

NEWS RELEASE

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CURRENT DIRECTION OF WADING RIVER STUDY DISREGARDS ECONOMIC REALITIES AND PUBLIC INPUT

March 28, 2012: Despite repeated input from the public that it doesn't want more retail in Wading River and in complete contradiction of a recent economic analysis of the area, the Town is considering allowing 120,000 to 175,000 square feet of additional retail-type development in Wading River.

With little to no demand for more stores, restaurants, banks (etcetera) and a community that strongly opposes commercial overdevelopment, many are questioning the direction in which the recommendations, and the Riverhead Town Board, appears to be heading. Civic groups, environmentalists and everyday people from the area who are all speaking out on this issue warn of dire consequences to the area if the Town fails to properly address the situation and leaves zoning that could allow approximately 5 to 7 times what is called for. They have cited a loss of the irreplaceable small-town charm and rural character that makes Wading River special to them, the impending closure of local businesses as one business cannibalizes another, and the empty storefronts they expect to see as a result.

A market assessment and gap analysis conducted by Urbanomics that was included in the recent Brookhaven 25A Corridor Study conducted by BFJ Planning, the same consultants performing the Wading River study, concluded that in Wading River "limited opportunities might exist for a gasoline service station, but other retail options are not feasible."¹ It also concluded that Wading River already has a surplus of food and beverage and health and personal care stores, as well as restaurants.² The RNPC extrapolated the potential demand for retail in Wading River based on the Urbanomics findings that the entire Brookhaven corridor could support approximately 140,000 sq. ft. of retail. The 11792 zip code, which encompasses all of Wading River and thus all of Wading River was studied, represents a small fraction of that 140,000: we used 18% which equals Wading River's share of the retail demand gap. That puts the total retail that could be supported in Wading River at 25,000 sq. ft.² This number is in stark contrast to BFJ's latest publicly released version of their recommendations, which would allow 120,000 more square feet, and to the Town Board's recent indication that it is considering allowing approximately 175,000 more square feet of retail in the little hamlet.

Over 400 local residents attended a standing-room-only public workshop held in February and made it clear with their passionate comments, and via BFJ's red- and blue-dot survey, that they strongly objected to more retail. Yet the community's consistently expressed vision for Wading River does not seem to be reflected in BFJ's recommendations or in the direction the Town Board seems to be going. One Wading River resident, Michele Dougherty, expressed the growing frustration with this study in a letter that ran in several publications: "BJF's suggestions are not a balanced approach to development, nor do they consider resident input. Obviously the town meetings to gather 'input' from the community were smoke and mirror ploys to make residents feel like their voices mattered."⁴

At a March 1 work session held weeks after the public workshop, the Town Board took an unofficial vote on whether or not they should consider BFJ's recommendations for rezoning an 18-acre parcel next to the CVS — from zoning that would allow retail to zoning that prohibits it. Councilpersons Dunleavy, Giglio and Gabrielsen disagreed with the planner's suggestion and indicated they wanted it to remain zoned for retail, which would pave the way for a 52,000-square-foot shopping center to be built there.

"It's as if the Town, and the planners they've hired who've repeatedly reminded us that their client is the Town Board, only see what they want to see. Everything points to the need to dramatically reduce the potential for commercial overdevelopment and yet the Board seems motivated almost solely by the perceived financial interests of the would-be developers and by the threat of litigation from them. This is not the sort of rationale that's supposed to inform a proper land use study. It not only disregards the economic realities and the environmental impacts but it also disregards the community's long-held vision for the hamlet. It also defies logic that the Town Board consistently cites the threat of litigation as a reason to give developers what they want without considering that the public, having already filed two lawsuits related to Wading River development projects, may also be likely to pursue its rights in court.

1. Page 64, Route 25A - Mount Sinai to Wading River Land Use Plan (Draft). Emphasis added.
2. Page 63, Route 25A - Mount Sinai to Wading River Land Use Plan (Draft).
3. The RNPC previously cited 23,000 sq. ft. as the maximum amount of retail supported by the demand but we recently made a minor adjustment to this calculation as a result of excluding restaurants in the calculation.
4. March 15, 2012 editions of Riverhead News-Review and The Community Journal.