

**TOWN HALL STUDY COMMITTEE**  
PUBLIC HEARING  
Wednesday, February 20, 2008  
7:00 pm - Town Hall Council Chambers  
75 Main Street, Southington, CT

**MINUTES**

Town Council Chairman John Barry called the meeting to order at 7:02 o'clock, p.m, with the following in attendance:

Anthony D'Angelo, Michael Riccio, John Carmody, Philip Pomposi, Anthony Tranquillo & John Weichsel

Absent: Mark Sciota

**JOHN BARRY, Chair, presiding:**

Mr. Barry welcomed everyone to the public hearing this evening. This is really a casual conversation meeting. He gave a brief history of the purpose of the meeting and how things have evolved over the last several years.

In 2005, the Council authorized a Town wide referendum on a proposal to renovate and have an addition to the Town Hall. That vote was on May 10, 2005. A very small turnout, 1,394 voters. And, out of that 57.82 percent voted against the referendum. It was clear that the people were against the proposal that was presented at that time.

Approximately six months later, November 8, 2006, the same referendum was up again to the people of Southington. It was a more typical turnout, 7,551 voters. However the people were against that plan, as well. It was 60.63 percent against the referendum.

Not much has changed since 2005. After the 2005 election, the Council asked the Administration to look at Town owned property to try to look at how we can maybe empty the Gura Building out. Basically, the reason for emptying the Gura building is we believe there was public health issues, public safety issues and we also thought that it was important to have a back up plan.

We looked at renting office space in the event there was a problem at the Gura building. Ultimately, it was the consensus at that time of the Council not to rent outside space. We did find a location at the former Milldale Firehouse for our community Services Department and they will be moving there in

three to four months. So, we are opening up some space in the basement here at the Town Hall.

But overall, the issue of the Gura building is still with us. It is a building that has become a money pit in a lot of ways. There are health issues we think could evolve there over time if we don't do something.

I just wanted to tell everyone that we are trying to move in a different direction this time. The Gura building issue is an issue that has to be addressed. We are having this Town wide meeting so you can tell us what you think.

I do want the Town Manager to talk about the Gura building and why he thinks, from his perspective, something should be done as quickly as we can.

Mr. Weichsel stated that it is pretty well known throughout the community that the building next door is in very poor condition. You can start from the top and work down. The roof, with a rain like we just recently had, constantly leaks. We are constantly patching the roof. When asked the question about reproofing, that would not be wise in a building has come to the end of its useful life. It is leaking right over the desk of some of the people in the Youth Services Department where they work. Obviously, it is an impossible situation. We do get roofers in and they do the best they can, but patch work is patch work and that fails.

Throughout the building the plumbing is very, very bad. You might say, well get a plumber and fix it. These problems are in the walls and it is not a matter of exterior plumbing that you have the problem with. To fix that, you have to literally pull down the walls and again you would be facing a tremendous expense in a very old entity.

The Chairman mentioned what is perhaps the most worrisome part of it and that is that cellar is not like a modern cellar and there is, despite great efforts, no way to stop intrusion of water into the building and the water then tends to create mold, spores and has been indicated, we are greatly concerned that you might actually be creating health problems. Over the years, complaints have been made by employees and we have been telling them to be patient that something would be coming along.

The building, of course, is also not handicapped accessible. Our staff is willing to come down to ground level and have an outdoor meeting with people, if it comes to that, but that is not the best way to work with the handicapped, needless to say.

So, as the Chairman just indicated, we really have to get rid of the Gura building and that is absolute and for sure.

Moving just a moment forward, I think it's clear the Council has made it clear we must now go to a different approach, obviously, since the total solution was rejected, going to an incremental system and that can be done if we get rid of the Gura building and put some entity smaller than what we talked about before, but taking the immediacy out of the problem.

So, the Gura building, to throw more money in that --- one other thing I think I should mention. A few months back, a section of the outside wall literally collapsed and Tony did get it fixed as best we could. There are every few days something goes badly wrong. You don't put money into a '36 Chevy and that is what we have here, a 1936 Chevy. It has come to the end of its useful life. And, I will stop there.

Mr. Tranquillo added from an engineering perspective the mechanicals in that building are very poor. As John mentioned, the plumbing is very old and not doing very well. The heating and air conditioning is poor. The lighting is not up to standards. The finishes, which is probably the least issue there, are old finishes. The floor space is very poorly laid out. It is not efficient. The windows are inefficient and poor. Anything you can imagine about that building is true. It is just a very poor building, very inefficient to keep maintaining that for the Town.

Mr. Barry opened it up to public comment at this time. He noted any questions asked that couldn't be answered this evening; we will get back to you with the answer. We want to hear from you, tell us what you think.

Arthur Cyr: 103 Berlin Avenue. Passed around an area map of the Town Hall.

Discussion about Mr. Pomposi having been added to the committee.

There is no question in my mind that we need more space in the Town Hall. And, the Gura building has to come down. I don't think too many people dispute that. I do have some suggestions, which I think are very good.

First, a question. Why doesn't this committee have a qualified professional with the expertise in municipal planning -- why isn't our new Town Planner on the committee? Doesn't she deal with these kinds of things day in and day out?

Discussion.

The second thing is, I know we have a space needs study that has been done. I do believe that a parking study should also be part of this deal. We are going to expand the Town Hall. We have a lot more employees now than we had before and yet, as far as I know, there has not been a parking study done to figure out what we do with all the cars coming downtown.

I suggest you do what I have done. Drive around downtown and look at the parking. Apparently as to Apple Ally parking, the police department just ignores the fact that people park from one end to another. The municipal lots behind 98 Main Street all the way down to Center Street are absolutely jammed.

It's a great thing. We have a parking problem downtown. I do believe as part of this Town Hall expansion we desperately need a parking study done.

Explained.

We should not build a grand building like has been previously proposed. That was voted down twice. We should not do it in piecemeal or in any way, shape or form. I think that plan should be forgotten forever.

As for parking, someone said we should build a parking garage between the Bank of America and the American Legion. I don't think there would be anything uglier across the street from our beautiful Town Green than a two or three level-parking garage. That is not the solution to our downtown parking problems.

The Town owns two parcels on Berlin Avenue (23 and 33) where we have a raised parking area. The Town also owns three parcels on Academy Street (26, 32 and 38) (Referenced on handout) that total approximately 188 lf on the street by approximately 100 feet deep.

We can lower that grade about 10 feet and pave it. That would give us an area of approximately 17,000 feet. We then temporarily place two or three mobile or portable office buildings like you can rent all over the place and move the remaining offices out of the Gura building.

We then demolish the Gura Building and construct a new building that is set back about half the distance that the current building is being set back. Whatever we build there has to be set back off the street. It does nothing aesthetically for me to drive down and see the Gura building right on the sidewalk. The building should also be pulled back off of Berlin Avenue. That would increase the sight lines and make the Town Engineer happy.

We can put in some grass and some landscaping and pretty up the corner, per suggestions of our Town Planner.

After the new Gura Building is constructed --- it should be a one-story building so we don't have handicapped accessible problems to the second floor like we do now. Move the staff out of the temporary buildings on Academy into the new building and you line that parking lot, 1700 sf lot, for parking.

Then you close the employee parking lot on Berlin Avenue. Take the area that we have for parking now (37,000 sf) and you take that entire site down to street level and you construct a three or four level prefab parking garage. That facility would resolve all the parking problems for Town employees, residents and shoppers. It would be free, available parking.

Discussion.

Now, the back of this parking structure, the back top of it would be made level to the before mentioned existing parking lot we have now added on Academy Street. We do that so in future years if we need to expand Town Hall once again, we then construct a building up there on Academy, level to the top of the parking garage, one story. You would access on the top of the parking garage and you wouldn't have any handicapped access problems. This kind of incorporates everything going forward.

I think that any plan the Committee comes up with that doesn't address the parking issue downtown would be missing a very important part.

And, with that, I have run out of ideas.

Mr. Weichsel advised that we have on file a parking study that Bob Nerney, former Town Planner did. So, we have a parking study. We are a long ways from meeting the goals stated in that, so we have to do that before we talk about other things. We are well aware of the parking situation.

Lou Puglielli: 72 Candlewood Lane. I had a few simple ideas. We know the Gura building is a disaster. But before you tear it down, have you thought about using it for any kind of filing that you need to move out of the Town Hall? You can use the building for the purpose of clearing up space in this Town Hall building.

Now, the Town owns the old drive-in theater property. They want to use it for a recreational purpose for the kids and that's fine to a certain extent. I'm saying, if you want to use the back portion of the site for the kids, for fields, they can use it right like they use it now. This would also free up any traffic jams caused on the main roads in this area.

You can then use the front section, let's say, for a one-story structure. Discussed some prices for construction. You take departments out of this Town Hall that have the least foot traffic by the public. You take those departments and move them to the new structure built right in front of the drive-in theater. Just use that front portion. You would use the main road to come into it. I see no problem with traveling a few miles up the street.

With all the technology and communication systems we have today, I see no problem with that. I really believe that is the way to go.

The previous speaker had a lot of wonderful ideas, but it will take 30 years to complete what he is suggesting.

I am suggesting a simple solution right now: a single story structure right where the drive-in is, right off the main road, nobody'd have any problem finding it. And, it's right up the street.

Mr. Barry stated there has been some casual discussions concerning a single story structure right here on this property.  
Discussion.

Ilio Fusciello: 82 Autran Avenue. I know about construction pretty much. Talked about the water department building. He talked about the police station. Talked about the Renaissance.  
Discussion.

Talked about taxes going up. Talked about the ITT Zone.

We will all have to pay the taxes. There should be no distinction.

Spoke about the cost of the Town Hall to the taxes.

Anne Marie Connaty: A while back there was talk about an Annex if the Gura building came down. You might have an Annex to connect the two buildings at one point.

I like the idea of the portables to house the departments.

I understand everybody saying the Gura building is really bad, but you have not given us figures to replace windows, replace plumbing, et cetera. It just would be nice when things are coming from the taxpayers to know the offset.

If you gutted that building and started all over and get it handicapped accessible, what are the costs compared to looking at building a brand new building. That is my only question. Does anyone have those figures so we can see if it is more cost effective to put up a new building or renovate the old building?

And, how did the building get into that condition to start with?

Discussion.

This Town seems to be needing a lot of things; do you have a list prioritizing things? We are looking at a bad economy in the next couple of years.

Discussion.

We need a committee to plan things on the whole. Stop running Southington helter-skelter. We need a plan for major expenditures. We need fiscal responsibility. We need more information before we move forward. We need a real plan at all facets.

The PZC made changes to the regulations this year. They started listening to the public comments and I think they're on the road the right way. This Council has got to start working that way.

Look at the whole Town. Look at the pocketbooks you're taking from. Look at the State possibly cutting budgets. Your increases for budgets. And, you've got to say; maybe we need the Town Hall more than we need a middle school. You have to have that Master Plan and you can't just keep telling us you have that list. You to bring that list to the Town Council meeting so we can see it.

Discussion.

Mr. Weichsel indicated the last capital plan was approved by the Town Council about two years ago and he would send her a copy of it. I am working now with Emilia to update the 2006 plan and we should have it in the next few months. We're going to be really technical: Board of Finance, Planning and Zoning and ultimately the Town Council. That'll be an update to the 2006 Plan and that'll be done in the next couple of months.

Discussion.

Renovation of the Gura building was discussed with possible costs being as much as \$1 million or \$1.5 million to bring it up to code. The building originally was not built as a municipal building.

Discussion.

Mr. Tranquillo pointed out that even if you renovate it, you still have an old shell and an old foundation. Those are not going to change. The basement is crumbling.

Discussion.

Chairman Barry and Mr. Riccio pointed out that the space needs study indicates we need 16,000 sf and the Gura building is only 6,000 sf. So, it is not enough space.

Discussion.

Ms. Connaty stated you have to start building smart, cost effective, fiscal responsible buildings when you are using taxpayer money.

Mr. Riccio said the Town's goal, to consolidate major administrative functions of the Town of Southington into a single expanded Town Hall building, which will facilitate effective, efficient and economical operations and public service. That was the goal and objective. We told them to design a building that flexible for the future.

Discussion.

Mr. Riccio said he went through the current plan, in quick numbers; he was able to eliminate 3100 sf roughly. And, on today's numbers at \$250/foot, that's \$800,000 off the current price. I am not going to shove the old plan down anybody's throat. I am going to get real and say okay, where can we find space to save money.

Mr. Tranquillo said that's just for construction. You have to add on the contingencies and soft cost. The real number is about \$400/square foot.

Discussion.

The Space Needs Study was discussed.

(End of Tape #1, Side A)

(Beginning of Tape #1, Side B)

Technology, microfiche, et cetera was discussed as cost savings features. And, the new Town Hall is designed for that. Discussed.

Mr. Riccio stated that in the current plan there is no fat. But if we rip this thing apart and get it all out, we can save some money.

Discussed.

Mr. Riccio pointed out if we get rid of renovating this building right now, probably cut that price tag almost in half.

We don't have to join the two buildings. We can connect them with an atrium of some sort, which will save money.

Discussion.

Ms. Connaty did say she believed the Town Hall should stay downtown and it would take away if you start separating them.

Mr. Tranquillo indicated that back in 1989, a committee did some Town comparisons, and it was determined that a Town our size needs about 60,000 sf of Town Hall space. After discussions, we whittled that down to about 42,000 sf. We can't cut it back so much that the building is outdated before it is even built. That would be a bigger mistake than making it too large in my opinion.

Discussion.

Mr. Tranquillo pointed out that one of the reasons to expand the Town Hall was to serve the public better, but also to eliminate the inefficiencies in working in too tight spaces, i.e., trying to work with maps in the way, constantly moving things to get that files and then moving things back. Expanding the building will make our time use more efficient.

Explained.

Mr. Riccio invited anyone to sit down with him or the Town Engineer, go over the plan, and show us the facts. Because it does not exist.

Sandra Feld: I don't have an awful lot to add. I agree with what already has been said. There are a couple of points I would expound on.

Ms. Feld spoke about the Comprehensive Fiscal Plan presented by Board of Finance member Glenn Klocko presented in 2007. And, toward the end of it he said: future policy considerations are a one time revenue policy, pay as you go budgeting policy considerations and a more formal five year capital improvement plan.

She spoke about the 5-Year Capital Improvement Plan that she got from the Town Manager. It does cover a lot of things through 2013, but the Town Hall addition is to be determined, no dollar amount. She pointed out missing information that she felt would be needed to make a financial decision on the Town Hall expansion. She concluded on this point by saying we need to know our budget and our bonding for this year, next year and approximately fifteen years in the future.

Discussion.

We all agree we need a new Town Hall. We don't disagree. We needed the denitrification plant. Two elementary schools are going up. Where are we going to be in each year? If you can

tell us that and give us a solid budget that we can count on, we could tell you whether or not we want to do a Town Hall. We have to have facts to go with that.

That's all I have to say.

Mr. Barry said any proposal that comes out of this committee will have the impact to the taxpayers before there is a Town wide vote. It's important.

I understood the point about the policy and formalizing it. The Administration is working to try to make the plan better. I know Mr. Zoni has been in communications with the Town Manger and you have valid points, but in terms of the future costs, a lot of it is unknowns.

Art Cyr: I have some questions. Twice I voted for the new Town Hall even though I didn't like the plan. I feel the Town needs to expand the Town Hall.

Discussion.

Spoke about the perception to public after the presentation was made for the Town Hall last time.

Discussion.

Mr. Riccio pointed out that he will be adamant that whatever we do on this corner, fit in architecturally with Main Street and be done properly.

Discussion.

He asked for an accounting of what was spent on the Gura building over the past five or ten years above and beyond normal costs. And, get that information out to the public; we will realize it's time for the money pit to dry up. Mr. Weichsel said he would provide such information. Keep in mind there are a lot of hidden problems that won't show in the numbers. The numbers are not the total answer to the difficulty with that building.

Discussion.

You need to throw the number at the public of how much it will cost to put in an elevator to make the building handicapped accessible added Mr. Cyr.

Discussion.

The capital improvement list was discussed. It truly is a wish list if you don't have numbers in it. We need a list with numbers.

Discussion.

And, Mr. Cyr stressed we need to address parking along with the Town Hall. Give us the information and we'll be successful.

Mary Morelli: I need dollars and cents on what it will cost to take down the building and put up new. I do think we need a new Town Hall. I think it is the number one priority. But, I don't know what kind of Town Hall. I think if you get a plan and present it to the public with facts and figures and dollar amounts, that is an important thing.

I think you will eventually get your Town Hall if you don't try to jam it down the public's throat.

Thank you.

Mr. Pomposi addressed the public. A lot of comments here were regarding the fiscal policy and the capital improvement list. That is all well and good. But I think before we can even get involved in all those things and knowing how much money we will spend on the roof in the future and on various projects, we all have to come to a consensus and decide that what is the most pressing need in the Town. What's number one.

Over the past months, I have heard a middle school and renovations to the schools. I have heard artificial turf. I have heard various other things about more fields and on and on and on.

It's always been in my mind that the number one priority right now is the Town Hall. I think the last couple of times it was rejected; it was just too aggressive, a public relations nightmare.

Mike made the point and I agree, taking out the renovation of this building, which was included in the last referendum, will go along ways in bringing the costs down. It's a fact we need more space in Town Hall. Over the past years we have made a pretty substantial investment in properties around here and it would behoove us to put that property to use. I think now is the time.

With the economy, I think we can get more for our dollar now than when things are real good.

Discussed.

I would not be in favor of any other capital project until this Town Hall is done. This passes the needs test.

Discussion.

Discussion followed with members of the public as to what a capital improvement plan is.

The Chair asked for further public comment.

Ilio Fusciello: This Town Hall should've been built 25 years ago and minimize all other things that would be done.

You take care of downtown, the police and not the big bomb that explodes.

Good evening.

Mr. Tranquillo noted that this Town Hall study on the expansion of the Town Hall has been going on since the 1980's. In 1987 it was started, so we have been thinking about it for a long time.

The Chair pointed out this issue has to be addressed. We have to do something. That's why we're here and that's why I want to move forward as quickly as possible to address these issues.

Benny Camusso: Meriden Avenue. I have been at meetings here time and time. I always say we should give priority to what we are doing. Priority, whatever comes first, that is what we have to do. Money is not easy, economy being like it is. It's not like it used to be. All industry is gone. It is going to get worse. We have to look a where we spend the money and for what. Priority.

Discussion about how the opportunity might be for us now with the interest rates being low in terms of cost when we go out to bid. Mr. Barry added, this might be the right time and that is why we have to do something. It is very difficult to sit on the Council and say I want to spend \$4 million or whatever it might be, but I think Phil made a good point. This is an opportunity for this community to address this issue and get it behind us.

We have to do something about this serious issue and that is why we are together.

Mr. Pomposi added as far as he was concerned, this project passes the needs test. It's just not the Gura building, but it is a problem with space and future growth at the Town Hall. He stated that if this is put before the public and they refuse it, that would not change his opinion, personally, as to this being a top priority in the Town. As far as he was concerned, this was a first priority and then take one step at a time from there.

Discussion.

Mr. Riccio commented that one of the major concerns in this whole process is where do we put these people while we build? The concern was we didn't want to pay the private sector for rental office space. I have had conversations with Councilman Dave Zoni about this and I took it upon myself to call the Chairman of the

Water Board and the BOE and the Water Board has room at their new facility wherein they could accommodate temporarily, the health department in full. And, they actually said to me, they were thinking about approaching the Town about integrating the health department in their facility on a permanent basis. But that is a discussion for another day. But it is something to look at because in the space needs study, the health department was taking up 1200 sf.

I spoke to Brian Goralski, Chairman of the BOE, about the possibility of temporarily moving their meetings for the next ten to twelve months while we are constructing and we utilize the Pyne Center for one of the other offices, but I think that we can put our heads together.

We have the second floor of the Calendar House. I don't think we need to go out to the private community to rent space. I think we can do this in-house.

Discussion.

Also, I think we should give our space needs study to a technology person to review the file storage space before we go to an architect.

Discussion.

Hearing no further questions or comments from the public, Mr. Barry asked Councilman Zoni to add his comments.

Councilman Zoni addressed the technology issue. You have all seen me come to Council meetings with my laptop computer. I literally have in that laptop computer every single document that was ever sent to me since I've been on the Council.

Quite frankly, after a tour of the Town Hall, it seems like this is the land of lost filing cabinets. All of that could be scanned in and filed on a disk on a server and we could save hundreds of square feet just by getting rid of filing cabinets.

You are proceeding in a real good direction here. You realize there's a problem with the Gura building. We've abandoned the idea of doing major renovations to this building, which were a big part of those costs last time. That's the right direction to go in and I'm happy to support that.

The concerns regarding the fiscal aspect of this and where it stands in the capital improvement plan, we just didn't start doing capital projects today or yesterday. We've been doing projects for years. As some are paid down, those bonds and that debt goes away. The trick is it has to do with the level of debt service that you have as part of your budget. You need to stabilize the level of debt service. As things are paid down, you can bring new projects on line.

Our capital improvement plan, the problem is, it's not strategic. Things get on there that not every stakeholder has bought into. All stakeholders have to buy into every item that's on there, otherwise, it's pointless. You have to have an idea of the cost.

Discussion.

Each stakeholder as a community has to sit down and look at every single capital improvement item, prioritize it. Give it criteria for prioritization and then lay that deck of cards out in a row and then assess what that does to your debt service level and try to maintain a stable debt service level.

We gave our fiscal policy parameters. Explained.

Keep the debt service stable. That's the trick to it.

I really support the demolition of the Gura building and I would like to see a structure built right where it stands now, of course, set back off the road, connected to this building with some sort of atrium.

Thank you.

Chairman Barry thanked everyone for coming.

(Whereupon, the meeting was concluded at 8:40 o'clock,  
p.m.)

