



Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

The Norwalk Public Library main branch.

## DEVELOPMENT

# Library area to get overhaul

### Committee seeks urban design firm

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — The Common Council laid the groundwork in July by approving an option-to-purchase agreement for the private parcel next to the Main Library at 1 Belden Ave.

On Thursday evening, the council's Planning Committee will take the next step in reinvigorating the library area by reviewing a request for proposals for master planning services.

"In anticipation of the city exercising an option agreement to utilize and own adjacent parcels to the Main Branch of the Norwalk Public Library, the Redevelopment Agency, in partnership with Planning and Zoning staff and Library officials, has developed a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a Master Plan of the 16-acre Library Area," wrote Tami Strauss, community development director at the Redevelopment Agency.

Sought is an urban design firm or firms, including a local land-use attorney, to prepare the master plan for the Library Block Area, which has taken on additional significance with the approval of the option agreement.

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## LIBRARY

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"If and when the option agreement is exercised, the city will own nearly 10 percent of the acreage of the library area," Strauss wrote in her memorandum to the committee.

The anticipated option agreement, according to officials, presents the city a prime opportunity to explore a "form-based code," rather than conventional zoning for the 16-acre area bounded by Route 1, Belden Avenue, West Avenue, Union Park Square, Berkeley Avenue and the Route 7 Connector.

The resulting master plan will lay out "appropriate form, scale and character of development" and address, among other things, "housing affordability, parking and a dearth of optimal uses," according to officials.

"Anchored by the library, and as the northern gateway to Wall Street, West Avenue and the entire urban core of Norwalk (a) form-based code will ensure that the city has as much control as to how the area will look and function," Strauss wrote.

The library block area is home to the library, courthouse, businesses and nonprofit organizations. Through the master plan, officials hope to correct a num-

ber of issues, such as poor pedestrian connectivity, excessive asphalt areas, inaccessible parking, car dominance, and "an overall lack of cohesiveness," according to the draft RFP.

Former Mayor Alex Knopp, now library board chairman, spearheaded negotiation of the option agreement under which the city, upon payment of \$460,000 to the owner of 11 Belden Ave., gained exclusive use of the 28-space private parking lot facing Mott Avenue from that address. The city has six years to decide whether to buy the larger parcel for up to \$4.8 million.

While the immediate goal of the agreement was to provide

parking relief for library patrons, the deal more broadly opens the city's options to expand the library and plan future development around the library.

Knopp said he is pleased the city and Redevelopment Agency are moving quickly on the master plan.

"It will help inform and shape whatever planning we do at the library, both in terms of the facility expansion and for programming of the space," Knopp said. "This initiative from the Redevelopment Agency helps fulfill the promise of the option agreement, in terms of it making the library the centerpiece for whatever new planning and zoning occurs in

the new neighborhood."

Knopp thanked the Redevelopment Agency for including himself and library Executive Director Chris Bradley in helping draft the RFP for the area.

The effort comes as the library board moves forward with a master plan for library building. The resulting redesign could create a new study area and space for art galleries and concerts. The historic structure was built in the early 20th century with money donated by businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

The Main Library has about 25 parking spaces and several hundred visitors daily.