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State of the Town: P&Z Chairman: The Town's Been Improving and Can Expect 'Future Success'

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Darien land use boards put in place the town's business regulations in response to the COVID-19 epidemic before any other community in the area, Planning & Zoning Commission Chairman Stephen Olvany boasted in his State of the Town address Monday night.

It was among several boasts Olvany made about the town's recent accomplishments and prospects. Among them: Darien has been a top target for families moving out of New York City; the town's office vacancy rate is below similar area towns; its residential home prices are slightly higher than New Canaan and Westport.

Olvany said the Palmer's redevelopment project in downtown Noroton Heights is expected to begin sometime this year, and the project should take two years.

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Here's the text of Olvany's speech, as prepared:

Thank you, Mister Moderator, Members of the RTM, my fellow elected officials and The People of Darien. Good evening everyone, I am Stephen Olvany, Chairman of the Planning & Zoning Commission.

I was recently re-elected as the Chair of the P&Z and I am excited deliver my report again this year. In my speech last year, I started by thanking the many volunteers who staff our four local land use boards.

I will take the opportunity to do that again this year, with a special note that even during this current COVID pandemic, it has been important for the work of our town boards to continue, even under such trying circumstances.

The Planning & Zoning Commission has still held 3 to 4 meetings a month since April 1st in order to accommodate the Town's business. All of the Town Boards have been using the GoToMeeting virtual Platform, although there's nothing like actually meeting in person. Tonight, I'm standing here talking to an empty 300 seat auditorium. Unfortunately, these type of virtual non-in-person meetings will likely be occurring for another few months. We will manage through it!! And I hope it's over soon.

I do need to especially acknowledge the many years of service of two special Zoning Board of Appeals members, who left the ZBA this year...Chuck DeLuca and Vic Cappelupo. I was on the ZBA some 7 or 8 years ago and served with these 2 pros.

They each served over 17 years on the ZBA, and attended over 300 meetings between the two of them. Their long-time experience and institutional knowledge will be difficult to replace...I wish them best of luck in their future endeavors. Thank you both.

In a follow-up to last year's speech, and over the past 10 months, I have personally met with the Chairs of the Architectural Review Board – Liz Geiger; Environmental Protection Commission – Eric Joosten, and Zoning Board of Appeals – Mike Nedder. I wanted to discuss issues, needs and any regulations or items that the Planning & Zoning Commission should be aware of. I have also met with Amy Barsanti the Chair of the RTM PZ&H Committee. These folks are all know their stuff, and I enjoy all these conversations. It is always helpful to get feedback, and a better understanding of the specific issues facing each of our land use boards, and get the news of what we are doing on the P&Z Commission out to the general public. All of our 4 land use boards, the RTM, and the Board of Selectmen are facilitating the Town's business, and it is great to collaborate with them.

Our year started off with a bang in February 2020 with all the Darien land use, boards reviewing the proposed new Ox Ridge Elementary School project and plans.

This included three nights of Planning & Zoning Commission public hearings totaling 5 ½ hours, and hours of plan review and site visits. The ARB and EPC had meetings on the project as well. I am pleased to announce that after a very thorough review and some changes that we requested and required, the project was

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fully approved, and the required Zoning & Building Permits have been issued.

It will be a new 109,000 SF state of the art school with 21 classrooms designed for 428 students and about 80 faculty and staff. Congrats go out to the Building Committee and their professional consultants. Good luck with the next steps of the development and construction process.

In early April, the Planning & Zoning Commission had to react fast to the COVID pandemic, relative to allowing outdoor dining and other commercial outdoor activity. Having business owners go through the typical site plan review process during a lock down and town hall closed was not an option. We had to cut through the Red Tape,

So, we authorized Department staff, headed-up by Jeremy Ginsberg the P&Z Director, in conjunction with the Building Official, Fire Marshal, and Health Department, to issue temporary approvals. This has allowed the restaurants to have outdoor dining, and retail stores, and exercise studios to have outdoor activity. These temporary approvals have been extended under my Board's authority in an effort to provide continued relief to these businesses and keep them open, now in tandem with the State's timeline. I can tell you that a number of our town restaurateurs, and landlords came to our Virtual meetings in support of the outdoor re-openings and thanked us. Their commercial success is the backbone of our Town. P.S. We got our downtown re-opened and active faster than any other regional municipality.

Also, this Spring, the new cross county track at the Darien High School was completed by the Parks & Rec department and the Darien Athletic Foundation. My daughter was a DHS track team captain star. She's now a Junior in college, so she missed it by 2-years. Sorry Kimberly, but it will be enjoyed by other athletes and town residents for years to come. Thanks to the DAF, the BOE and Pam Gery, who heads up the Parks & Rec Department.

Surprisingly, the number of permits and applications to the P&Z has not dropped during this pandemic period. The Department has seen a record-high number of inquiries and permits for swimming pools—requests for approvals for land regrading for yard flattening. House additions and alterations are also up. Families are home more and are again investing in their most important asset, their houses, which is great to see. The Commission also approved pre-school and afterschool programs at all of the elementary schools within the past year.

I want to announce another recent commercial building trend. The creation of outdoor rooftop deck space in office buildings. This is one more feature that is helpful in making office space in Town more appealing and rentable, especially important due to the impact of COVID on the demand for office space.

We approved two of those rooftop decks this year, one at 19 Old King's Highway South and the other for a new replacement office building to be constructed at 34 Old King's Highway South. Some of you may know 34 Old King's Highway South; it is the building that Baywater Properties had painted by an artist as a haunted house. It is slated for demolition this month.

Over the summer, we saw the completion of “The Royle at Darien”.

This is the redevelopment of Old Town Hall Homes into 55, new senior, affordable rental apartments in a state-of-the-art building near downtown managed by the Darien Housing Authority. This adds to diversity of Darien’s Multi-Family housing stock, and is a big improvement over the prior buildings. This is a net increase of 25 units on the property. The additional note about this project that it includes solar panels on roof, making it more “green”.

I am a real estate guy and have been in the commercial real estate valuation & analysis business for over 30 years. So, now I’d like to quickly walk you through how Darien’s real estate is doing, during this crazy year. Conclusion – Darien is doing just fine (actually, great), while other national and regional markets are struggling. I credit this due in part to our location, existing policies in-place, and a great town leadership, including the First Selectman’s office, the Board of Finance and our Board of Education.

I am pleased to note that there is very little commercial/retail space available in Darien. Downtown now only has 2 vacant storefronts directly on Boston Post Road. The former Brooks Brothers and the former Tina Dragone store, and there is activity brewing for both of these assets. Our peer towns are seeing retailers this year, while we are opening new businesses and more are coming.

The new retailers and restaurants that have opened in Town during 2020, and between April and October (6-months) during the pandemic, including those on the slide you see.

In all, I counted nine new businesses and ten others that have extended their leases, have relocated within Darien, or are in the process of considering expansion.

Next, I want to touch on the commercial office market. New York City, Norwalk and Stamford are having commercial office issues. Suburban towns like Darien are benefitting. Here are some slides I put together.

Darien is a 1.2 million SF Class A to C commercial office market according to the CoStar Group. Our office vacancy is 8.5%. According to my firm CBRE, Inc., the

Central Fairfield County Class A & B office market that includes Norwalk comprises 9.73 million square feet and has a vacancy rate of 29.9%.

Our average quoted rent is \$33.87 per square foot. the Central rate is \$33.27 per square foot (we are 2% higher). Our most comparable peer towns are New Canaan and Westport.

New Canaan – 700,000 SF; 9.6% vacant; more expensive at \$35.01 psf

Westport – 2.87 million SF; 11.5% vacant; most expensive at \$36.72 psf

In the end, for a vibrant and sustainable office market you want to have low vacancies, quality building, and

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affordable rent market rent along with low real estate taxes and Darien has those. Historically, once a market has a sustained vacancy of less than ten percent, it is time for new construction.

I surveyed a few of our town's largest commercial landlords. I want to acknowledge a number of new, expanding and office tenants in 2020.

Fletcher Properties in their office park at 320-330 Boston Post Road has leased to five new tenants within the past year. Nielsen Properties and Baywater Properties have also been successful in attracting new tenants. Forestone Capital has brought in Everwell as a tenant at 19 Old King's Highway South.

Jon Vaccaro is a newer commercial developer active in Darien with 5 new projects and counting. The long-time resident reports all of his commercial and residential spaces are fully leased. Amazing.

We welcome all these retail, service, and office businesses, try to support them and give them lots of credit for opening and investing in our community during such uncertain times. Please support them.

Finally, I want to update you on the residential single-family market in Darien and our peer towns and Fairfield County. I have some more slides to assist.

It's no secret, New York City, Manhattan & Brooklyn residents and young families bolted from the City. Where did they go? I'm pleased to say that Darien is one of their destinations.

Single Family and condo home prices in the overall Fairfield County market jumped 25.6% during the 3rd quarter of 2020 according to Douglas Elliman Realtors after the pandemic lockdown lifted (July to September).

The normal Spring season March/April/May was non-existent due to the lockdown, but you have to get your kids ready for school by September.

Here are some more charts on the Darien market and our peer communities from Douglas Elliman.

Darien Median pricing jumped 19.5% quarter over quarter and 16.7% year over year, between 3Q-2019 and 3Q-2020 to \$1.5 million.

New Canaan – 14.2% Qtr. over Qtr. and 18.9% Yr. over Yr. to \$1.45 million

Westport – 18.1% Qtr. over Qtr. and 32.0% Yr. over Yr. to \$1.435 million.

It is clearly a strong real estate market on the residential side.

To update you on some ongoing redevelopments:

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First, the Corbin District project is now underway downtown.

The first step is to re-locate the “Brook” drainage ditch that ran behind Gofer Ice Cream and the 3 buildings on Corbin Drive and underground that water. The next step will be to remove the existing gas station at the corner.

Work will continue on the eastern side of Corbin Drive in 2021. The final product will include 85,500 square feet of new Class A office space to help our downtown.

The associated East Lane project will also be getting constructed in 2021, which will have twelve of the 14 required affordable units associated with the Corbin District project

Next, the Federal Realty project in the eastern part of the Noroton Heights commercial area. The foundation & roof top parking deck for the new Walgreens is complete, and we expect that building to be complete by fall 2021. Other construction will get underway in 2021, as that entire multi-building mixed-use project proceeds to 2022 or 2023 full completion.

While the Palmer family project in the redevelopment of the Noroton Heights Shopping Center has not yet begun, we are optimistic that demolition will begin in 2021. The construction will take at least two years.

There are a number of other smaller, mixed use projects which are now underway.

First is the redevelopment of the Darien Playhouse building. The back of the building where the theater was has been removed, and the former theater has been gutted. The project will consist of three new commercial spaces on the first floor in the back of the building, and four upstairs apartments.

This project will complete the sidewalk along of Grove Street between 2 Squab Lane, the Butcher Shop, Brook Street and the Darien Sport Shop.

The former Darien International Tile building at the corner of Dickinson and Boston Post Road (1897 Boston Post Road) has also been approved as a mixed use project. The work has begun, and is expected to be completed in 2021.

There will be commercial tenants on the first floor, and five upstairs apartments on upper floors with one of those being deed-restricted affordable.

One last note is that it appears that the Legislature up in Hartford has its eyes on potential changes to the planning and zoning statutes. In February, we released a new accurate inventory of multi-family housing constructed within the past 20 years, noting that there have been more than 500 units of multi-family housing constructed in that time, with over 200 of those being deed-restricted affordable units. We have been monitoring this, and it will be a priority for us at the start of the new year to stay on top of those potential changes, and understand their implications for Darien.

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In conclusion, although it has been a tough year for everyone personally, I am pleased to say that the Planning & Zoning Commission has been responsive to local businesses, and is positioning the Town for future growth. We look forward to the year ahead!

Stay safe!

I want to wish you all the best in 2021.