



BEST PRACTICES in ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & LAND USE PLANNING



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Charles House Project

Best Practices in Community Engagement in Farmington, Connecticut

By Jade Hardrick, Connecticut Economic Development Association & Laura Brown, UConn Extension

The town of Farmington in Connecticut demonstrates best practices in economic development and land use through efforts to engage with the community before expediting projects. For smaller projects, Farmington encourages applicants to conduct outreach activities with neighbors. For larger projects, they encourage applicants to have community meetings. A great example of this was the approval process of the \$60 million luxury apartment complex at the historic Charles House factory by Centerplan Developers.

The Charles House project involved adding residential units to an already approved zoning project and included multi-family housing in much higher densities than former projects. The project had stalled because of the cost of remediating environmental issues on the property. "The original project did not provide the density to cover the costs of the project," said Rose Ponte, Farmington's Economic Development Director.

Farmington staff connected Centerplan Developers with the Union Village Improvement Association (UVIA), a coalition of residents, businesses, non-profit organizations and local government agencies based in Farmington that works to promote economic growth and preserve the town's architectural, natural and historic resources. After Centerplan Developers presented its plan to UVIA, UVIA organized two community meetings in Unionville.

The UVIA sent out invitations to all residents in local neighborhoods, and the Farmington staff contacted the local newspaper company to report the meetings. Farmington also notified the board of education and the school superintendent.

Neighbors expressed concerns about the increased density and how the proposed project changed from condominiums to rental housing units, school officials were concerned about brownfield remediation taking place while students were in school and parents were concerned about traffic and how to safely drop off and pick up their children.

After these meetings, Centerplan Developers decided to sell 15 units, while offering the others as rentals. Centerplan Developers also agreed to conduct the remediation during the summer, while students weren't in school and to construct a safe drop off and pick up safety lane next to the school. The project was approved in 2016, but the developer had not received the appropriate state permits from the Department of Transportation and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to begin the project and complete the work during that time frame.



Given that the property was adjacent to an elementary school and in a residential community, we felt it was very important to conduct meetings to engage the community and explain the need for additional density,”

*Rose Ponte, Economic Development Director,
Farmington, Connecticut*

Centerplan Developers has not yet moved the project forward but has received extensions. Engaging with the community is vital before planning economic development initiatives. Municipalities, developers, and businesses should meet with residents to ensure their plans are not at odds with the local vision. “I strongly advocate that developers have community meetings, so they better understand how the community will react to a given project. It's very important for the residents to have a voice in the process, since this is their community. Developers benefit from understanding how to improve their project,” advised Ponte.

Front image: Centerplan Development, Rose Ponte
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EXTENSION