

NEWS RELEASE

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For more information contact: Dominique Mendez
@ 631-886-1895.

The Struggle to Avoid Commercial Sprawl in Wading River Reaches a Critical Mass

In an effort to preserve the small town, country feel and lifestyle that has attracted people to Wading River for generations, residents and local groups have banded together to ask Riverhead's Town Board to study a corridor that stretches from 25A through the western portion of Sound Avenue. In a letter dated January 28, the Group for the East End, Riverhead Neighborhood Preservation Coalition (RNPC) and Wading River Civic Association suggested the Town Board require a Generic Environmental Impact Study for this corridor "where three large-scale commercial development projects are currently pending." Many are questioning the need for additional commercial development in this town of 8,000 plus and are raising concerns over a series of undesirable impacts.

There is increasing public discussion about the transformation of Wading River from a quiet hamlet to a shopping destination, the resulting traffic congestion in an area already overburdened during picking and harvesting seasons, and the likelihood of empty storefronts as a result of overbuilding. A petition was circulated in and around Wading River by a number of concerned citizens and local businesses during the last week of January and submitted to the Riverhead Town Board on February 1 at a public meeting. According to one of the petitioners who braved the snow and cold last weekend, RNPC co-founder Dominique Mendez, "we heard one sentiment over and over. We moved to Wading River to escape this type of retail and commercial overdevelopment and want and expect the Town to prevent it from happening here."

Much of Wading River's current commercial zoning allows for retail development that is, according to Town code, "geared primarily toward providing daily services to residents in the adjacent residential areas." The proposed 24- to 30-store mall with, according to developer Ken Barra at a public Planning Board meeting last fall, a food court and tourist

information center has been classified by civic and environmental groups as a destination retail project aimed at attracting tourists and regional shoppers that would irrevocably alter the character of the town and the entrance of the historic rural corridor of Sound Avenue. There have also been serious questions raised as to the validity of the current zoning on those parcels.

Two other plans are being considered for approval by the Town's Planning Board: Central Square would be 52,000 square feet of retail and office space while Great Rock Golf Course is seeking to double their clubhouse/restaurant with a 7,200-square-foot addition in order to host events. This catering facility would sit in a residential zone a few hundred feet from homes and would be accessed on Sound Avenue directly across from a main entrance to the proposed Knightland mall. A local landowner, Joe Vento, spoke at the February 2 Town Board meeting about his intention to submit a site plan for over 40,000 square feet of commercial space on the Tsunis property just west of May's farm stand. That would bring the total to four commercial proposals for Wading River.

“We can do nothing and say we could have done a better job in 2003 [referring to the comprehensive plan]... but we will have suburban sprawl in Wading River ... [we'll] have something that has the potential to resemble Route 58,” noted Sid Bail, First Vice President of the Wading River Civic Association.

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