

## COMMERCIAL LAND USE

### Existing Conditions

Commercial development in Westport consists of approximately 2,500,000 square feet of office space and about 1,400,000 square feet of retail space. Westport has become both a regional employment center and a regional shopping center, drawing employees and customers from surrounding communities. Commercial land use is concentrated along the Post Road, in Westport Center, in Saugatuck Center and at three outlying office parks.

Westport Center is the Town's focal point. It is the area bounded by the Saugatuck River on the west, Imperial and Myrtle Avenue on the east, Thomas Road on the South, and Kings Highway North on the north. It is the center of town government and business, and of much of the Town's cultural life. It has become a regional shopping center while still managing to preserve much of its small town look. The river adds to the ambiance and serves as a reminder of the Town's history. Intensive retail activity is supported by municipal parking as well as private parking. The layout encourages pedestrian activity.

Saugatuck is focused around the train station and is bordered by the Saugatuck River. Saugatuck Center is a collection of 19th century structures, but uses are less intensively retail than in Westport center and more predominantly marine and auto service, including boatyards and garages. There is also a collection of contractors yards and offices in this center as well as numerous restaurants and some professional services. Saugatuck Center is considered to be the area lying between the east side of Saugatuck Avenue and the Saugatuck River (but including the small RORD #2 Zone on the west side of Saugatuck Avenue) and extending south from the Saugatuck/Riverside/Treadwell intersection to Ferry Lane. Many of the buildings show the signs of their age and need for maintenance.

Two major infrastructure changes are in the planning stage for Saugatuck Center and a third is pending construction:

1. A new railroad station will connect the eastbound and westbound tracks by a bridge or tunnel. It will comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards and may include an elevator to accommodate the grade change.
2. Improvements to the railroad bridge over the Saugatuck River. This may affect the alignment of the tracks.
3. A plan to upgrade the Ferry Lane parking lot, which floods in storms, was approved two years ago, and is expected to be under construction by the summer of 1998.

Post Road West tends to have a corporate image with larger buildings set back on attractively landscaped lots with sufficient on site parking. The open and treed character of this stretch of the

road provides a visually attractive entrance into Westport that distinguishes it from Route 1 in Norwalk. Post Road East has been developing into a more traditional suburban strip, with a mix of convenience shopping centers, larger retail outlets, gas stations and limited fast food restaurants. This stretch of the road also includes some of Westport' condominium and multi-family housing. The various zoning districts along the Post Road provide varying intensities and types of use as well as varying heights, roof lines and sizes of buildings.

Interspersed along both the east and west sections of the Post Road are some of the Town's vintage historic buildings. These historic frame structures provide visual relief from contemporary retail and office development and provide a transition to residential areas.

There is virtually no vacant commercial land available in Westport. Most commercial expansion potential is associated with underutilized sites. The appeal of Westport as a retail and business location has increased pressure on real estate values. As a result many properties have been redeveloped to more modern and more intensive commercial use. These economic pressures raise continuing concerns over the character of the community and the traffic congestion and parking demands associated with intensified commercialization. Also, as a result of these constraints, development applications have grown increasingly complicated. Variances for commercial buildings are sought with increasing frequency. There is further pressure to expand into residential areas and to increase the commercial intensity of mixed-used zones above permitted levels

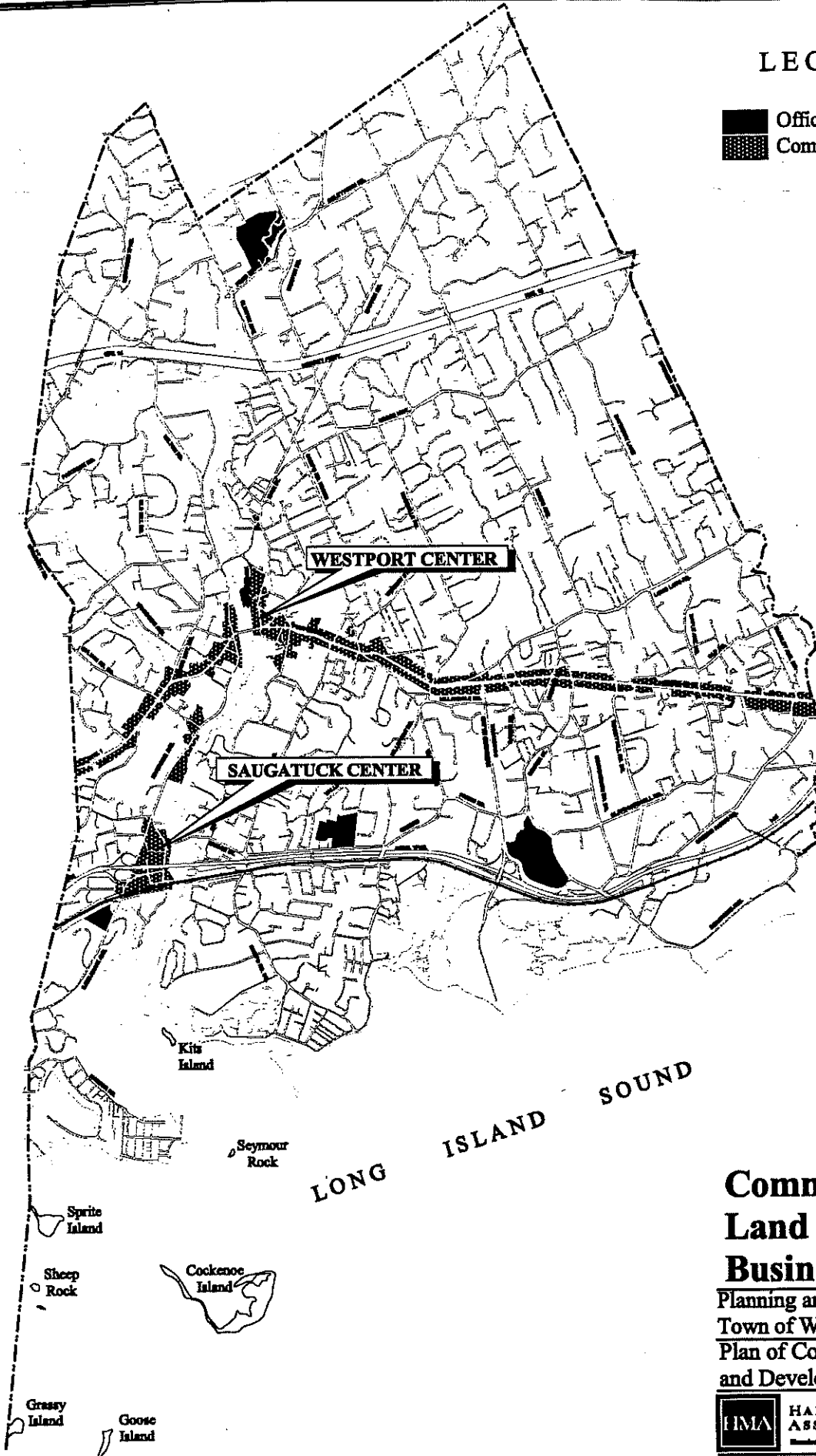
In Westport Center, the availability and convenience of parking has been an on-going topic of concern. In 1988 Allan Davis Associates completed a parking study of both Saugatuck and Westport Centers. In Westport Center, the study counted a total of 2,265 spaces. Of the total there were 1,117 spaces in municipal parking lots, 149 spaces on local streets and 187 spaces at Town Hall. Private lots provide 812 spaces. Within the municipal parking lots the spaces are about evenly divided between short and long term.

The 1988 Davis study examined occupancy and turnover and found that the peak overall occupancy reached 76% and municipal lot occupancy reached 84%. Davis advised that capacity generally "maxs" out at 85% occupancy for short-term lots and 95% occupancy for long term lots. The Davis report concluded at the time that based on peak occupancy observed (76%/84%) the overall supply was adequate. While overall occupancy may have been adequate on average, there were several individual lots which were at or above the 85% for short term or 95% for long term. These included Baldwin lot, Bay Street lot, Jesup Road lots, Library lot, Parker Harding and Taylor Place.

Parking has also been an on-going concern in Saugatuck Center where the demand comes mainly from commuters using the Saugatuck Train Station. The Railroad Parking Authority reports a waiting list, which includes commuters from surrounding towns, of approximately 2,000 for railroad parking permits. The state has expanded available parking during the past ten years and there are plans pending for improvements to the train station and the Ferry Lane parking lot.

# LEGEND

- Office Park
- Commercial



**Commercial  
Land Use &  
Business Centers**  
Planning and Zoning Commission  
Town of Westport, Connecticut  
Plan of Conservation  
and Development

**HMA** HARRALL-MICHALOWSKI  
ASSOCIATES, Incorporated  
Meriden, Connecticut November 1997



## COMMERCIAL LAND USE PLAN

Westport commercial activities are considered supportive of the principally residential character of the community. Their benefit as a tax base and economic base as well as a convenience to Westport residents is acknowledged. Established outlying office parks are anticipated to continue as such. The commercial land use districts of Post Road West and Post Road East and Westport Center are intended to be maintained as such. Saugatuck Center is also intended to be a focus of commercial activity, but with a possible increased component of residential development. In both Westport Center and Saugatuck Center the Saugatuck River frontage is considered a community asset to be enhanced for aesthetic appeal, pedestrian access and recreational uses. A major goal is to enhance the appearance of all commercial areas and minimize negative influences on neighboring residential quality of life.

Managing redevelopment and reuse stands out as a more significant challenge for commercial land use planning than regulation of new construction. New construction represents a minority component of local commercial development.

Existing zoning regulations assure a proper review and evaluation of both new construction and redevelopment proposals. Change of use or reconstruction impacting the existing footprint of buildings and the site plan layout are subject to comprehensive site plan review. In the case of redevelopment of non-conforming properties there is some flexibility to deal with development standards by special permit, but not to increase non-conformity.

***I. Goal: A viable economic base of commercial activities, complementary to Westport's predominantly residential character and attractive community appearance, within the existing limits of commercial development.***

***A. Policy: Proposals to extend the lines of existing commercial and mixed use districts or to revise development standards to permit more intensive site utilization will be considered contrary to the Plan of Conservation and Development.***

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The existing commercial land use areas of Westport should be maintained within their existing zone limits without extension into residential areas or intensification in excess of current standards.
2. Where individual properties are split into multiple zones, such as commercial frontage on the Post Road and residential land at the rear of the site, encroachment of commercial use into residential zones should continue to be prohibited.

3. Maintain the 25% Floor Area Ratio (FAR) and the 10,000 square foot building size limit to maintain "small town" character. Examine a reduction of the 10,000 square foot building by creating different RBD districts based on building size. Maintain the restricted limits of commercial activity in mixed use districts.
  4. Maintain the three small convenience store areas which exist in residential zones as non-conforming uses.
- B. Policy: All of the agencies within Westport that are concerned with land management, such as the Conservation Commission, the Flood and Erosion Control Board, the Zoning Board of Appeals, and their respective offices, should support the concepts expressed in this Plan of Conservation and Development within their respective areas of regulation.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Land use agencies such as Planning and Zoning Commission and the Zoning Board of Appeals should have the authority to hire specialized consultants to handle complex applications and defend against appeals.
2. The ZBA, when variances are applied for, should be vigilant in ensuring that any variance granted meets the statutory conditions of unusual hardship, and harmony with the general purpose and intent of the zoning regulations.

**II. Goal: A Westport Center which is a vibrant focal area of government, cultural and business activities and in which buildings are maintained in their historic character and scale; there is adequate parking available for customers and employees without losing the small town appearance; which emphasizes the riverfront and which continues to afford pedestrian access to the river.**

- A. Policy: The distinctive character of Westport Center should be maintained and outstanding features should be enhanced. Parking needs should be balanced against the need to preserve the small town look.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Within the BCD zone, parking standards should be revised to include retail, restaurant and office as a single group and to limit restaurant and retail occupancy to the first floor. Such change would simplify administration and the application procedure. Its effects should be closely monitored to ensure consistency with the overall plan.
2. Study ways to increase use of Imperial Avenue parking lot through a cooperative effort of the Town and the Downtown Merchants Association to provide shuttle buses for employees during morning and afternoon peak hours. Address parking lot safety issues through use of safety personnel or use of closed-circuit cameras linked to the police station, or other means. Reexamine need and feasibility of construction of vehicular bridge from library lot to Imperial Avenue lot.
3. Winslow Park and Baron's South provides open space in an otherwise commercial area. This area should be protected by Town acquisition of the Baron's South and rezoning of Post Road frontage of both properties to a residential category.
4. Develop a coordinated design policy for paving, planting, lighting and signage for Westport Center, including the commercial districts along the west bank of the river.
5. Develop waterfront parcels whenever possible to provide for public access to the waterfront. Priority should be given to water dependent uses.
6. Create a greenway along the east bank of the river from Jesup Green to Grace Salmon Park.
7. Continue to locate community facilities within Westport Center or close to it, as long as additional parking needs can be accommodated.
8. Encourage downtown employers to arrange for employees to park in the more outlying lots, leaving more desirable spaces for short-term visitors and customers. Consider closing short-term lots or sections until after most employees have arrived.
9. Update the 1988 study of "Transportation and Parking Management" by Allan Davis Associates to enumerate parking adequacy as of 1998 at both Westport and Saugatuck Centers, with the standard of service geared to normal rather than peak demand.

10. Improve parking in Westport Center with management strategies recommended by the proposed update of the 1988 Davis study in order to maximize use of existing lots. If the study reveals serious inadequacies in the parking supply, examine the possibility of installing a parking deck, balancing parking need with the desire to retain a small town look.

**III. Goal: A Saugatuck Center which maintains its existing character and in which redevelopment is conducted at a similar scale and in compatible character. Saugatuck Center should continue to afford opportunities for small scale business and services, particularly water-dependent and marine related operations and increased opportunity for residential use. It should provide increased riverfront visibility and access. Saugatuck Center will continue as a center of commuter activity focused around the train station. Renovations and parking area improvements should be in keeping with the character of the neighborhood enhancing the appearance and traffic circulation.**

- A. Policy: Future planning and redevelopment for Saugatuck Center should have the overall goal of maintaining the existing character of the area, especially the urban character of the shops adjacent to the railroad station. Traffic circulation should be improved in conjunction with railroad improvements, as well as neighborhood appearance.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Develop a coordinated design policy for paving, planting, lighting and signage for Saugatuck Center, and advocate landscape improvement of the several extensive public parking facilities in the neighborhood.
2. Development of waterfront parcels to provide public access to the waterfront and give priority to water dependent uses.
3. Consider revising the zoning in Saugatuck Center to permit apartments at a density sufficient to encourage their development. Saugatuck Center is mostly zoned GBD. Increased residential use is desired at Saugatuck, but apartments are prohibited in the GBD zone.