

# Riding toward the future

Transit-oriented development opportunities launch new vision for New Park Avenue

by Abigail Albair  
Executive Editor



Courtesy Imaging

**T**ransit-oriented development is the wave of the future and the CTfastrak stations in West Hartford, along with a potential rail stop on the horizon, have opened the door to opportunities for such development in town.

"We want to try to promote a mixed-use environment and our opportunities to promote transit-oriented development would include residential development, perhaps even office development, in the future," Director of Community Services Mark McGovern said. "We're looking for more development that would put feet on the street so we understand that we need to try and facilitate a better pedestrian environment."

A change to zoning code was made in 2014 to permit residential uses in the general business zone and the general industrial zone, a change that will make mixed-use development possible along New Park Avenue, McGovern said.

West Hartford then applied for a Transit-Oriented Development

Planning Grant through the Office of Policy Management in December of 2014. OPM, in consultation with the Interagency TOD Workgroup, ranked and scored 23 applications, according to information from the state. The West Hartford project was one of 11 prospective planning projects chosen.

According to the resolution

**"There is an opportunity for New Park Avenue to become a more well-rounded environment through a mix of uses."**

**-Director of Community Services  
Mark McGovern**

authorizing the town manager to submit the grant application, the town's Plan of Conservation and Development promotes integrated, balanced and "complete" transportation systems and principles of smart growth in the New Park Avenue area.

Two major components of

smart growth are TOD and mixed-use development, Town Planner Todd Dumais said, calling them "the wave of the future."

The Capitol Region Council of Governments supported the town for the planning grant application because the council continually encourages plans and policies taking advantage of major

The current TOD zone – the Flatbush and Elmwood fastrak station area – is defined in the application as a "unique commercial district."

"Traditionally this area was dominated by industrial uses, with nearly all of the town's 700+ acres of industrially zoned land located within it," the application reads. "In general, the industrially zoned areas do not reflect the heavy industry of the past, but rather commercial services, auto-related repair garages, small machine shops and storage yards. More recently, a trend towards retail development has occurred."

It notes the "significant industrial employment centers" of the area, including major commercial employers, the Home Design District and the single- and multi-family residential neighborhoods that line the TOD zone.

Along with the fastrak stops, state improvements to New Britain Avenue, construction of the Trout Brook Trail and the new Charter Oak International Academy are all





Photo by Lynn Wolfe

**DOT Transit Administrator Michael Sanders said the results of a recent CTfastrak customer survey will help determine future modifications to the new bus rapid transit system.**

## CTfastrak's first 100 days

The first 100 days of CTfastrak have had ridership numbers exceed expectations, and in late June, the 500,000th rider boarded one of the buses running on the dedicated route.

Michael Sanders, transit administrator, said the CT Department of Transportation projected 11,200 daily rides in the corridor on an average weekday for the first year of service.

"We're actually seeing an average of 14,000 weekday boardings a day in June," he said.

The previous transit system had about 8,000 bus rides a day along that line. About 1,000 of them, plus about 7,300 additional riders are using the new rapid transit system now, with the addition of the green buses running on the bus-only road. Ridership numbers drop to about 5,000 on Saturday and 2,500 on Sunday, Sanders said.

Routes and stops continue to be adjusted. For instance, a new route to Westfarms Mall was added from Wethersfield and another runs from the Flatbush station through West Hartford Center and Bishops Corner to the Copaco Shopping Center in Bloomfield. A few tweaks will possibly occur in August with other changes coming, if necessary, in November.

CTfastrak also has a new rewards partnership, offering riders discounts and incentives at local businesses. In West Hartford, participants include The Corner Pug, Blast Fitness, Bombay Olive, Custom Framing Depot LLC, Elmwood Grill & Bar, Indigo Hair Innovations, Joe Cornfield's Blinds and Wallpaper, New Asia Chinese Restaurant, Puritan Barber Shop, Max Muscle Sports Nutrition and Ira Nozik Photographers.

A survey conducted in June noted that 30 percent of people who completed it were new riders on Connecticut Transit. Information from the survey is being processed.

"Very efficiently and quickly, we want to get feedback from our new customer base and see what each community and, in general, central Connecticut commuters are seeking in their weekday and weekend transit needs," CTfastrak Spokesperson Ron Dresner said.

listed as recent positive changes, while traffic, pedestrian and bicycle accessibility and safety are listed as needed improvements to "capitalize on the opportunities presented by the two new CTfastrak stations and the proposed NHHS rail station."

Funding for initial steps toward bringing a railroad station to West Hartford was approved by the State Bond Commission at the beginning of the year.

Gov. Dannel Malloy's office announced at the time that the \$5.75 million approved would be used to advance design plans and address environmental issues for new railroad stations on the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield line and the New Haven Line. The funding was combined with \$4 million in previously approved funding.

Called the "Hartford Line," the new NHHS line stations will be in Enfield, West Hartford, Newington and North Haven. Enhancements will be made to existing stations in Windsor Locks and Windsor, and a location study for a future Hamden station will be done.

The West Hartford rail station will be across from the Flatbush Avenue CTfastrak station.

The town's vision for the future outlined in the TOD planning grant application is for a more walkable and mixed-use redevelopment of the New Park Avenue area, including dedicated walking and bicycle networks from neighborhoods to commercial and municipal destinations, programs that support and encourage alternate transportation modes, and land use decisions that support smart growth.

The study funded by the grant will focus on a review of the Flatbush and Elmwood Station areas, a feasibility assessment for development and implementation, conceptual planning and zoning amendments, evaluation of alternatives, public outreach and participation, and final reporting and public presentations.

"There is an opportunity for New Park Avenue to become a more well-rounded environment through a mix of uses," McGovern said.

He noted smaller parcels have already begun to convert from industrial to other uses, such as 635 New Park Avenue which used to be industrial and now includes

gyms, personal services and other neighborhood elements.

"That's sort of a new type of investment that leads us to believe we'll see more and more of this type of activity," McGovern said. "What's critical is residential opportunities and places of work."

## Plans evolve

The first major mixed-use, transit-oriented development in the works is a \$19 million project on the former Pontiac dealership site at 616 New Park Avenue, north of the Elmwood fastrak station, planned by Trout Brook Realty Advisors, the developer of the West Hartford Housing Authority.

The plan includes 54 units that mix market-rate and workforce housing on the building's three top floors with the first floor reserved for retail use.

The units will be both one and two bedroom, though predominantly one bedroom units are expected as the development is aimed at young, working professionals, West Hartford Housing Authority President George Howell explained during a public information meeting last month.

Howell said the options are open for the retail offering, though a restaurant is not possible; he cited a casual coffee shop, bike shop or dry cleaners as likely examples.

Although the location near CTfastrak should be beneficial, Howell said the idea for the project emerged prior to the fastrak project.

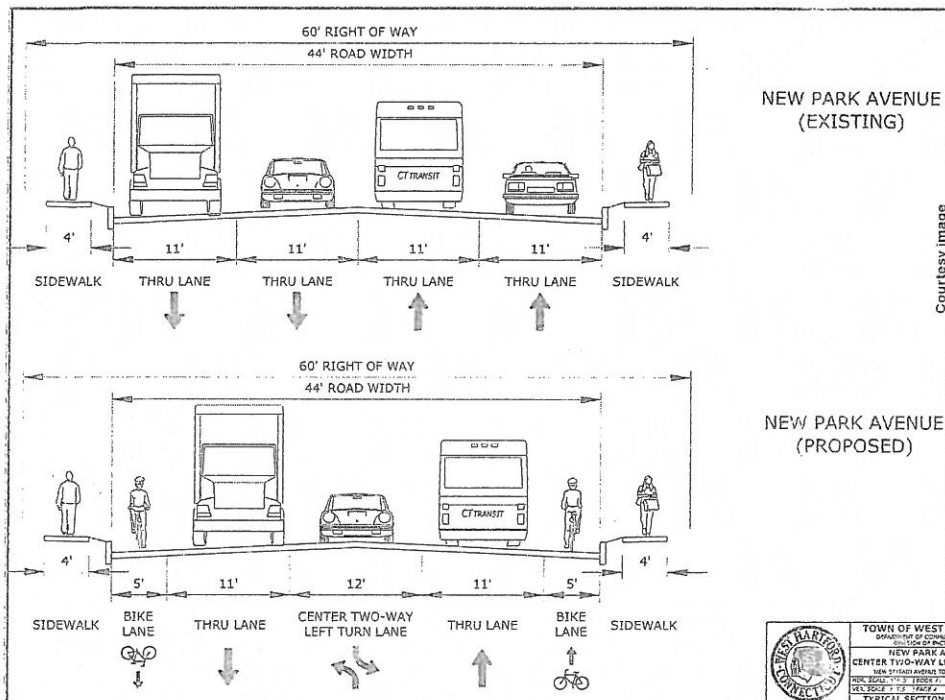
"We're looking at young professionals. With CTfastrak you could have or not have a car and get into the downtown of both cities," he said. "To me, it feels like Brooklyn, with its sense of urban sustainability. It's a place to walk."

He added, "Fastrak is here and it isn't going anywhere. This investment tells other investment: 'Maybe I should be here.'"

"616 New Park could serve as an economic catalyst for the area by providing new customers for local restaurants, stores and businesses, and encouraging new investment in Elmwood and West Hartford," a release on the development reads.

To continue building on TOD opportunities, the town most recently added its name to a





A potential road diet would modify New Park Avenue's existing four-lane roadway into a single travel lane in each direction, a two-way left turn lane in the center and bike lanes in each direction.

Connecticut Department of Transportation application for a Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery discretionary grant for a project titled CTfastrak Ladders of Opportunity: Complete Streets to Improve Access Between BRT Stations and Employment.

The Capital Region Council of Governments, the facilitating entity for the

located within walking distance to the busway while another 30,000 are accessible by feeders to major employers.

The project is aimed at strengthening connections "between low-income, transit-dependent neighborhoods that surround most stations, and the corridor's large employment base of 155,900 jobs," according to the application.

along with a road diet that would modify New Park Avenue's existing four lanes into a single travel lane in each direction, a two-way turn lane in the center and bike lanes in each direction.

It will also create an improved link between the Elmwood Station and the existing Trout Brook multi-use trail terminus on New Park Avenue.

**"Access to employment will be improved by constructing complete streets, enhancing transit operations and improving infrastructure that supports transit-oriented development."**

**-An application for TIGER grant funding**

application, brought on the Central Connecticut Metropolitan Planning Organization, West Hartford, Hartford, New Britain and Newington and wrote the application for a total of \$15,000,000 in TIGER funding.

According to CTfastrak information, 86,000 jobs are

"Access to employment will be improved by constructing complete streets, enhancing transit operations and improving infrastructure that supports transit-oriented development."

Part of the project will be to implement findings from the TOD Planning Grant Study

According to the application, average daily traffic volumes on New Park Avenue range between 13,100 and 17,500. The defined New Park Avenue corridor is between New Britain Avenue and the intersection with Flatbush Avenue.

The preliminary cost

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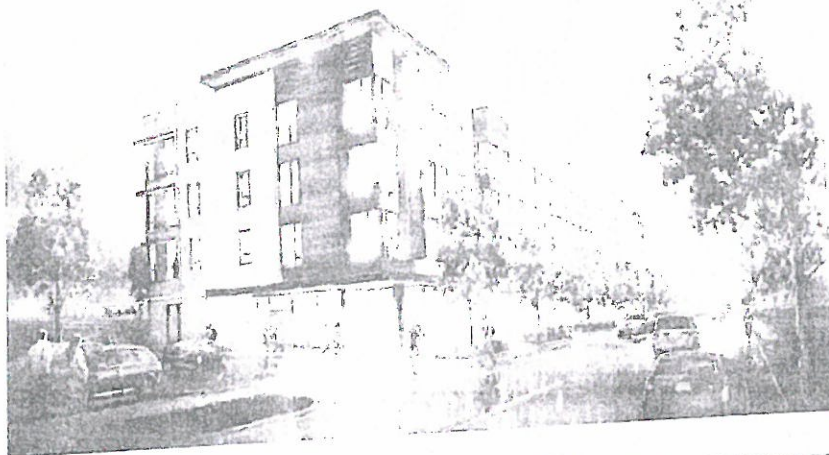


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Pictured is a rendering of the first major mixed-use, transit-oriented development in the works: a \$19 million development on the former Pontiac dealership site at 616 New Park Avenue, north of the Elmwood Fastrack station, planned by Trout Brook Realty Advisors, the developer of the West Hartford Housing Authority.

of the New Park Avenue improvements is projected to be \$4,476,000 and the preliminary cost of the Ladders of Opportunity project's second element - including the trail extension and wayfinding improvements in West Hartford and Newington - is projected to total \$8,540,000.

"The long-term goal is for

October of this year with a slated completion date of mid-2019.

While the on-road studies and projects continue to develop, the town will also maintain a focus on zoning code changes that may aid in TOD encouragement.

"Our role is to use the zoning code to prompt the kind of development that we want to

to 2 ½ years. How long will this window be there where people want to invest money?"

He added, "At the moment we're pleased with the interest and activity. ... New Park Avenue is an area where we can focus and see what else we can do to try and see some additional investment and some redevelopment."

**"The long-term goal is for the New Park Avenue corridor to evolve into a more mixed-use pedestrian and bicycle-friendly neighborhood with the characteristics that support transit ridership growth."**

**-New Park Avenue improvement project proposal**

the New Park Avenue corridor to evolve into a more mixed-use pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly neighborhood with the characteristics that support transit ridership growth," the proposal reads.

The state has committed a \$11,850,000 match through the DOT and municipalities with a goal of beginning the project in

see here," McGovern said.

"I believe [TOD] is the next area of focus in which we can see redevelopment that's consistent with the new opportunities that have come about. The development process is a long one and you don't know how long the window of opportunity is going to stay open. Big projects can take two

Still, he said, there is "no magic bullet."

"What we need to do is try and provide the right environment. We have very unique areas that are doing well. We have a great school system, great park system, good environment that is very stable. There are a lot of things that attract development."