



Smart Growth Project Evaluation

Project: Metro Green, Stamford

Developer: Jonathan Rose Companies/W&M Properties

Evaluated: August, 2009



Metro Green Rendering

1000 FRIENDS of Connecticut is a statewide organization whose mission is to promote and shape growth to ensure a prosperous economy, a healthy natural environment, and distinctive, integrated and attractive communities while promoting opportunities in education, housing, transportation, and employment for ourselves and future generations.

I. THE PROJECT SCORING PROCESS

THE PROGRAM. 1000 FRIENDS of Connecticut operates a program to identify, evaluate and advocate for real estate development projects that further the organization’s mission to bring smart growth to Connecticut. Such projects will not only contribute directly to the implementation of a sustainable, livable and productive physical and community environment, but will also serve as examples for government policy-makers, other design and real estate professionals, and the general public.

THE SCORERS Those who developed and administer the smart growth project evaluation program are board members and FRIENDS of the organization who, among them, have the full range of professional skills necessary to produce fair, expert and complete judgments. There are between seven and ten panel members; a minimum of four will evaluate each project. Their skills include design, real estate development, finance, engineering, law, planning and economic development. Five people reviewed Metro Green.

THE PRE-REQUISITES To be eligible for the evaluation program, three conditions must be met. First, the project must *not* be a “greenfield development” -- that is, a project to be built on undisturbed forests or grassland, or on land previously used for rural purposes only, such as cropland, pasture, wood lots, or quarries. Second, the project must *not* be on land that would have to be served by sewer and water infrastructure that was not existing or already approved at the time the project was initiated. If a project fails *both* of these tests, it is by definition not a smart growth project and will not be eligible for the program. Third, the project sponsor must pay an application fee of \$1000 to defray the costs of administering the program.

THE SCORING CRITERIA. The program evaluates projects in eight categories as follows:

- Maximize the Use of Existing Infrastructure
- Transportation Choice, Accessibility & Connectivity
- Provide for a Mix of Uses
- Provide Compactness; Use Land Efficiently
- Provide a Range of Housing Options
- De-emphasize Parking
- Excellence in Urban Design
- Environmental Stewardship

II. THE PROJECT

Metro Green Apartments is located on Henry Street, one block from the Metro North Stamford Railroad Station. The building is the completed first phase of Metro Green Residential, a candidate for LEED Neighborhood Development Gold certification that will include two additional residential buildings for a total of 238 mixed-income rental residences on a mixed-use, transit-oriented site.

In addition to the Jonathan Rose Companies and W&M Properties Metro Green Residential joint venture, the site will feature a new 350,000 square foot, 17-story, “best in class” LEED Platinum candidate office tower and numerous public improvements. Public amenities of the project include a new plaza and streetscape with custom street light fixtures, new sidewalks and landscaping.

The site is located in the South End neighborhood, just south of downtown Stamford. Interstate 95 borders the area to the north and the surrounding neighborhoods include a diverse mix of small homes and apartment buildings, industrial and old factory sites, and office buildings, with water and sewer infrastructure in place. Aged infrastructure on the site was replaced for purposes of functionality to serve both the site and future adjacent urban infill development.

III. FINDINGS:

1000 FRIENDS of Connecticut endorses the Metro Green Project. The project was found to be sustainable, responsible, and worthy of the organization's support. It is an excellent urban infill project, well-sited and compact. It provides a variety of housing options and a range of affordability. It is green and generally pedestrian-friendly.

IV. THE SCORING

THE METRO GREEN PROJECT...

A. ... MAXIMIZES THE USE OF EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE – SCORE: 9.8 OUT OF 16 POINTS

Strengths: Metro Green makes excellent use of a site in downtown Stamford adjacent to a train station and remediates it to the highest level for residential re-use. It has re-used existing road, sewer, water and utility infrastructure.

Weaknesses: Existing structures on the site were torn down; the panel has no knowledge of what these consisted of or whether or not they could have been adapted and reused.

B. ... PROVIDES TRANSPORTATION CHOICE, ACCESSIBILITY & CONNECTIVITY – SCORE: 12.6 OUT OF 16 POINTS

Strengths: Metro Green is located to provide maximum access to existing transit, and has provided for walking, biking and disabled access throughout. It has provided some traffic calming measures on Henry and Atlantic Streets.

C. ... PROVIDES FOR A MIX OF USES – SCORE: 10.5 OUT OF 12 POINTS

Strengths: The project will add a great deal of multi-story, multi-unit housing to a mix that already includes a large office building and a large state-owned parking structure on the same block. The Metro North and Amtrak train station across Station Place and lower-density housing across Henry and Atlantic, plus some small retail outlets at the Henry-Atlantic corner are complemented and enhanced by the coming of Metro Green. A variety of other uses on the other side of the train station in downtown Stamford make this an excellent infill smart-growth project on what was previously an under-utilized urban site. A second office tower (not scored by 1000 FRIENDS) by the commercial developer partner of this joint venture is planned for the portion of the site nearest to Station Place, connected to it by a narrow corridor. Overall the project improves the jobs-housing balance of the neighborhood.

Parks and public spaces within the project are well connected to public streets and sidewalks that border it.

D. ... PROVIDES COMPACTNESS; USES LAND EFFICIENTLY – SCORE: 10.2 OUT OF 12 POINTS

Strengths: The project increases both the existing and the historical density of the site. The ease of access for pedestrians among the components of the project is very good, and the project reinforces the existing street grid and is well-connected to existing streets, which have been improved on all sides for the benefit of the project and by new curbs and sidewalks on the other side of Henry and Atlantic streets as well.

E. ... PROVIDES A RANGE OF HOUSING OPTIONS – SCORE: 10.4 OUT OF 12 POINTS

Strengths: Metro Green provides a good range of housing unit types and housing price options in low-rise, mid-rise and high-rise formats. It serves a wide range of incomes through the protection of affordability at all levels including units for the lowest-income population. Sixty-two per cent of the units, including all of the high-rise buildings are market-rate units, which contribute to the municipal income diversity in the area.

F. ... DE-EMPHASIZES PARKING – SCORE: 6.4 OUT OF 12 POINTS

Strengths: Metro Green’s parking strengths consist of good on-street and good off-street parking design. The street has been redesigned and improved with new sidewalks and trees and with parking on at least one side on Henry and Atlantic. The parking garage planned for the site, which will serve all three of the residential buildings, is off the street and the drawings show it landscaped to minimize its impact.

Weaknesses: The number of parking spaces provided, all in the on-site parking structure when the project is complete, is 334 spaces for 238 housing units. This meets but does not exceed the city zoning requirements of 1.25 per one-bedroom unit and 1.5 per 2- and 3-bedroom units. The panel deemed this to be an excessive number for a project which is ideally located and designed to be walkable and transit-oriented.

G. ... EXCELLENCE IN URBAN DESIGN – SCORE: 6.8 POINTS OUT OF 8 POINTS

Strengths: Metro Green does a good job in the urban design of the project. Buildings are oriented to the street, with multiple entrances and windows on the street. The design respects the local architectural character, and the tree cover and planting are excellent.

H. ... ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP – SCORE: 7.6 POINTS OUT OF 10 POINTS

Strengths: As an urban site, Metro Green has no topography, habitat or natural feature issues, other than the existing slope on the site, which has been used to good advantage in the one-acre interior courtyard for tenant open space, which is planted with native plant materials and used for rainwater absorption. The rain garden at the lowest point in the public plaza makes excellent use of the slope and provides relief

to the storm sewer system. The reuse of rainwater for irrigation of plantings and laundry is an excellent feature. The LEED ND gold certification being sought is also a strength.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

PROJECT STRENGTHS: Metro Green is a very good example of urban infill and transit-oriented development. It will strengthen and enhance the South End neighborhood and the adjacent downtown with a variety of uses, a range of housing options, and many new residents. It will add energy to the street and consumer power to the economy.

PROJECT WEAKNESSES: Although parking is dealt with skillfully within the site, the project overall remains more automobile-oriented than it could be. A parking plan that integrates all users and shares the Metro Green garage, the State DOT garage that serves the train station, and the garages for the existing and the planned office buildings could provide greater efficiency and reduce the total number of parking spaces required, while setting a standard for parking near transit in other Connecticut cities. Such a change depends in large part on the cooperation of the city and the State DOT.

HOW PUBLIC AGENCIES CAN FACILITATE SMART GROWTH:

The City of Stamford has shown itself willing to allow parking at lower levels than the minimums that its code currently requires, although Metro Green did not take advantage of that flexibility. To take smart-growth parking policy further, the City needs to re-think its requirements in terms of *maximums* that are lower than the current minimums, and insist that a developer go no higher. It can also urge or require adjacent commercial and residential projects to share parking, mandate both-side-of-the-street parking wherever possible, and insist on charging for parking, both through meters on the street, and as a purchased amenity in private developments.

It should strongly urge the state Department of Transportation to reduce the size of its garage on Station Place and instead make some or all of the street frontage available for residential and commercial use, including a more robust connection to Station Place for Metro Green. With a downtown economy as vigorous as that of Stamford and a block as densely developed as this one, parking should be made as expensive as the market will bear.

The Connecticut Department of Transportation should pursue the option of demolishing the western Station Place garage wing, replacing it with residential or commercial development, and providing better access to Station Place for the Metro Green project. Further, the appearance of its garage should be improved and the two skywalks connecting it to the station should be eliminated to encourage pedestrian activity on the street. ConnDOT should also pursue shared parking arrangements with the other owners on the block to reduce the overall number of parking spaces and support other modes of transportation, particularly walking.

The Connecticut Housing Finance Authority, which administers the affordable housing tax credit program and awarded tax credits to this project, should ensure, in finalizing its criteria for future tax credit allocations that they favor urban infill projects that contribute to the jobs/housing balance like Metro Green.

The General Assembly should re-legislate and the **Governor** should sign the green tax credit bill, which would create an additional capital source for developments that are green and transit oriented like Metro Green.