



## Smart Growth Project Evaluation

Project: Storrs Center, Mansfield

Developer: The Leyland Alliance

Evaluated: October, 2008



Storrs Center, Concept Plan

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 of bringing smart growth to Connecticut. Such projects will not only contribute directly to the implementation of a sustainable, economically robust, 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. This new program is a work in progress; suggestions for improving it are welcome.

**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. The panel members range from seven to ten in number; a minimum of four will evaluate each project. Their skills include design, real estate development, finance, engineering, law, planning and economic development.

**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 must not 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 a fee of \$500, which will accompany the application and be used to defray the costs of administering the program.

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

- Maximizing the use of existing infrastructure
- Compactness and efficiency of land use
- Providing a mix of uses
- Providing a range of housing options
- Providing transportation choice, accessibility and connectivity
- Pedestrian comfort and safety, streetscapes and parking
- "Green" building and alternative energy

## II. THE PROJECT

Storrs Center will be a mixed-use development located where the civic center of the town of Mansfield and the main campus of the University of Connecticut intersect. Located along Storrs Road (CT Route 195) adjacent to the University, the Town Hall, the regional high school, and the community center, Storrs Center will include a new Town Square across from the University's proposed Fine Arts Center and a smaller Market Square across from Town Hall. The project will occupy approximately 17 acres of a 47.7 acre site. The remainder of the site will be preserved primarily for open space and recreation. Storrs Center will combine retail, restaurant, and office uses with a variety of residence offerings including studios, town homes, condominium apartments and rental apartments. Structured and surface parking will be provided.

## III. FINDINGS:

1000 FRIENDS of Connecticut endorses the Storrs Center Project. The development was found to be exciting, ambitious and worthy of the organization's support. The development ranked particularly well in

its design, mix of uses, provision of public spaces and environmental sensitivity. Storrs Center is smart and sustainable.

#### **IV. THE SCORING**

##### ***THE STORRS CENTER PROJECT...***

###### **... MAXIMIZES THE USE OF EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE – SCORE 80%**

**Strengths:** Storrs Center uses existing sewer and water infrastructure to expand/create at urban densities a town center on a site that is presently characterized by highway strip development. Its location across Storrs Road from the local high school, a community center and the town hall, and between the University of Connecticut and some of its playing fields makes it the natural place to expand and center the community. The site will include new walking trails just behind its residential district. The project is on a bus line and will seek to bring additional bus transit into and through the site. Storrs Center creates new roads internal to the development, and will accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists at safe speeds and with on-street parking.

###### **... IS COMPACT AND USES LAND EFFICIENTLY – SCORE 80%**

**Strengths:** Storrs Center is compact, with high densities in the village district and lower densities in the residential district. Detailed planning and design guidelines ensure that density and architectural compatibility will be maintained as various sections of the plan are built. The developers negotiated a lower parking standard with the town, and the development provides the majority of its parking through shared or joint parking. Metered parking will be introduced for the first time.

**Weaknesses:** The excellent plan and design guidelines do not extend to the adjacent site where existing retail will remain, or across Storrs Road to include any future development or any expansion or re-design of the public facilities there.

###### **... PROVIDES A MIX OF USES – SCORE 70.7%**

**Strengths:** Storrs Center will provide a diversity of uses integrated on its streets and within individual buildings. Planned uses include residential, shops, restaurants, offices, and a grocery store. The project will increase the diversity of uses available in the immediate neighborhood. The development promotes jobs/housing balance, as its residents will be within walking distance of two major employment generators -- the University of Connecticut and the Town of Mansfield.

###### **... PROVIDES A RANGE OF HOUSING OPTIONS – SCORE 70%**

**Strengths:** Storrs Center provides a variety of affordability and housing sizes, and a mix of rental and homeownership.

**Weaknesses:** No affordability protection is provided.

**... PROVIDES TRANSPORTATION CHOICE, ACCESSIBILITY AND CONNECTIVITY – SCORE 80%**

**Strengths:** The planned Town Square, Village Street, market and residential districts are planned to be highly accessible and connected to one another; good biking and transit connections to outside destinations are planned. Many residents will be able to live comfortably and get to work in many instances without a car. Residents will be able to take the bus to Willimantic, the regional center.

**Weaknesses:** While connectivity within the new development is excellent, the existing retail development that the project surrounds stands apart, visually and functionally. Comfortable connections to the civic uses across the street, other than those by automobile, depend on whether or not the state Department of Transportation allows the urban street and parking design envisioned in the plan.

**... PROVIDES PEDESTRIAN COMFORT AND SAFETY, INCLUDES ATTRACTIVE STREETSCAPES, AND MINIMIZES AND CONCEALS PARKING – SCORE 80%**

**Strengths:** Storrs Center has ready access to open space, including the considerable preserved area behind it and by walking trails connecting to a cultural center on Dog Lane. The development proposes sidewalks on all sides and conveniently-placed cross walks. It includes pedestrian walkways, street trees, and buildings oriented to the street. The development will maintain or restore an existing stone wall; the architectural guidelines will maintain the tradition and character of the area.

**Weaknesses:** These fine features apply only to this project, not to the larger town center that the project will help create.

**... MAXIMIZES “GREEN” AND ALTERNATIVE ENERGY FEATURES –SCORE 80%**

**Strengths:** Storrs Center is a green development and will conform to a new set of sustainability guidelines created by one of the drafters of LEED-ND. It makes no changes to the site’s topography, preserves a vernal pool, mitigates storm water and restores wetlands. It uses green design and construction.

## **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

**PROJECT STRENGTHS:** The proposed Storrs Center project is an excellent project in exactly the right location to expand economic growth: it is a smart development. Further, it aspires to provide to the University of Connecticut a real “campustown” similar to the best of such places enjoyed by many other colleges and universities.

**PROJECT WEAKNESSES:** Although the developer has an excellent plan, only public agencies can guarantee that the full vision for Storrs Center is realized. The jury is still out on those actions.

## **HOW PUBLIC AGENCIES CAN FACILITATE SMART GROWTH:**

**The State Traffic Commission** has the opportunity to break new regulatory ground in its decisions regarding Rt. 195 for the Storrs Center project. A broader definition of the agency's charge -- one that recognizes the requirements for a successful Main Street when that Main Street is a state highway -- would support not only the development of Storrs Center, but the economic vitality of many town centers in Connecticut, and would increase pedestrian safety in such settings. It should approve the redesign of Storrs Road as proposed by the developer to be a slower, narrowed, pedestrian-friendly boulevard with parking on both sides of the street.

**The Town of Mansfield** has the opportunity to enlarge the vision for a real town center in a way that will increase the chances for success. The sustainability, zoning and design guidelines developed for Storrs Center should be applied beyond the boundaries of this one privately-owned development to include adjacent properties if and when redevelopment opportunities should arise there. The same or a related set of guidelines should encompass the municipal facilities across Storrs Road in anticipation of future expansion or redesign, such that the "Greater Storrs Center" can be knitted together to ensure its success as both an economic entity and a community center.

If the State Traffic Commission is not able to accommodate the proposed redesign of Rt. 195, then the Town of Mansfield should plan to take over responsibility for the road, including the maintenance requirements that come with it. The ultimate success of Storrs Center depends on it.