

Redevelopment in Wilton-Why, What and How

By First Selectwoman Lynne Vanderslice

Wilton is experiencing high interest in redeveloping under or nonperforming commercial properties to multi-family residential. Residents are asking why is this happening, what is being proposed and how can they participate.

Why are commercial buildings being torn down or retrofitted to build multi-family housing?

The short answer is demand for multi-family housing is strong. And there is an excess supply of commercial properties. Particularly of Fairfield County office buildings, which, as of September 30th, had an overall vacancy rate of 32%. That rate was led by Wilton at 50%, Norwalk at 39% and Stamford at 37%. (Source: Cushman & Wakefield). One solution for owners of such buildings is to sell to a developer of multi-family housing.

Why is Wilton's office vacancy rate so high?

Office vacancy rates have been increasing for some time. During this spring, 20 Westport Road was reported as fully vacant following the completion of Bridgewater's relocation to renovated office space in Westport, supported by a State economic development grant, and/or office space in Stamford. That one building accounted for 22% of the 50% vacancy rate. Other businesses, such as Deloitte, also relocated to Stamford with State support. Wilton is disadvantaged by the lack of direct train service to NYC and the availability of new office buildings in Stamford versus our more mature buildings.

Are there more underperforming properties in addition to those being discussed with P&Z?

Yes. In addition to the 340,000 sq. ft. at 20 Westport Road, the 46,000 sq. ft. building at 45 Danbury Rd is vacant due to Beiersdorf's recent downsizing to Stamford. The Commonfund building at the Wilton train station also has a high vacancy rate.

The School Sisters of Notre Dame property on Belden Hill Road, with 200,000 sq. ft. of buildings, is on the market. A number of smaller buildings near the Cannondale train station are underperforming and, given the strong market, could be expected to be developed.

What is the impact of these properties remaining vacant or nonperforming?

The impact is two-fold

- 20% of Wilton's grand list is commercial, meaning residents fund only 80% of the town's budget. Any value declines reflected in the 2022 revaluation will shift the associated tax loss to other taxpayers, including residential taxpayers.
- More than 12,000 employees work in Wilton. As businesses move or employees work from home, there are fewer employees to shop, dine and use services in Wilton.

How is the Town responding to these vacant or underutilized properties?

Proactively. Director of Land Use Management and Town Planner Michael Wrinn and I regularly meet and work with owners or representatives of underutilized properties,

commercial brokers, site selectors and potential developers to recommend and facilitate appropriate redevelopment. The same occurred with Michael's predecessor.

The Planning and Zoning Commission and the Architectural Review Board hold pre-application meetings to provide feedback prior to a developer submitting an application. These non-binding meetings allow the Commission members to speak more freely and thereby improve applications.

The First Selectwoman's Office, primarily through Community Affairs Coordinator Sarah Gioffre, is focused on making it easier for businesses to access the information they need to open or expand a business by publishing a [Guide to Opening or Expanding a Business in Wilton](#) and by an ongoing effort to make land records and permitting and other information fully accessible online.

Why only apartments? Why not townhomes or less dense development?

Developers indicate higher density is required to make their projects economically viable based on the high price of developable land and the need to provide affordable units. Market rate units must offset revenue loss associated with affordable units. Last year, Donald Poland provided WestCOG mayors and first selectmen/women with a presentation, *Affordable Housing: By the Numbers*, which includes financial data and analysis. The [slides](#) and the [video](#) are available on the WestCOG website.

How can residents learn more and provide input?

For Planning & Zoning Commission matters, complete application and pre-application [materials](#) and [agendas, minutes and meeting videos](#) are easily available on the Town's website. Residents can sign up to receive notice of activity [here](#). Public comments may be provided during the public hearing period, which typically occurs over several meetings. Instructions are on the meeting's agenda. The same is available on the Town's website for the Architectural Review Board and the Inland Wetlands Commission.

I encourage you to engage. We all have an interest in redevelopment and the expansion of housing options to retain and attract new residents and to support existing and new retail, dining and service businesses.

Thank you.