

Westport Enters a Caution Zone

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Stores at Boston Post Road and Riverside Avenue are overshadowed by a new neighbor

The New York Times/Bruce Hosking

By ROBERT E. TOMASSON

WESTPORT

WITH its red clapboard sides, white trim and awnings, the old liquor store at the corner of the Boston Post Road and Wilton Road stands in rustic contrast to the angular, gray concrete of the nearly completed office building that looms above on the hill.

The incongruous juxtaposition of the structures symbolizes the commercial growth that draws thousands of office and retail workers into this once-sleepy commuter town each day. While many residents bemoan the commercial expansion, Westport is faced this week with a renewed pressure for another and more controversial form of growth — a proposed zoning change to permit apartment construction for the first time.

The decision by the Representative Town Meeting will be made after a debate that is expected to elicit issues and emotions evident in a number of generally wealthier towns in the state that are seeking to plot their futures, decisions involving policies of growth and the question of who should be permitted to live in the town.

To the east and to the west along the five-mile stretch of Route 1 within Westport, known locally as the Boston Post Road, hundreds of stores, markets and office buildings are crowded together in

a commercial hodgepodge of economic vitality and traffic congestion. It is a bustling scene largely made possible by two prime factors — the availability of a sizable middle-class market and the zoning ordinance of 1930.

The local law, adopted at a time when cities and towns all over the United States were passing the first zoning ordinances, designated the Post Road as the town's commercial main street. The law was both simple and inflexible, setting a strip 200 feet wide on both sides of the road for commercial development. There were no provisions for geographical contours or for variances such as less development in one spot or another that are now generally considered a necessary ingredient of enlightened zoning policies.

"I don't think the planners in those days could have envisioned what was to come when they set the 200-foot boundary," said Melvin H. Barr, the Town Planner. He has been involved for years with reconciling residents' concern over congestion with the commercial development that was set in motion 48 years ago, when the population of Westport and surrounding towns was considerably smaller.

While the pressure of traffic and businesses along Route 1 essentially will remain a fact of Westport life, Mr. Barr said, there are some profound uncertainties shaping up along the busy thoroughfare that are expected as never before to

touch a sensitive nerve in this town. They have to do with apartment construction.

On the highway from Norwalk to Fairfield there are 16 vacant tracts ranging in size from one to 36 acres, with the 200-foot part of the highway zoned commercial and the rest mostly designated for one-acre residential use.

Development proposals for the lots are expected to evoke strong emotions as the town seeks to define community responsibility in the light of strong sentiment to retain the suburban characteristics — if not the rural atmosphere that has long since been lost. (With a population of 29,300, the town has a density of 1,308 persons per square mile.) Thirty years ago, the population was 9,700 for a density of 433 persons per square mile.

But whatever the sentiments in the expected debate, Westport's most basic decision will probably have to be whether the choice will be its own or largely imposed from outside.

The debate will start formally on Tuesday evening when the Representative Town Meeting will accept or reject a new zoning regulation that would for the first time permit apartment construction in Westport. Over the last several years similar proposals have been defeated three times.

On May 31 the state's Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities will release a zoning study financed by the Federal Department of

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Westport Ponders Its Future

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Housing and Urban Development and prepared by Paul Davidoff, executive director of Suburban Action Institute, which is expected to be sharply critical of what Mr. Davidoff termed "the systemic housing discrimination in the state." Local officials aware of the forthcoming report said that they expected it to be used as leverage by the state under civil-rights laws to effect zoning changes conducive to apartment development.

"How much of a leverage remains to be seen," said Mr. Barr, the Westport Town Planner.

"There is absolutely no sense of regional responsibility in Westport," said Alan H. Senie, a lifelong resident of the town who has practiced law here for 25 years. "There's a wall up at the Norwalk line and one at the Fairfield border, which says, 'You can come in here to work during the day, but please be out by nightfall.'"

Mr. Senie said that the town had turned a deaf ear to the apartment needs of three groups — the elderly who may have lived all their lives in Westport, but who cannot find an apartment in town after giving up their homes; the young who go away to school and want to return to work and live in Westport, but who are forced to find housing in nearby cities,

and the municipal workers — teachers, police and others — who cannot afford houses in the town.

But for many residents, such as David Royce, apartment buildings "compromise the quality of a nice suburb."

"I've seen it happen in Stamford — the apartment buildings go up in place of private homes — and before that in White Plains and the Bronx," said Mr. Royce, a Westport resident for 13 years who is active in the campaign against apartment buildings.

"I would like to solve the apartment needs for people who already have an existing need to live here — the elderly resident, the person who works here, the guy who's dating a girl here — not for the outsider who will be lured by an ad in a city paper for a garden apartment overlooking the beautiful Saugatuck River," he said.

"And the people who have that existing need to live in apartments here can find them in homes. I'm against visible apartment buildings, not invisible apartments in homes."

With well over two million square feet of retail and office space — equivalent to the area in the Pan Am Building in Manhattan — there seems to be a consensus that the Post Road has reached the commercial saturation point.

And while the welcome mat is no

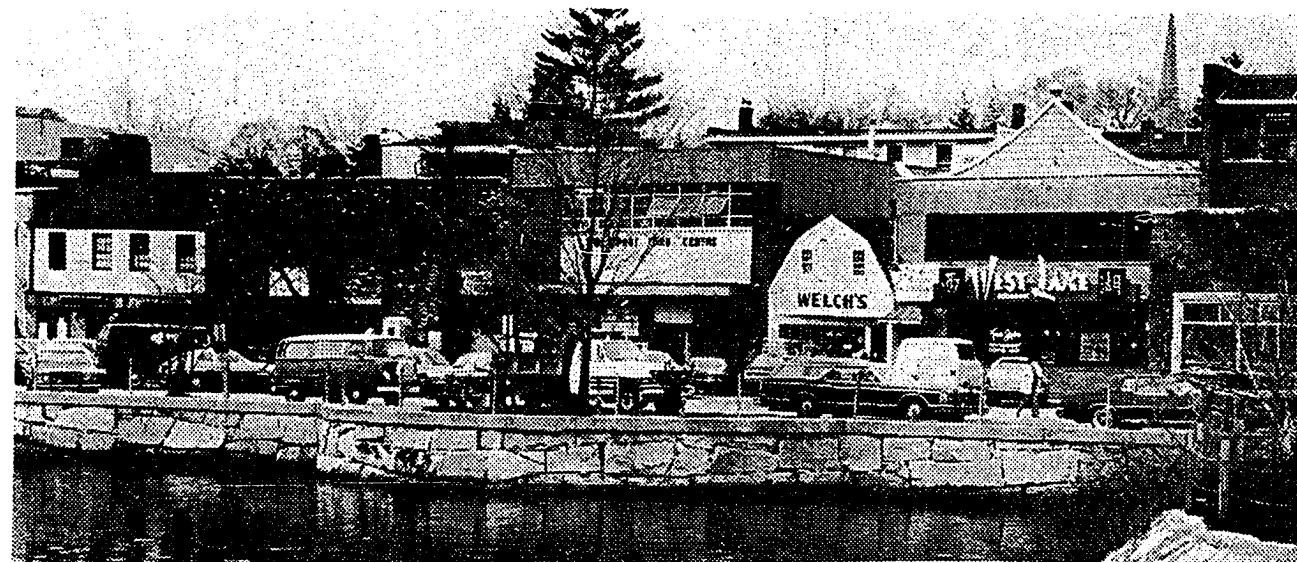
longer out for the still-eager developers of stores and office buildings, the mention of apartment construction with all its implications of change for Westport has sent shock waves through the town's political structure.

"People in Westport don't really recognize the complexity of the problem in refusing any more commercial development, while not admitting that the only alternative is some residential conversions," said Jacqueline P. Heneage, the First Selectman. "Westport has many people out of New York who associate apartment buildings with scary blocks, which is not what we are talking about at all."

During her more than four years as the town's chief official, Mrs. Heneage has sought, generally in conjunction with Mr. Barr and the Planning and Zoning Commission, to get zoning changes that would permit limited apartment construction both as an alternative to further commercial development and to forestall outside intervention.

Three such attempts have been blocked by the 40-member Representative Town Meeting, which has the unusual authority of veto action over the Planning and Zoning Commission.

"I really have no reading on how the R.T.M. will vote," said Mary Jenkins, moderator of the legislative body. Mrs. Jenkins, who is in favor of the zoning



The New York Times/Jack Manning

Westport shops on Parker Harding Plaza

proposal, said that 14 of the 40-member group were recently elected and that she did not know their views.

A two-thirds vote — 27 — is required to veto the Planning and Zoning Commission's proposal.

Mrs. Jenkins, who helped frame some of the earlier housing proposals during her eight years on the Planning and Zoning Commission, said she felt she had been unable to get across to the many residents who have expressed concern that the new regulation is "very limiting."

"They all seem to envision the town going up into apartment buildings," Mrs. Jenkins said.

Town officials noted that with land costs on the Post Road generally starting \$250,000 an acre, apartment rents would be substantial.

The proposed regulation modifies zoning provisions in two districts on the West Post Road and on Saugatuck Avenue. Apartment construction in the two Restricted Office-Retail Districts would be permitted under three main conditions: The new building could cover no more than 20 percent of the plot, must have a maximum height of two and a half stories or 30 feet, whichever is less, and have no more than 2,500 square feet on any one floor.

With the available land on the two

sites, the proposed regulation would permit initial construction of 29 apartment units, according to town officials.

What apparently bothers so many people is the number of apartments that would, perhaps inevitably, follow in the years to come and whether it is wiser to control and limit the number now or maintain a firm stand against all apartment construction.

"We're all getting older and there are some of us who would like in time to move into a place where the yard is taken care of," said Mrs. Heneage. ■