

# Development planners aim high for Preston Riverwalk property

By [Claire Bessette](#) Day Staff Writer

## Document advises rezoning around section of Route 2

**Preston** — The new draft Plan of Conservation and Development anticipates Preston Riverwalk, the former Norwich Hospital property, as the center of future commercial development, but also recommends improvements to other main corridors to improve the tax base.

Town Planner Kathy Warzecha presented an overview of the plan for several residents Tuesday at the start of a public hearing hosted by the Planning and Zoning Commission.

One chapter, titled "Areas of Special Interest," in the 150-page plan describes the section of Route 2 through town as a main target for commercial development. Warzecha said the western section of Route 2 is zoned commercial but is underutilized, with a few scattered small commercial businesses. For example, one automobile junkyard on Route 2 pays as much in taxes as a single-family house elsewhere.

"This area of Route 2 really does need to be improved," Warzecha said. "? This is the entryway into your town from Norwich."

The plan recommends changing the zoning of the western section of Route 2 either to resort commercial to take advantage of the high volume of tourist traffic or an industrial park zone, which would have a more cohesive design. Resident Robert O'Neil agreed that the area needs attention. He said the town must plan for it rather than just allow future developers to propose projects that fit their needs "because (the land) is cheap."

The eastern section of Route 2 also is zoned for commercial development, but most of the available land either is owned by the Mashantucket Pequot tribe and remains undeveloped or is owned by the town and used for municipal purposes - Town Hall, Preston Public Library and the highway department. "Preston really does lack a good commercial base," Warzecha said, "with the exception of Preston Riverwalk."

Preston Riverwalk is a centerpiece of the plan - a separate Preston Riverwalk Plan of Conservation and Development is attached as an addendum - and also a source of unknowns for the town, Warzecha said.

Preston's population grew only slightly in the past decade, and town officials recently have discussed consolidating the town's two schools. Warzecha advised "caution" on that issue, however, because future development at Preston Riverwalk could bring more population to town.

The issue of allowing housing at the Riverwalk property was a major topic of discussion during planning workshops over the past year. The commission ultimately allowed up to 30 percent of lot coverage at the 393-acre property to be used for housing. But commercial development must come first.

Warzecha said affordable housing is another issue that must be addressed by town officials. Only 3.9 percent of Preston's housing stock is deemed "affordable" with income or deed restrictions. By state law, towns that have less than 10 percent affordable housing can be targeted for large, dense affordable housing development in any zone in town.

Southeast Area Transit commuter bus system is headquartered in Preston, but buses do not serve the town. Warzecha said when future development occurs at Preston Riverwalk, it is anticipated that bus routes would stop there. Resident Andy Depta said the plan is "absolutely excellent," allowing any town resident to find out anything they need to know about the town. Depta submitted written comments to the commission Tuesday. Both he and O'Neil recommended the commission change the word "should" in the goals and objectives section to "shall," with specific agencies assigned the tasks.

"If you don't do that," he said, "the action items won't happen. Everyone will be looking around looking for someone to take the lead."

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