

Liberty Square Improvement Project



Prepared by the
Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association

Subject: Proposal for financial assistance for neighborhood improvements through the City of Norwalk Neighborhood Centers Improvement Program

Submitted to: Timothy Sheehan, Director of the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency

Submitted by: Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association Board of Directors: Laurel Lindstrom; Marija Bryant; Gordon Tully; Erik Nees; Maribeth Becker; Wendye Pardue; Sarah Hunter; and Advisory Board Members: Diane Lauricella; and Nick Overall

Date: October 26, 2005

Summary Page

Name of Project: Liberty Square Improvement Project

Location of Project: Liberty Square in East Norwalk, within Block Group 3 of Census Tract 442

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Amount of funding requested: \$40,000

Anticipated matching funds: \$40,000



Executive Summary:

The Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association commends the City of Norwalk for initiating the Neighborhood Centers program. In the past 18 months we have held several meetings and conducted numerous interviews with area residents and property owners in regards to potential improvements in the Liberty Square neighborhood. But only now, with the backing of the City, can we hope to realize our dreams.

Liberty Square is currently a mixed-use neighborhood center, including open space and affordable housing. With a boost from this program Liberty Square can come into its own. The information that we gathered from the locals provided us with a clear direction for improvements that resulted in the detailed document that follows. We are excited at the prospect of participating in a project that will have a positive impact on our neighborhood. The following seven pages take you through the history of Liberty Square, our decision on the scope of the project, current site conditions, potential improvements and our financial planning process. Appendices are included that provide backup documentation, maps, photos and schematic sketches. Our proposal delineates a starting point for the planning of a comprehensive improvement project that will create a vibrant neighborhood center – benefiting the entire community.

Description of Neighborhood Center

The Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association is focusing attention for improvements on Liberty Square, an important gateway into East Norwalk. The core project area is bound by the railroad tracks to the north, Fort Point Street to the east, Route 136 to the south and the Norwalk River to the west. Spot improvements may also be considered in areas outside the boundaries of Liberty Square, but within the eligible area for improvements through the City of Norwalk Neighborhood Centers Improvement Program – Block Group 3 of Census Tract 442 (see Appendix A).

Liberty Square is rich in history – once the site of the old Indian Fort. The current row of retail shops dates to the 19th Century, when the existing parking area was the main road leading to the former bridge across the river to South Norwalk, and trolley cars clanked by Canevari's shop that once stood on an island in the middle of the converging roads (see Appendix B).

The trolley line is long gone but the shops remain in this Neighborhood Business Zone, owned by several merchants who own the property and the business, or rent the retail space (see Appendix C). Currently, there is a mix of retail including a glass company, a plastics company, a convenience shop, a pizzeria, an insurance agency, a deli and two vacant stores. The shops, in most cases, retain their original facades, but restorative work is needed. Occupied second-floor rental space exists above most of the shops. The sidewalks are broken and unappealing, with decaying planters and overgrown plantings at the curbs. Goldstein Place enters Liberty Square perpendicular to Route 136.

The retail buildings to the west of Goldstein Place on Liberty Square are within the Industrial 1 Zone, as is the property to the north and to the east. Retail use includes a café, a late-night bar, a hair salon, a nail salon and a restaurant – with residential rental space above where second stories exist.

North on Goldstein Place three century-old single-family houses on the west side of the street are owned by absentee landlords. The property to the west as far as the river, and north to the tracks, is owned by SoNo Wharf, LLC and includes Neptune Marina and a rowing club. A large portion of the property to the east, and north to the tracks, is owned by two property owners, and used for outdoor storage of discarded vehicles and junk metal. Two garages exist on the properties in use for businesses related to excavation, auto body and auto sales & service.

East from the row of shops on Fort Point Street is a Norwalk Housing Authority complex (Seaview Apartments) comprised of 34 'family housing' rental apartments. The adjacent two properties are Perfect Plantings, with two structures, and the Fiesta Mexico Bar. These three properties lack aesthetic appeal, exhibiting a streetscape of dead arborvitae shrubs, a chain link fence and a dilapidated house that is posted for demolition.

From the row of shops, to the river on the west and Route 136 on the south, is Constitution Park – a park owned by the Third Taxing District. The riverbank is overgrown with invasive plants. The park is poorly connected to the rest of Liberty Square and is underutilized because of limited public accessibility, mainly used for late-night drinking and drugging, and by the homeless. Litter accumulates, and dumping is a problem.

In front of the shops, on either side of Goldstein Place, there are open parking lots that are owned by the City of Norwalk. These lots are heavily used, even when the shops have little business. Between the paved parking area and Route 136, east of Goldstein Place, there is a grassy area with three Norway maple trees, and a Wheels bus stop shelter fronting on the sidewalk along the busy 4-lane state highway.

There is little attraction to enter into Liberty Square for pedestrians walking past, or visiting Veterans Park. And vehicles find it difficult to enter from the west or exit to the east onto Route 136. A vehicular 'entrance only' is located at the eastern end of Liberty Square that creates a dangerous situation because of its location, and because vehicles use it to exit illegally.

Planning Activities to Formulate Scope

Late in 2004 the ENNA drafted a Revitalization Plan for Liberty Square that also included the neighborhood retail center around the historic cemetery and the connecting streets (see Appendix D). It was intended, not as a finished plan, but as a tool to spark dialogue in the community. The plan was, and still is, posted on the ENNA website and widely publicized to elicit input from residents and merchants. January thru April of 2005, we met with several groups and individuals to present our plan and gain support. We presented the 2004 plan to the Mayor, the Mayor's Neighborhood Preservation Committee, the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency (NRA), the Department of Public Works (DPW), the Planning Commission, the Third Taxing District (TTD) Commission, SWRPA, the Norwalk River Watershed Association (NRWA), the Norwalk Preservation Trust (NPT), the East Norwalk Business Association (ENBA) and several individuals, including city and elected officials.

The Mid-Harbor Study that was recently conducted by the City of Norwalk, and will be included in the City's updated Plan of Conservation and Development, was followed closely by the ENNA. Since Liberty Square is included within the study area, it is a significant document. Conceptual recommendations for Liberty Square have been included in our planning process.

After the City announced the details of the Neighborhood Centers program on September 20, 2005, Liberty Square became the focus for our improvements, since it is the neighborhood center that falls within the eligible census tract and is within the boundaries of our neighborhood association.

In September, the ENNA began intensive planning to determine scope of the project. We sent information about the program to the membership through an email bulletin, and as a flyer to the residents and business owners in the eligible area. We encouraged residents, business owners and other stakeholders to contact us with their input and ideas. We announced in the local newspapers a series of three Liberty Square planning meetings that were open to the public, encouraging residents and merchants to participate so that we could determine the specifics related to the scope of the project (see Appendix E). Most of the property owners have now met with us, and agree that improvements are needed at Liberty Square. But they have revealed to us that they lack extra funds for aesthetic improvements and that they are nervous about the potential taking of their property through eminent domain for development of Liberty Square. We held several committee meetings, one to tour Liberty Square and another at the Norwalk Museum to research the archives. We engaged the historical community (NPT), the environmental community (NRWA), the Housing Authority (NHA) and the taxing district (TTD) in the Liberty Square planning process.

Liberty Square, as a mixed-use neighborhood center, was identified as having great potential for improvement that will create a safer, more attractive, pedestrian-friendly node that encourages communal activity. As a historic gateway into East Norwalk, next to the Stroffolino Bridge and the Norwalk Harbor, and across from Veterans Memorial Park, we see it as an exciting location whose time has come – to receive community attention. The neighborhood association, building on the momentum started with the mid-harbor plan, can act as a conduit and facilitator by working with, and bringing together, the stakeholders for this project – a consensus-building process we have already begun.

Anticipated Schedule for Completion of Planning Activities and Implementation of Improvements

The first year, funded with CDBG funds, is the pre-development phase of the project. This phase began on July 1, 2005 and will end on June 30, 2006. The two subsequent years, or development phase, is the phase in which the improvements are to be completed. Funding for improvements will come from city capital budget requests, and other sources.

Pre-development activity already completed by the ENNA resulted in the determination of anticipated needs for improvement in the project area that will require the involvement of engineering, architectural and environmental consultants.

Business property owners have informed us of challenges related to flooding, drainage, parking, vehicular ingress/egress, security, garbage pickup and odor from the Waste Water Treatment Plant that they see as priorities of any improvement plan. We further identified opportunities for improved lighting, traffic calming, aesthetics, landscaping, façade treatments and a more inviting environment for people on foot and in motor vehicles.

Residents that live within the Liberty Square area live in apartments above the shops, in three single-family houses on Goldstein Place and in apartments in the Norwalk Housing Authority complex (Seaview Apartments) at 11 Fort Point Street. The ENNA has invited participation by these residents, and as planning goes forward the ENNA will continue to engage them so that we can advocate for their benefit, and so that the improvements will be beneficial to these area residents.

A 'Welcome to East Norwalk' sign, an informational kiosk, signage identifying Liberty Square and a series of narrative sign posts (examples at Mill Pond and in Heritage Park) would draw people into the Square and create a warm and inviting place to visit.

Trolley cars that were once an integral part of the day-to-day life of this neighborhood hub, with the tracks still in place beneath the parking lot asphalt, could be incorporated into the improvements as a focal point or theme to draw people to Liberty Square. The strategic placement of a stationary trolley car as a focal kiosk, or using one of the shops as a 'trolley museum', is a possible option.

The proximity to the river invites additions that would enhance aquatic use such as a kayak-launching facility or a boardwalk over the salt meadow with the restoration of riverbank vegetation. After a drainage study is completed, storm drain enhancements may be deemed necessary. Flooding that occurs in the parking area during heavy rains could be ameliorated.

The addition of outdoor seating, with community benches and tables with checker-tops, would further encourage and define this location as a community gathering place. Plantings at strategic locations, outdoor sculptures and murals (similar to those on the sides of buildings in SoNo) would add to the appeal of Liberty Square. Opportunities for bicycle access will need to be incorporated into the overall improvements.

Creating a safer means for pedestrians and vehicles to enter Liberty Square, and to cross over Route 136 from Veterans Park, would allow this site to be better utilized by the local residents. Engaging the State DOT will be essential to the success of any improvements. Creation of a Roundabout on Route 136 at Seaview Avenue would help to calm traffic. Keeping open communication with the DOT will also allow us to plan for any challenges related to proposed work on the Stroffolino Bridge and on the railroad bridge.

An arrangement for shared parking, with the City potentially allowing Liberty Square shop proprietors and employees to park in the overflow parking at Veterans Park, could alleviate the problem of limited availability of parking at the Liberty Square lots that already exists and could get worse.

Restoration of historic facades on the row of shops, and enhanced facades at other locations, would be a high priority. Widened and leveled sidewalks in front of the row of shops, with brickwork or slate, and granite curbing, would add aesthetics and comfort for shoppers. Additional lighting, with historic fixtures would add security and be an attractive addition.

Constitution Park, a valuable asset, once integrated into the planned improvements for Liberty Square, would be better utilized. The wooden platform is currently in disrepair and rarely used. The Third Taxing District is open to working with the ENNA as we move forward with recommended improvements.

The intensive development that is rumored for the Neptune Marina property – with the involvement of the ENNA in planning for the whole of Liberty Square with all property owners – could become a consensus-building opportunity. The result would be development at the Neptune Marina site that is integrated and has a better chance of being acceptable to the community.

A retail market analysis would help determine if use of property could be more profitable for current owners if they chose alternative uses. A tenant in the row of shops that goes out of business may fail to draw customers because his or her business is not a good match for this location. Other property owners to the north of, and east of, the row of shops may benefit from using their properties more profitably, and in a manner that also benefits the overall improvement plan for Liberty Square. An environmental site assessment for potential contaminants would be beneficial because historical records show filling stations and auto repair shops on these sites in the past.

Where possible, pervious surfaces, sustainable building design & landscaping, and non-invasive native plantings would be incorporated into the planned improvements.

Pre-development schedule for planning activities (Phase I)

- Formal presentation to the City – Nov. or Dec. 2005
- Sign Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with City – Nov. or Dec. 2005
- Strengthen liaisons with others who can assist with the project (Mayor's Office, NRA, NHA, Rec. and Parks, NPD, DPW, Parking Authority, WPCA, OMI, P&Z, TTD, NRWA, NPT, LWVN, ENBA, ENIA, etc.). Secure matching funds for planning activities where possible.
- Hold meetings open to the community to educate and for consensus-building at least monthly – from present until end of planning period
- Send letters or flyers to the property owners and residents of the area eligible for program funds inviting their participation. Secure matching funds for planning activities where able.
- Hold committee meetings with participating ENNA board members and/or meetings with individual stakeholders (property owners, , TTD, State DOT, etc.) weekly, and as needed – from present until end of planning period
- Research availability of a trolley car for sale to use as focal point for Liberty Square
- Research availability of outdoor sculpture to put on display
- Capital budget request for fiscal year 2006-2007 for drainage study and/or parking study (if insufficient funds available through CDBG)
- Apply for grant from CEDF, once ENNA receives 501c3 status
- Contact City Clerk for potential grants and funding sources, and for assistance in grant application process
- Work with City to apply for SWRPA Transportation Technical Services Program funds for intersection analysis for potential roundabout placement at Rte. 136 and Seaview Ave.
- Research further the history of Liberty Square, including potential for national and state historic designation – present until end of fiscal year
- Work with City on choosing consultants, including input into RFQs and RFPs – Nov. 2005 through Jan. 2006. Work with Consultants, once selected, throughout the planning phase
- Work with Vollmer Associate, hired by the city for the Comprehensive Transportation and Pedestrian Master Plan for Central Norwalk. The area of the traffic study includes Route 136 that passes by Liberty Square and East Avenue to the east.

Implementation of improvements schedule (Phase II)

- Secure commitments from individual property owners for contributions toward façade and sidewalk improvements – 2006 through 2007
- Contact City Clerk for potential grants and financing sources
- Start 'buy-a-brick' program as fundraiser for improvements – Feb. 2006
- Start 'dedicate-a-bench' program as fundraiser – 2006
- Elicit community contributions to purchase a trolley car (if one is available for sale)
- Capital budget request fiscal year 2007-2008 for landscaping, sidewalks and improvements to parking lot and curbs – and certain other improvements determined in Phase I

Financing Plan for Phase I

Income

CDBG funds.....	\$40,000
CEDF grant for retail market analysis (anticipated).....	\$5,000
SWRPA Transportation Technical Services Program funds (anticipated)...	\$3,000
SWRPA staff services (in-kind).....	\$2,000
Architectural plans from individual property owners (anticipated).....	\$5,000
Development plans & studies from property owners (anticipated).....	\$6,000
Architectural planning services (in-kind).....	\$5,000
Landscape architectural planning (in-kind).....	\$4,000
Environmental consultation (in-kind).....	\$8,500
TTD planning for lighting and park improvements (in-kind).....	\$1,500
Total.....	\$80,000

Expenses

Consultant(s) for.....	\$40,000
Landscape architect/Architect,	
Environmental Site Assessment/Drainage study	
Parking study	
Estimates for preparing area for National Historic Register designation (\$1,500)	
Drainage study and Parking study funding can be requested in Capital Budget funding if insufficient CDBG funds are available	
Traffic study information can be obtained from the Central Norwalk Transportation and Bicycle study to be conducted by Vollmer Associates through city resources	
Retail market analysis (anticipated).....	\$5,000
SWRPA Transportation Technical Services (anticipated).....	\$3,000
SWRPA staff services (in-kind).....	\$2,000
Plans and studies from individual property owners (anticipated).....	\$11,000
Architectural planning services (in-kind).....	\$5,000
Landscape architectural planning (in-kind).....	\$4,000
Environmental consultation (in-kind).....	\$8,500
TTD planning for lighting and park improvements (in-kind).....	\$1,500
Total.....	\$80,000

Building Momentum and Gaining Support

Now that the ENNA has invited community input and met with Liberty Square property owners, we are building support – and we are certain that we will continue to build support as the planning process continues. Repeatedly, we have heard from the business property owners that they fear that their properties may be lost through eminent domain, or that there will be no funds available for the improvements in Phase II, so hesitate to put funds into the planning phase of the Liberty Square Improvement Project.

What we are finding, is that these owners are strong and determined, described as “cowboys” by one of the owners. They have plans for improvements that are conceptual, dreams that have yet to be placed on paper or realized as finished steel-and-mortar tangibles. Yet some owners have recently started improvements, making aesthetic additions with sidewalk and façade treatments and landscaping at some locations.

We anticipate that the property owners, once the ENNA has been successful in our Neighborhood Centers grant application, will become increasingly interested and confident that the City and the ENNA want to work with them rather than find a way to take their properties away from them. We feel certain that this trust will translate into individual property owners funding plans and improvements as the program moves forward.

To reach this objective, of heightening support for the improvement project and for consensus-building, the ENNA will work with the NRA and the consultants that are selected, keeping the property owners integrally involved in the planning process.

The items on the financing plan, outlined on the preceding page, are marked as ‘anticipated’ for this very reason. Once the pre-development process begins, following the City’s approval of the Neighborhood Centers grant funds for the Liberty Square Improvement Project, we will then be able to secure commitments for funding from other sources. Community Economic Development Fund (CEDF) – and SWRPA Transportation Technical Services Program fund – approval will be more probable if the City has embraced this project in the form of monetary support of the planning phase (see Appendix H). Once the City provides funding for a consultant for preparing the area for National Historic Register designation then this could make the buildings eligible for federal tax credits for improvements.

The Southwestern Regional Planning Agency (SWRPA) executive director has reviewed our proposal for Liberty Square improvements. He has indicated that this is a project in keeping with the goals of SWRPA and one that SWRPA staff will dedicate in-kind hours toward. A resolution of support for the project will go to SWRPA as an action item at its next agency meeting on November 7, 2005.

Until the CDGB funds have been committed to this project, firm commitments are not possible from individual property owners – or from organizations that provide grant funds.

The ENNA Board, as a dedicated board of directors, pledges to work diligently toward securing additional funds for the planning phase and for the development phase of this project. We also have several talented and knowledgeable board members who will commit time to this project, including professionals who have committed in-kind matching funds in the form of professional services.

This is an exciting project that we are looking forward to pursuing. It will allow us to bring together all those aspects that we value for Norwalk and for our neighborhood association – the protection of the natural environment, the re-creation of our historic roots and the quality of life of the people who live and work in the community.

Resolution adopted by ENNA Board of Directors

Resolution of Support for Liberty Square Improvements

The Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association Board of Directors unanimously adopted the following resolution at its regular board meeting of October 12, 2005.

WHEREAS, Liberty Square is within Census Block 3 of Census Tract 442, a United States Department of Housing and Urban Development low and moderate income area, and as such is eligible for grant funds from the City of Norwalk Neighborhood Centers Improvement Program; and

WHEREAS, Liberty Square is a historic neighborhood center for East Norwalk, located at a gateway into East Norwalk adjacent to Veterans Memorial Park and the Norwalk River, and;

WHEREAS, Liberty Square, for purposes of an improvement plan, is bound geographically to the west by the Norwalk River, to the north by the railroad tracks, to the east by Fort Point Street and to the south by Veterans Park; and

WHEREAS, Liberty Square has great potential for improvements as a gathering place for local residents; and

WHEREAS, a Liberty Square plan would include, but not be limited to, improvements to landscaping, facades, lighting, drainage, river bank vegetation, sidewalks, pedestrian safety and traffic calming; and

WHEREAS, the plan does not exclude improvements to select locations outside the boundaries of Liberty Square but within Block Group 3 of Census Tract 442;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the governing body (Board of Directors) of the Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association expresses its support for the scope of improvements to Liberty Square and Block Group 3 of Census Tract 442, as indicated above.

Proof of Organization and Area Served by ENNA

The Eastern Norwalk Neighborhood Association first adopted Bylaws in 2003, most recently amended in September 2005 (see Appendix F). The geographical boundaries, which is the area served by the ENNA, are described in our Bylaws. Our boundaries are the Norwalk River to the west, Route 1 to the north, Westport to the east and Long Island Sound to the south.

We are a certified non-stock corporation with the State of Connecticut. We applied for 501c3 status earlier this year. We are awaiting a decision by the IRS and anticipating approval by the end of the year.

Mapping and Photos of Project Area

For schematic drawings of options for improvement, and mapping and photos of existing conditions within the proposed project area, see Appendix G.

Appendices

- A. Maps of Block Group 3 of Census Tract 442
- B. Historic maps and historic photos
- C. Zoning map of site
- D. ENNA Revitalization Plan drafted in 2004
- E. Letter to property owners and newspaper articles, meeting notices/flyer
- F. ENNA Bylaws
- G. Schematic drawings, recent photos and mapping of site
- H. Additional backup documentation