

Connecticut Planning & Development, LLC.

Town of Plymouth, Connecticut **Planning Assessment Report**

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Introduction

This report is intended to provide the Town of Plymouth with findings and recommendations related to the Community Assessment conducted by the Connecticut Rural Development Council. The Community Assessment began at a kickoff meeting February 28, 2008. The meeting included staff from the Connecticut Rural Development Council, the volunteer consulting team, the Town Council, and members of various town agencies. This meeting was followed by a Community Tour that was conducted April 21, 2008. The Community Assessment consultants reconvened May 5th to discuss the community, assets, liabilities, and to formulate findings and recommendations. This report will provide specific findings and recommendations related to community planning and land use regulations.

Communities are not static. They are living, changing environments that evolve over time. How a community evolves is dependent on many factors. Some of these factors include market conditions, relative location within the greater market, transportation networks, consumer preferences, and land use regulations. As a community evolves over time it must constantly adjust to changing conditions and continually reposition itself within the market to attract and retain investment.

Investment can be both financial and social. Financial investment is measured by both people and businesses investing the community. For example, financial investment can be the purchase of a home, the rental of an apartment, the opening of a new store, office, or manufacturing facility, or renovations to an existing property. Social investment is measured by active role that residents and businesses play in the community. For example, residents may participate in local government, utilize community facilities, participate in youth sports organizations, church organizations or other community organizations. The same is true for businesses and may also include the chamber of commerce and other business related organizations.

When making planning decisions that will impact investment and when creating strategies to best position the community, a community should consider the factors that drive investment behaviors of residents and businesses. Some factors, such as geographic location, local taxes and services, and access to markets or jobs are obvious, four other key factors should also be considered. They are as follow:

Choice: Understanding that people and businesses make choices as to where to buy, what to buy, when to invest, and how much to invest.

Competition: From other communities, properties, and other neighborhoods. It is not enough for a community to be a good place to live; the community must be able to attract residents and businesses even as its competitors change every year.

Confidence: Older communities, neighborhoods, and properties can often display a confusing mixture of perceptions and behavior. Residents and businesses want confidence affirmed from neighbors and other businesses that investing in their homes or businesses is worthwhile and is supported by newcomers also investing.

Predictability in Community: Residents and businesses want predictability. New neighbors and businesses are considered good when they notice and abide by the prevailing norms within the community.

Community planning most often focuses on land use planning, land use regulations, and physical planning of spaces. However, community planning often loss sight of other aspects of planning and that comprehensive planning and strategies should consider market conditions, social capital, and community image. When assessing a community and developing strategies to best position the community for success it is important to consider the community in the context of the four key levers of change: Image, Market, Physical Conditions, and Social Connections. These four levers of change were considered as part of this community assessment. The following are observations related to Plymouth what is working and what is not working in the context of these four levers of change:

Town of Plymouth

Image	
Assets - What is working?	Liabilities - What is not working?
Strong industrial history	Confusion between Terryville and Plymouth to outsiders
Residents have a strong sense of community	Lack on high standards of property maintenance in older industrial park
Historic character and charm	Older strip design along Rte. 6

Market	
Assets - What is working?	Liabilities - What is not working?
Proximity to Bristol and Waterbury	Located on the fringe of the Hartford market
Access to Rte. 8	Oversupply of older industrial factories
Access to rail	Congestion on Rte. 6
Strong industrial history	Older out-dated commercial space
Historic properties with character	Limited space for expansion in older industrial park
Industrial space and land available	

Physical Conditions	
Assets - What is working?	Liabilities - What is not working?
High standards of residential property maintenance	Older industrial park and moderate standards of property maintenance and investment
Very well designed new industrial park	Older architecture (1950s – 1970) strip design along Rte. 6
Modern high school	Older public infrastructure

Social Connections	
Assets - What is working?	Liabilities - What is not working?
Strong sense of community	Lack of a Main Street organization
Dedicated elected and appointed officials	

When developing strategies to best position the community, the Town of Plymouth should consider these four levers of change and what is working for the community and what is not working for the community. The examples provided about are based on my limited knowledge and exposure to the community. Community leaders and residents will have a greater understanding and insight in these items and should further explore.

The following is a seven step approach to developing and implementing a strategy to best position the community. The Town of Plymouth may wish to consider utilizing this approach to further develop and implement strategies.

1. Read the community (or area or neighborhood) to determine what's working and what's not working in terms of people's decisions to invest, or not and why?
2. Set outcomes and measures for a healthy and successful community (what are the specific outcomes related to image, market, physical condition, and neighborhood management).
3. Choose the tactics/strategies that will best achieve these outcomes (community building, marketing, investment, design, infrastructure, land use regulations)
4. Assess and strengthen capacity to deliver investment strategies (organization, partners, products, services, structure)
5. Implement strategy.
6. Measure progress towards outcomes – improvement. Do not measure for outputs, counting numbers or numerical goals.
7. Develop new approaches when old ones are obsolete based on changes in the market

Finding and Recommendations

The following are specific recommendations related to planning activities and land use regulations. Regardless of the whether the community proceeds with a more comprehensive approach as discussed about, this section will provide specific actions that the community can consider implementing now. These are based on specific areas of concern raised by the community leaders and viewed on the community tour. In addition, no planning assessment would be complete with a review of the existing Plan of Conservation and Development and Zoning Regulations, which is also provided.

General Findings

In general, from a planning perspective, the Town of Plymouth appears to be in very good shape. The community has recently updated both its Plan of Conservation and Development and Zoning Regulations. In addition, the Town has a very competent, experienced, and successful town planner who continues to guide the community in its development.

For a smaller community, Plymouth appears to be very progressive in its planning and development activities. For example, the Town's investment into expanding the industrial park is very innovative for a community of this size. Being proactive and developing the infrastructure for the industrial park is not something many small communities do.

Plymouth also has a very favorable tax rate. While it is understood that there is always a concern over taxes and providing a balance between community services, budgets, and taxes, Plymouth should feel very good about its low tax rate. Plymouth could also benefit from further public investment in the community. While it is never popular to increase spending and raise taxes, communities should realize that some investment is needed at times. In addition, well planned and strategic investments can benefit a community and even return additional investment. The expansion of the industrial park is a good example of this. Therefore, the community should consider specific areas of town (redevelopment) that could both benefit from investment and leverage additional private investment.

Recommendation: The Town of Plymouth consider an assessment of community facilities and infrastructure and develop a 10 to 20 year strategy for public investment. This should be incorporated into the Capitol Improvement Plan and Capitol Improvement Budget.

Plan of Conservation and Development Findings

The Town of Plymouth completed its most recent Plan of Conservation and Development in 2005. The Plymouth Plan of Conservation and Development provides a comprehensive review of the town's existing conditions related to demographics, housing, economic development, conservation, transportation, community facilities and services, and cultural resources. In addition, the Plan of Conservation and Development provides recommendations and strategies to the needs of the community both today and in the future.

A review of the Plan of Conservation and Developed revealed a very comprehensive and high quality plan for the community. The Plan took a realistic and practical approach to assessing the community and provides for realistic and achievable outcomes through its recommendations and strategies. In addition, The Plan utilized and considered modern planning strategies such as smart growth policies to guide its future growth and development.

Recommendation: The Town of Plymouth should continue to use and implement the recommendations of it 2005 Plan of Conservation and Development. The Executive Summary of The Plan and its Implementation Strategy tables provide the Town with a detailed work plan for implementing The Plan who (what agencies) is responsible for specific tasks. The Planning and Zoning Commission and Town Council should review The Plan Implementation Strategies yearly continue to implement them.

Zoning Regulation Findings

The Town of Plymouth completed its most recent update to the Zoning Regulations in January of 2008. This comprehensive update of the regulations included the implementation of the recommendations in the Plan of Conservation and Development. Therefore, the Town of Plymouth has a very modern and up-to-date set of Zoning Regulations. This is very good and very important in terms of guiding future development. The zoning regulations are simple, clear, and user friendly. In addition, the regulations are fair and balanced and not overly reliant on special permit uses which can create a more difficult and time consuming land use approval process.

Recommendation: The Planning and Zoning Commission may want to consider an innovative approach to the sign regulations. There appeared to be concerns expressed about the aesthetics of commercial signage. The conventional approach to dealing with signs is to create more restrictive regulations. An innovative approach to improving the aesthetics of signs is to provide design standards and incentives.

Communities are not allowed, by law, to regulate the design of signs. However, that does not mean a community can not promote and provide incentives for specific sign designs. Most businesses want large signs, greater square feet of sign area or more signs. Therefore, using the size and number of signs allowed, the Zoning Regulations could provide an incentive for businesses to comply with design standards for signs.

The concept goes like this. Leave the existing sign standards in place. But amend the sign regulations to include a Unified Sign Program. The unified sign program would include design standards for signs, including materials, locations, and designs. However, properties (signs) that comply with the Unified Sign Program Design Standards (created by the town) receive a 20 or 25 percent increase in the allowable square footage of signs and are allowed 1 additional sign on the property. Many property and business owners may be willing to voluntarily accept and comply with design standards if in return they get larger signs.

Redevelopment of Existing Sites

Community leaders expressed both interest and concerns related to a number of specific sites in town and the prospects of redeveloping the site. The sites included the Eagle Lock property, the Prospect Street School, the Oz Gedney property, and the East Main Street Elementary Schools. Each of these sites provide the Town with unique opportunities to maintain historic structures and sites that enhance the character of the community and connect the community with its past. At the same time each of these properties has unique and significant challenges for redevelopment related to their size, conditions, and locations.

The Eagle Lock and the OZ Gedney property are both former industrial sites. It appeared that the intent of the Town of Plymouth was to encourage the redevelopment of these properties a commercial uses. Both of these properties are very large and redevelopment of them as commercial uses would add a significant amount of commercial square footage to the local market. Adding a large amount of additional commercial space to the local market may saturate the market which could create problems. In addition, these two properties are older multi-story structures. Modern industrial and manufacturing space tend to be single floor, as demonstrated

by the style of buildings in the industrial park. Therefore, these properties may not be very desirable for such uses. These may be the reason why there has been little interest in these properties for redevelopment.

It also appeared that there was an interest in redeveloping the Prospect Street School as a commercial, possibly, office use. This also raises concerns related to the demand for such use in the market. The discussion around the East Main Street Elementary School included a possible senior center or office use. A senior center would make sense with the aging population structure of community.

Recommendations: Seventy five percent of Plymouth's housing stock is single family residential. Another 15 percent is 2-4 unit residential housing leaving only approximately eight percent as multi-family with five units or more. Providing for a greater mix of housing in the community is recommended. While the overall housing market is weak at this time, there is still demand for rental units. In addition, the housing market should bounce back within the next year or two and ownership units should become viable again.

The reason for mentioning the residential housing mix is that housing should be strongly considered for the redevelopment and reuse of these redevelopment sites. Residential uses would provide a greater market for reuse of the sites and may aid developers in securing financing for the site. To best encourage the redevelopment of these sites, it is recommended that the Planning and Zoning Commission amend the Zoning Regulations to include a Redevelopment Overlay Zoning District. This district should allow for commercial, industrial, residential, and mixed-use uses. Flexible site requirements should be included to best facilitate redevelopment. In addition, funding assistance from CHFA and DECD may be available for these properties if the Town is willing to allow a percentage of the housing units to be restricted to low and moderate income households. Twenty or thirty percent should create a good balance of income levels.

Conclusion

The Town of Plymouth appears to be in good shape from a planning perspective. The community has recently updated its Plan of Conservation and Development and its Zoning Regulations. It has also be proactive in the development of it industrial park and is positioned to build out the new industrial park. While the community faces a number of challenges related to older industrial sites, there are opportunities to make these sites more appealing to developers. Moving forward the community may want to consider developing a more comprehensive strategy to best position Plymouth for future success.

Respectfully Submitted,



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