

Opinion

Readers write: Big box Costco, inappropriate scale for Guilford

Friday, September 10, 2010

By Delores Hayden
Special to the Times

I am writing to oppose the change in Guilford zoning proposed by Developers Diversified Realty, the developers of a failed shopping center who would like to sell their property to Costco.

They request that the town change the existing zoning to increase the square footage allowed for one store by a factor of six, from 25,000 square feet to 150,000 square feet. A Costco is built at an inappropriate scale for Guilford. It belongs in a city or town already equipped for the scale of the 18-wheeler trucks and tanker trucks. I would recommend New Haven, East Haven, Clinton, or Branford.

Guilford has three National Register historic districts - three districts of historic buildings and landscapes important to the heritage of the nation. The historic district around the Green is particularly special because of the size of the Green and the pedestrian scale of the many historic houses and streets surrounding it. This intact, historic town center makes Guilford attractive to many residents and to visitors. To sustain its historic pedestrian scale, planners and residents of Guilford have emphasized preservation and conservation in the existing town plan and in the existing zoning limiting individual stores to 25,000 square feet. This should not be changed.

Many parts of Connecticut exhibit a scale oriented to trucks and automobiles, not to people. A landscape composed of highways, wide arterial roads, big box stores, small box stores, outlet malls, enclosed malls, strip malls, fast food stops, chain motels, auto dealers, truck stops, and gas stations can be seen in many towns along the exits from Interstate 95 – Milford, Orange, East Haven, parts of Branford, parts of Clinton. The towns of Madison and Guilford have resisted, and that is why their residential property values are higher and why they are sought after by residents and visitors who enjoy small restaurants and a variety of small shops. But in the last 20 years, commercial developers have brought increased pressure for inappropriate growth, trying to break down the zoning barriers in various ways.

The DDR developers who want to weaken Guilford's zoning barrier hire engineers, and lawyers, and marketing consultants to argue that the big box store is the cheap, democratic American way to shop and that unconstrained growth is helpful to small towns. It is not, numerous studies show that over time the big box forces smaller stores to close and becomes a drain on the municipal

budget. I hope town officials will be wise enough to understand that the campaign on behalf of Costco is not about bargain shopping. It is about how a zoning change can increase the value of commercial real estate to a shopping mall developer who failed because of overestimating the demand for retail space in Guilford. We should keep the existing zoning and work to strengthen, rather than weaken, all the zoning along Route 1 in Guilford.

I have been a resident of Guilford since 1991 and I served on the Route One East advisory committee. My most recent books deal with the history of American suburbs and the economics of sprawl.

Editor's note: Dolores Hayden is a professor of Architecture and Urbanism and professor of American Studies at Yale University. She lives in Guilford.

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