

CHAPTER 11: BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT



Encourage business development in appropriate areas

OVERVIEW

This section of the Plan looks at business and economic development in the Town of Ridgefield, noting the location and type of retail, office, and industrial development and other activities that provide:

- goods and services for residents,
- job opportunities, and/or
- a balanced tax base.

In Ridgefield, business are concentrated in Ridgefield Center, in the Branchville area, along parts of Route 35, at the intersection of Routes 7 and 35, and in large office and research parks.

Due to the presence of water, sewer, and road infrastructure, these locations are logical within the overall community fabric and should be maintained. Growth management within identified commercial areas should address redevelopment and revitalization of those business centers and areas of mixed land uses, concentrating new and renewed site development in appropriate transportation corridors. Emphasis should be placed on encouraging business development within existing business zones and minimizing the conversion of business land to residential uses. Businesses should provide for adequate transitions to adjacent residential uses and consolidated development (fewer curb cuts, and more cross-connections).

The permit and approval process involving various town agencies and officials should continue to be refined and improved to facilitate cost-effective development in accordance with appropriate zoning, availability of physical support and infrastructure, applicable codes for safety and health, and the goals and objectives of the Plan of Conservation and Development.

Economic Development Efforts

The Town established an Economic Development Commission (EDC) to implement orderly and planned economic development while preserving the character of the Town.

As part of its efforts, the EDC has created an Action Plan. The Action Plan will provide specific direction for priority economic development efforts.

GRAND LIST TOTAL

The Town should continue to pursue a strong non-residential tax base, to encourage economic development and increased business activity in locations supported by appropriate zoning and infrastructure, and to keep residential taxes at acceptable levels, while enabling the Town to provide quality services.

The 1999 Plan proposed a goal of maintaining the non-residential tax base between 15 to 25 percent of the Grand List. In the past decade, residential demand and housing values have exceeded the demand and values for business property. This trend, coupled with depreciation, means that the percentage of the non-residential component of the Grand List decreased (from 16% in 1999 to 13% today, as estimated by the Economic Development Commission), even though new development and refurbishment of existing commercial properties continued to occur.

These trends indicate that the 25% non-residential tax base goal may no longer be realistic for Ridgefield since residential property values have become a larger proportion of the ratio. The amount of development that would be needed to attain a 25% non-residential component of the Grand List would involve changes in business zones that might adversely impact Ridgefield's character. The overarching goal should be to pursue an increase in the commercial component of the tax base according to a more reasonable numeric goal based on historic figures, in the 13% to 18% range.

LOCATIONS AND TYPES OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The Town should continue the current pattern of business zones, but should evaluate and consider revisions where needed to attract suitable commercial development to areas appropriately supported by adequate transportation and infrastructure, as outlined in the next section.

Ridgefield's business development patterns are illustrated on the Business Plan map. Patterns include:

- Mixed use activity centers in Ridgefield Center, Copps Hill, and Branchville;
- Businesses along parts of Routes 7 and 35;
- Corporate Development Districts;
- Businesses located in residential structures along Route 7 and on north Main Street (per the adaptive reuse regulations); and
- Low-intensity home occupations throughout the Town.

The primary goal for future business development in Ridgefield is to promote business development in areas currently zoned for business use. This can be achieved through the development of vacant (infill) or underutilized parcels, redevelopment, and the re-tenanting of vacant space.

Southeast, NY

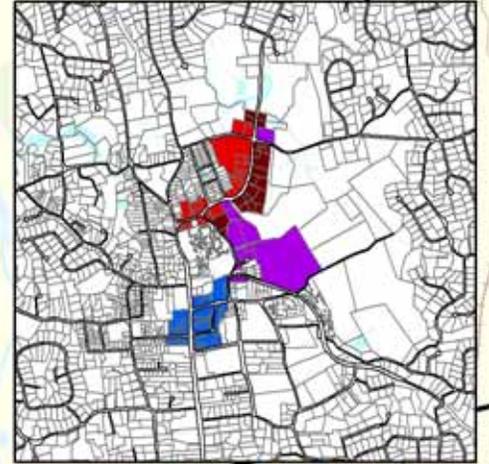
Business Development Plan

Ridgefield, CT

302

53

Danbury



121

North Salem, NY

53

116

35

Redding

See
Inset

Lewisboro, NY

35

Legend

-  B-1 - Business
-  B-2 - Business
-  B-3 - Business
-  Corporate Development District
-  Central Business District
-  Proposed Branchville Village Zone

124

107

57

Weston

Wilton

4,000

Feet

33

The Town has seen the loss of commercially-zoned land for residential development. In a village setting, mixing residences with businesses creates a positive synergy. Elsewhere, the loss of commercially-zoned land to other uses should be avoided.

Finally, where appropriate, the Town could evaluate municipally-owned land and buildings as potential sites for economic development.

ZONING CONSIDERATIONS

Route 7 Corridor

Business zones along the Route 7 corridor generally reflect the Town's desire to avoid strip-style commercial development and large retail developments. The current zoning does not, however, reflect the reality that there are some pre-existing retail uses. Questions have been raised as to whether business development opportunities in this area are too limited by the restriction on retail use. While residents likely have varying ideas for the future of the Route 7 corridor, two points emerged from public input: (1) This area needs renewed attention to evaluate existing zoning, and (2) the Town should continue to prohibit large "big-box" retailers due to limited infrastructure.

To begin addressing the Route 7 corridor, a number of issues should be examined. The Town should conduct a zoning study for the Route 7 corridor that will:

- examine the amount of vacant land and development potential;
- look at ownership of parcels in the corridor;
- determine the types of business and other non-residential uses that might be appropriate; and
- consider revisions to zoning that will promote appropriate use of properties while controlling the scale and size of developments consistent with the limitations of transportation services and infrastructure.

Branchville

Branchville is recognized as the second "village" of Ridgefield, although it is very different in character when compared to the downtown Central Business District. Zoning is primarily B-1 Business, which permits a variety of commercial uses including retail, offices, services and restaurants. The area is also limited for economic development by the Norwalk River flood plain, lack of municipal sewers, and high traffic congestion during commuting hours. The Metro North railroad station has limited parking, and most businesses are located on the opposite side of heavily traveled Route 7.

Nevertheless, Branchville is an important gateway for traffic entering Ridgefield from the south, and the village has potential for improvement with opportunities for small-scale transit-oriented development within the development limitations.

The Town should include Branchville in its business development planning by:

- continuing to implement appropriate recommendations of the *2002 Branchville Village Plan*;
- considering revisions to zoning that would allow opportunities for mixed uses, including residential, with limitations on size, density, and scale of development;
- considering revisions to zoning to allow adaptive reuse or business development of properties surrounding the train station;
- examining opportunities for inter-municipal sewer service with Georgetown, within limitations that would prohibit inappropriate high-density development; and
- supporting a program (with an agency like the Economic Development Commission) for low-interest façade improvement loans, to improve the appearance of buildings in this important gateway.

Downtown Ridgefield

The Central Business District in downtown Ridgefield is zoned to allow a variety of business, retail, service and restaurant uses. The historical and welcoming appearance of the Main Street shopping district (the “character,” which has been identified as critically important by the majority of Ridgefield residents) is protected through implementation of Village District regulations adopted by the Commission in 2007. Parking and pedestrian improvements were recommended in the *Ridgefield Center Study*, adopted by the Commission in 2009.

The Commission should continue to evaluate downtown zoning according to the economic climate, making changes as needed to promote a vibrant business atmosphere while preserving and protecting the charm and character that makes the downtown so attractive.

While there are differences of opinion on the identification of “problems” within the village and various methods that may be implemented as improvements, the Commission and the Town should leave the door open for further discussion on the following:

- zoning modifications that will preserve and promote the vibrancy of the downtown for retail, small offices and service-oriented businesses and entertainment; and,
- support for efforts by downtown property owners and the Economic Development Commission in the implementation of a Special Services District (a Business Improvement District) to coordinate and maintain parking and pedestrian improvements.

Route 35

The southeast side of Route 35 (Danbury Road) between South Street and Farmingville Road is zoned B-3. Retail uses are not permitted in this zone, but there are a number of non-conforming retail uses located here, some of which pre-exist zoning and others which have been allowed or modified by variance of the zoning regulations.

Zoning should be examined to determine the need for changes that will ensure proper Commission control of current and potential uses of land, while permitting appropriate density of uses in accordance with the limitations and availability of convenient access off a congested roadway. Allowing a limited level of retail by special permit might be an option for this area.

Adaptive Reuse

The Town has adopted adaptive reuse provisions for the Route 7 corridor and a small portion of Main Street near the intersection with Route 116. Adaptive reuse allows for the utilization of existing buildings (typically historic residential structures or significant residential “streetscapes”) for low intensity non-residential uses provided that the residential character of the area is maintained.

The Town should continue to allow adaptive reuse and consider expanding its applicability to other major corridors in Ridgefield.



Photo 23: Businesses on Route 35 (John Kinnear).

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Gateways

The importance of enhancing the appearance of gateways is discussed in Chapter 9, under “Community Structure.” The Commission should require appropriate improvements to gateway businesses that request changes under Special Permit and Site Plan applications. Agencies such as the Economic Development Commission, the Chamber of Commerce or other business-related organizations should encourage building owners in the Route 7 gateways to make improvements to building appearance by providing information on possible funding sources and low-cost improvements, and by giving guidance on other possible improvements.

Site Planning

The Town should continue to carefully review site plans for business development, with special attention paid to curb cuts, provision for pedestrian and bicycling amenities, and other considerations (see Chapter 13, “Transportation,” for further discussion on curb cut management). The Town can also provide guidance and require improvements through Special Permit conditions to improve handicapped accessibility when reviewing site plans for business uses.

Corporate Parks

The Town should continue promoting corporate park development and attracting and maintaining corporate headquarters. Efforts by local officials, including the Economic Development Commission, will play a critical role.

Green Buildings

Sustainable building practices are becoming more widespread, especially for commercial buildings. Many businesses recognize the cost savings, environmental and health benefits, and status associated with green buildings. As noted earlier, the State now requires some new development to meet LEED standards (see sidebar on p. 10-7), but many new buildings will fall below the State’s threshold. The Town should encourage new buildings to be energy efficient and encourage existing businesses to make appropriate upgrades.

STRATEGIES FOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Maintain A Strong Non-Residential Tax Base

1. Continue to increase the business/commercial component of the tax base (office, corporate, research and development, light industrial, and retail uses).

Promote Business Development in Appropriate Areas

2. Maintain business zones adequate to meet community needs.
3. Promote business development in areas already zoned for business use.
4. Avoid the conversion of business-zoned land to residential uses.
5. As appropriate, evaluate the potential for municipally-owned property for economic development.

Consider Zoning Updates

6. Conduct a zoning study for the Route 7 corridor to consider revisions to promote appropriate use of properties while controlling scale and size consistent with traffic limitations and infrastructure.
7. Examine zoning on the southeast side of Route 35 between South Street and Farmingville Road, to ensure proper Commission control and review of changes to existing and potential future retail uses.
8. As appropriate, consider allowing adaptive reuse of historic structures and residences in significant streetscapes in additional areas along major roadways.

Additional Strategies

9. Encourage building owners to enhance the appearance of their properties in key Route 7 gateways.
10. Continue careful review of business site plans to implement improvements at every opportunity.
11. Continue to promote the concept of corporate parks.
12. Encourage new buildings to be energy efficient and encourage existing businesses to make appropriate upgrades.