect these improvements to make the club more financially sustainable for decades to come.

The town's first Active Senior Development, Knobel Hill at Settler's Trail is an example of adaptive reuse of the Knobel Brothers store property for residential housing. As you can see, it was an innovative way to transform a rundown property into a beautiful development serving demand for senior housing in Darien.

Sticking with the senior housing theme, a modest expansion of Atria's Senior Living Facility yielded six additional units at the site.

The 14-unit expansion of the age-targeted Kensett development is well underway and completion is expected by the end of summer 2017.

What should not be lost in all these larger residential zoning projects is that Darien's Inclusionary Zoning regulation requires the creation of affordable housing units among the market rate units, so that Darien does not slip backwards in its ratio for the state's affordable housing bogey.

Between the several new private developments and the redevelopment of Old Town Hall Homes, the

Commission's approvals over the last couple years should yield over 50 new affordable units in Darien. Our local regulations and policy decisions are clearly working on this front.

Unfortunately, our commission can't affect what I call the "state's fiscal dumpster fire," which is making Connecticut far less attractive to live in given its high tax rates and low economic growth versus other states. Connecticut's fiscal ills are unnaturally influencing Darien by propelling both older and/or typically wealthier residents and businesses to move to lower-tax regions of our country. Jon and Jayme will shed more light on this ongoing challenge.

Redevelopment or what my fellow Commission members call "suburban renewal," continues to help increase the size of Darien's grand list. As this chart shows, the grand list has appreciated to just over \$8.5 billion today.

This kind of value creation is extremely important in offsetting some of our state's fiscal woes. The Planning and Zoning Commission is committed to maintaining Darien's economic vibrancy to the best of our ability using the zoning and regulation tools we have at our disposal.

The updated Town Plan of Conservation & Development was completed in June 2016 and is now about 18 months old. The Commission has already referred to the plan for several mandatory referrals and regulation changes.

With the help of consultant, Glen Chalder, the Commission's efforts to implement the plan are proceeding in three areas of our regulations: (1) Signage; (2) Residential building coverage and bulk; and (3) Our Business Zones. We are also considering implementing the Municipal Use zone for several of our town facilities to offer the properties more flexibility in the future.

Another issue the Commission has started to explore is broadening the age restrictions for senior living from 62-years-and-over to 55-years-and-over, so that we may offer additional housing options for our empty nesters and retiring baby-boomers. Please stay tuned on this front.

One of the reasons that I decided to pursue my second term on P&Z is that I deeply appreciate working with the three other people that are presenting to you this evening. Jayme, Jon, Tara I would like to thank you for all your hard work and collaborative efforts on your respective boards. It would be a much less enjoyable volunteer role if I didn't have the opportunity to work closely with people like you and I look forward to working together in 2018!

Steve Olvany and I will continue to foster communication between our Commission and the Planning, Zoning and Housing Committee — which is the committee we both served on during our years on the RTM.

I want to leave you with the message that I'm always open to discussion. Our Commission can't run effectively without community feedback. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us with comments, concerns, or even criticism — although it would also be awfully nice to field an “atta-boy” once in a while as well!

[Sini's slide presentation at this point included this contact information: Phone: (203) 969-4133; email: JSini@DarienCT.gov.]

Thank you again for your time this evening. I wish you all, Happy Holidays, Merry Christmas, and a wonderful, healthy, and prosperous 2018!