



Recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Residential Growth

July 27, 2005

Committee Members

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In Memoriam

Ralph Duell, 1927-2005

Resident of Tolland
Pillar of his Community
Friend

Introduction

The Town of Tolland was ranked in the Summer of 2005 by CNN/Money* as the 29th best place in the United States to live. Despite this honorific title—or perhaps because of this title—Tolland is struggling to maintain its character as it faces problems which are very serious in their nature, problems which touch upon nearly every aspect of residential life in Tolland. While statistics do not exist which formally identify the root cause of these problems, both anecdotal and direct evidence indicate that a recent and rapid increase in Tolland's residential population is primarily responsible. The Ad Hoc Committee on Residential Growth was formed, therefore, by the Planning and Zoning Commission to examine these problems and to suggest methods by which these problems may be solved.

The committee is a fairly diverse group of sixteen town residents consisting of grandparents, parents and non-parents; young (20s) and old (60+); retired, employed, and stay-at-home; developers and non-developers; Town commission members and non-members; and male and female. The opinions represented here are not necessarily unanimous, though a majority of those in attendance felt that the views of both the problems and possible solutions are reasonable suggestions.

The Problems, Areas of Concern, and Recommendations

The committee established very early in the process a list of areas of concern that define Tolland's character. These items are listed below in no particular order, though they have been grouped by general similarity.

The process of generating this list and then refining it into problem areas consumed a fair amount of the committee's attentions. Without knowing what problems it was attempting to address, after all, the process would be fairly useless. After defining the problems to be solved, the committee then examined solutions which may be useful. This document therefore is comprised of seven general categories, the recommendations associated with those categories, and the raw ideas which were brought out during the various brainstorming sessions.

Category One

Maintenance of the "Classic Look of New England"

This area of concern is one which is mostly subjective but which has a great deal of impact on the visual nature of Tolland's character. For example, a drive down some of the larger roads in Tolland reveals some subdivisions which "stick out like a sore thumb," as one committee member put it. Others are particularly well camouflaged and the impact to the visual landscape is minimal.

Of course, overall development restrictions (number, density, etc.) can have some impact on the ability of the town to maintain its classic look, but generally, the committee feels that visual continuity is best maintained through regulation which appropriately addresses this problem. Therefore, the committee makes the following recommendations:

* money.cnn.com/best/bplive/top100_2.html

Recommendation #1: that the P&Z support and encourage a scenic road ordinance be enacted to ensure that scenic roads be preserved.

Recommendation #2: that a resource overlay map be created for selected areas which are determined to have particularly important vistas or natural features.

Recommendation #3: that the town institute two checklists, one for site planning and one for design planning. These shall be comprised of the individual commission's requirements for site and design planning. This recommendation is designed to ensure that site analysis issues are being upheld and all design regulations are being considered.

Recommendation #4: that the town institute a more formal review of these checklists. Applicants must respond in writing to all comments and checklist items identified and all commissions must see these responses before approval of the application. This recommendation is designed to ensure that the checklist comments and requirements are being followed and to open lines of communications between the various commissions.

Recommendation #5: that the checklists be modeled after the checklists used in Woodstock.

Recommendation #6: that reduced building envelopes be established during the development process to reduce disruption to the site.

The raw list items which were associated with this category:

- Narrow, winding roads
- Stone walls
- Farm animals/farms
- Pasture
- Village-like qualities
- Traffic (or lack thereof)
- Mature tree "good" preservation
- Conserve/Preserve "green"
- Street trees
- Open space
- Views/vistas
- Dirt roads
- Preserve Green-like nature of new areas
- Increase non-motorized traffic

Category Two

Environmental Preservation

Tolland is a town which typifies the environmental characteristics usually associated with New England. Above the surface, it is characterized by, among other things, a considerable amount of green (trees, farms, etc.), water (small lakes, ponds) and wildlife (the things that eat your garden). Below the surface, it is characterized by poorly-draining soils, large, rocky areas, ledge, etc. All of these items are part and parcel of the New England landscape and they are what must be preserved to ensure that Tol-

land continues to look like the rest of New England (part of the quality of life sought by its residents) and to ensure that the environment is capable of supporting its residents without significant impact to the environment. The committee therefore makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation #7: that a maximum density be established for all of Tolland to ensure that the carrying capacity (including such factors as soils qualities, etc.) of the land is carefully considered and the eventual buildout of the town is considered. This density factor shall, at a minimum, include the consideration of soil types, infrastructure capacities, etc.

Recommendation #8: that the Town require open space dedication to be 25% for all proposed subdivisions of four lots or more or subdivisions of 15 acres or more. At least fifty percent of the proposed dedicated open space must be comprised of useable land, free of wetlands, ledge or slopes greater than fifteen percent. The open space shall be contiguous except by permit, as is already specified in the current regulations.

The raw list items which were associated with this category:

- Pasture
- Mature “good” tree preservation
- Open space
- Conserve/Preserve “green”
- Views/vistas
- Minimize invasive species
- Wildlife
- Water course
- Water quality
- Increase non-motorized traffic
- Wetlands
- Vernal pools
- Floodplains
- Threatened or Endangered Species, Species of concern
- Air Quality
- Noise
- Cultural resources
- Recreation
- Ecological/Natural Features
- Ridgelines

Category Three

Quality of Life

The current quality of life associated with Tolland is of significant importance. Tolland’s services are excellent with great programs offered through its parks and recreation department, with low traffic, with a quiet and dark night, etc. To preserve this quality of life, the committee makes the following recommendations:

see *Tolland Town Plan, 1999*, Policy G1, p. 17.

Recommendation #9: that a checklist item for the recommendation of planted buffers be included (see Recommendation #3) and that Section 166-6G of the *Town of Tolland subdivision Regulations and Design Manual* be followed more strictly. Also, the committee recommends that the plantings required be increased to provide a better noise barrier between major roads (I-84, for example) and the remainder of the town.

Recommendation #10: that compression braking be disallowed along I-84 between the Tolland lines.

Recommendation #11: that an analysis of the Town's existing road network be performed to identify opportunities to introduce creative methods of traffic calming or circulation, such as roundabouts.

Recommendation #12: that the design manual be modified to require roads to better follow the contours of the land to minimize severe cuts and fills.

Recommendation #13: that cluster housing require much larger undisturbed buffer areas between that development and existing development.

The raw list items which were associated with this category:

- Services for residents
- Village-like qualities
- Conserve/Preserve "green"
- Traffic
- Noise abatement
- Increase non-motorized traffic
- Water quality
- Safety and Security

Category Four

Economics of Development

While it is obvious to most town residents that the town is growing quickly as is represented by the significant number of subdivisions appearing within the town, some residents do not feel that the number of subdivisions is a "problem" until the taxes associated with the increased population, roads, town services, schools, etc., increase their annual property taxes. The committee debated at length about whether or not additional families in median-priced homes with median-priced property really represent an additional burden on the town or not; no evidence-based conclusion was ever reached. However, a safe assertion is that increases in the town budget are related in some fashion to the increase in population and increased costs of "doing business." In any case, the committee did feel that a slowing of growth was required and that a smaller buildout (eventual town population at maximum dwelling density and construction) will be required to have a sustainable infrastructure. The committee therefore recommends the following:

Recommendation #14: that the gross density for the entire Town be established at 0.2 units per acre.

The Town of Tolland is currently built with an overall average density of approximately 0.2 units per acre, including all commercial areas, wetlands, protected areas, etc. It is important to note that this recommendation does not state that the density for all zones be 0.2 units per acre. Instead, this recommendation states that the average density for the various zones be 0.2 units per acre. Some areas will have a higher density than others because of factors such as sewer service, water service, commercial zoning, mixed-use housing, etc., whereas other areas will have lower density factors associated with them, such as conservation districts, etc.

Recommendation #15: that a buildout analysis be conducted with proposed regulations changes to provide an indication of the Town's projected population. This information is necessary to determine if the goals and objectives established by this Committee have been addressed.

The raw list items which were associated with this category:

- Economics (Including schools, taxes, of new homes)
- Services for residents
- Housing opportunities
- Private vs. public infrastructure
- Underground utilities

Category Five Zoning

Neither the legislature of Connecticut nor its courts allow towns much leeway to make radical changes in the nature of the subdivision process. Whereas other areas of the country are allowed to implement impact fees and other such "developer-unfriendly," Connecticut's towns are relatively hamstrung with a limited toolset. However, the toolset that is left appears to provide a reasonable mix of town rights versus developers' rights. Therefore, the committee recommends the following:

Recommendation #16: that the Town change zoning methods from minimum-lot-size-based zoning to density-based zoning (DBZ) in conjunction with strengthened minimum-lot-size-based zoning (MLSZ) and new shape-based zoning (SBZ) regulations. DBZ, sometimes referred to as "conservation subdivisions," has some significant advantages by itself. However, by adding in strengthened MLSZ and new SBZ regulations, the DBZ becomes a more complete solution to some of the problems faced by the town.

First, by establishing a density associated with a parcel of land, both the developer and Town know the maximum number of lots that may be put onto that parcel. The developer then may place those lots together in any way that the developer sees fit provided the MLSZ and SBZ regulations are met. This is to the developer's advantage because the developer has the upper hand in negotiations with the Town in "getting the last lot" out of the parcel—the Town has already agreed to the maximum number of lots by right.

Second, this combination of zoning rules is also to the Town's advantage because it allows an opportunity to reduce sprawl and reduce the consumption of the land. If, for example, the MLSZ-based zoning rules dictated a 5 acre minimum lot size, each house

must be spread apart enough to accommodate that size, increasing road length between lots and increasing the likelihood that the lot owners will spread to consume that 5 acres. By allowing the developer to maintain an average density of 0.2 units per acre (which is the inverse of this example's MLSZ) for the entire project, the developer (1) can put in houses which are closer, as allowed by the SBZ and MLSZ rules, reducing the paved area of the development and (2) reduce the lot sizes to meet the developer's target market if required. Granted, the developer may go ahead and create those 5 acre lots throughout, but the Town still gets the 25% or more open space required and the developer must further contend with trying to get all of those 5 acre lots into the parcel around wetlands, open space, ledge, steep slope, etc.

Third, the combination allows the developer a significant flexibility in the eventual lot sizes on the parcel. Whereas MLSZ-based zoning of, for example, 5 acres per lot would require a 10 acre lot to have two equal-sized lots, this variation in the rules would allow the developer to put in a single 2 acre lot and an 8 acre lot aimed specifically at the horse-riding client.

Recommendation #17: that the Town regulations be written to calculate the number of lots which may be used in a parcel by taking the total area of the parcel and subtracting out wetlands, ledge (identified by square feet of exposure), natural resources identified by the Open Space Conservation Plan and slopes greater than 15% (identified by linear distance) and then by multiplying this area by the density associated with that parcel.

Recommendation #18: that the Town institute density factors that make best use of various features of the Town. The following areas are suggested as zones and overlay areas:

- Sewer/water service area, non-commercial, higher density with minimum density (Rhodes Rd., for example)
- Sewer/water service area, commercial, higher density with minimum density (Gateway District)
- Environmental protection, non-commercial, lower density (provided by a zone or multiple overlays for forest, farmland, wildlife corridors, ridges, etc.)
- Village Center Zone, residential, lower density
- Residential Design District, average density
- Watershed Design District, lower density

("Average" refers to the overall density of the town of 0.2 units/acre. See Recommendation #14.)

For example, areas serviced by sewer and/or water should require a minimum density as well as a maximum density and it should be higher than the density associated with, for example, a conservation area. The committee will be drawing on maps to show these areas which it finds demand different densities.

Recommendation #19: that the town institute shape-based zoning in lower density areas (such as a buildable area of x thousand square feet in some shape with one side of at least y feet and a Right-Angle Rule—the committee wasn't certain of what these particulars might be) to promote patterns of development that respect and reinforce the character of the town and to preserve natural systems.

Recommendation #20: that the Town zoning regulations should be amended to require conservation subdivisions with conventional subdivisions requiring a permit.

Recommendation #21: that the P&Z be allowed an additional density incentive for use in encouraging developers to give open space, increased buffers, flexibility in lot sizes, etc., especially in the higher density areas. The choice of density incentive shall be *very* carefully considered to ensure that it does not vary the overall density by much. The P&Z should also be very stingy in giving the bonus.

The raw list items which were associated with this category:

- Choice: mixed use, cluster
- Detached apartments
- Home-based business
- Address in-law apartment
- Ledge/cliffs/etc.

Category Six Commerce

The Town is currently faced with inflationary pricing associated with the availability of too few commercial properties making it very difficult for small-town America-type businesses to build or even lease space in what little property is left. The committee therefore recommends:

Recommendation #22: that an analysis of the Town's existing commercially zoned land and arterial corridors is performed to identify opportunities to add to the Town's commercial tax base.

The raw list items which were associated with this category:

- Commercial base
- Well-planned commercial district

Category Seven Monitoring and Planning

Should any of the recommendations of this committee be adopted, the recommendations and the resulting changes in regulations will be useless unless appropriate monitoring tools are established. Furthermore, the Town must become cognizant of trends before they grow out of control, and must make best use of the limited resources available. Therefore, the committee recommends:

Recommendation #23: that P&Z analyze housing starts, population, types of developments, etc., to ensure that the changes recommended (and hopefully adopted) are succeeding in their goals of managing growth.

Recommendation #24: that a working relationship with the University of Connecticut be created to establish internships to help refine and maintain GIS databases.

Recommendation #25: that the Planner's Office setup and maintain the GIS database to include open space. This recommendation, if instituted, should allow the Planner's Office and P&Z to more closely examine potential greenway connections for, among other uses, recreation.

Recommendation #26: that acquisition of open space be prioritized and that a program for the acquisition thereof be developed.

Recommendation #27: that additional sources of funding (grants, referendums, etc.) be explored to acquire more open space.

Recommendation #28: that the P&Z educate the population with changes it decides to incorporate.

Conclusion

Tolland is facing a remarkable period in its history, one which it is largely unprepared to deal with and which has seemingly caught it by surprise. The once-sleepy town of farming families, roadside stands and little development is changing incredibly rapidly as the Hartford metropolitan area grows outward. However, the Planning and Zoning Commission's forward-thinking move to create this committee is a substantial step towards examining the nature of these changes and discovering ways to preserve Tolland as it is today. The committee hopes that, no matter what becomes of its recommendations, the Town continues to look towards the future and make appropriate plans to ensure that Tolland remains the desirable place to live that it is today.

Acknowledgements

That the committee didn't create a camel (a horse, as designed by a committee) is remarkable. Considerable effort was put into the end result of this process, namely this document, and the process involved many people beyond the committee members.

Within the Town staff, Linda Farmer, the Town's Planner, was an invaluable resource to the committee, keeping us straight on many of the finer points of planning. And Cindy Murdock, Executive Secretary of the Town's Development Group, took care of ensuring that our meetings were scheduled properly with appropriate notices, agendas, and other paperwork which would drive most people slightly off their rockers.

On the committee, above and beyond mere participation, Marianne Latimer put in a tremendous effort by keeping the minutes for the committee's meetings. Furthermore, she not only created but also updated the committee's website, *TollandGrowth.org*, an ever-growing repository for information on the Town and its growth. The rest of the committee is indeed indebted to her for her efforts, and we thank her.

And outside of any official capacity, the inputs of many Residents of the Town, among them Rosanne Gottier, Ken Hankinson, and many others who attended the meetings of the committee, were greatly appreciated.

Respectfully Submitted
William N. (Bill) Eccles
Committee Chairman

¹ Attributed to Sir Alec Issigonis or *Vogue Magazine*, July 1958, where it was stated, "A camel looks like a horse that was planned by a committee."