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# Would a Westerly Mall benefit the entire town?

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It is the largest urban center in southwestern Rhode Island but, in reality, it is just a small town with a population approaching 20,000. A good example of small-town America, it is an attractive community and one in which residents take a good deal of pride.

Westerly has much in its favor: an extensive shoreline, with a Misquamicut State Beach situated between the two wealthy beach areas of Watch Hill and Weekapaug, which causes the summer population to more than double; a general absence of slums, with attractive homes scattered over an extensive 33 square mile area; a state airport; and a downtown which gives it a sense of identity. But like other growing communities it is experiencing some difficult decisions related to this growth. The most recent one is concerned with the proposed construction of the Westerly Mall on Franklin Street, which construction will have a profound impact on the small downtown.

The Westerly High Street is the heart of the small town center with most retail activity concentrated here between Dixon Square on the south, with its 1882 Marini Building, and the 1926 Nardone Block in

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the north at Canal Street. Going west on Broad Street through Dixon Square takes one across the Pawcatuck River into adjoining Connecticut. And just to the east, off of the High Street, is Wilcox Park, one of the loveliest town parks to be found anywhere in the state.

The postwar 50 percent increase of population in the town placed great strains on a town center not designed for the automobile. The inevitable result, as in towns and cities across the country, was an expansion of retail activities on high-way-oriented land about one mile away on Franklin Street. Today, in a typical strip development along this U.S. Route 1, one can find pizza parlors, hamburger stands, donut shops, and small shopping plazas, all with parking available and all doing well, as witnessed on a recent Saturday afternoon.

This development along Franklin Street has already had an impact on the downtown with a vacant Vars Brothers building on High Street and other vacancies on Canal Street. The question now is what will happen to the downtown should the new and larger Westerly Mall be built north of the present Franklin Street Shopping Center? Will the small town center be able to survive?

The Town Council will have to decide on July 24 whether to rezone the proposed site from its present use of residential to that of commercial. Should they approve the change, the Juster Associates of Yonkers, New York will be allowed to go ahead with its planned Westerly Mall, a 200,000 square feet development with plans for a bank, restaurant, supermarket, two department stores, and a variety of shops. With Council approval, this proposed 28-acre mall with its space for 1,200 cars is scheduled for construction sometime this year.

It will be difficult for the Town Council not to go along with this proposal which means new jobs and additional revenue for the town. But the important question to be

raised is what will happen to the downtown? And will new jobs really be created if some of the already existing retail stores in the downtown and on Franklin Street have to close because they cannot compete with a new mall?

There is a "what can we do about it" attitude on the part of some downtown merchants and an acceptance of what they feel is an inevitability over which they have no control. Certainly there is a parking problem in the downtown but it is not impossible to resolve, given the leadership necessary to move it.

For those downtown businessmen not willing to accept the inevitability of an even greater loss of retail activity and more store closings, they might well look to nearby Massachusetts where some small towns are fighting peripheral development and working to keep downtowns alive.

Perhaps the best example of what is possible is taking place in Pittsfield in the northwestern part of the state where, with vigorous leadership from Governor Dukakis who is committed to rebuilding city centers, a suburban mall was stopped because access to a state highway was denied. Money has now been pumped into the Pittsfield downtown and the proposed mall will be built there.

Although each community has its own characteristics and solutions to problems, and what may work in one town may not necessarily work in another, the Westerly Town Council should examine closely the Pittsfield case. Time should be taken to talk to officials and merchants there before rendering a decision on which the future of its own distinctive center may well be in balance.

A downtown with flowerbox-bedecked sidewalks, historic and interesting buildings such as the Greek Revival old Industrial Bank, a Romanesque Revival Memorial and Public Library, the Knox Taylor designed Post Office with a curved facade highlighted by Doric columns, a Dixon Square Building with smart shops, and an adjacent lovely Wilcox Park deserves every effort to maintain its viability. The alternative is another common cinderblock-on-asphalt development on Franklin Street.

Whether the Westerly Mall becomes a reality or not is now in the hands of the Town Council. Their decision, if taken now or delayed for further study, will have a major impact on the life or death of the downtown and, eventually, the character of the whole community.

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