

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES – TRANSFORM NOROTON HEIGHTS

Overview

This booklet has been prepared *to help guide discussion* of possible strategies for Noroton Heights for the 2016 Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD).

The following pages suggest strategies to be considered by the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC). Some of the strategies come from the 2006 POCD, some have been recommended by other boards and commissions in Darien and others have been suggested based on research and analysis conducted as part of this planning process.

Intent is to refine the overall vision for Noroton Heights and to lay groundwork for regulation changes and additional future planning.

“First comes thought; then organization of that thought into ideas and plans; then transformation of those plans into reality ...”

Napoleon Hill
American author

PZC members should review this information and evaluate whether the strategy, policies, and tasks might be appropriate for the POCD.

Noroton Heights

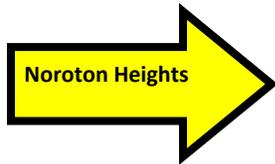


Noroton Heights

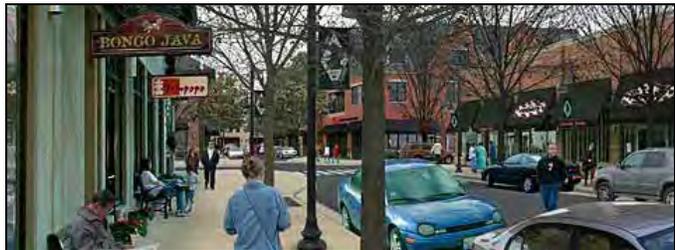


Executive Summary

Noroton Heights exhibits elements of a strip-type development pattern. As can be seen from the images below, such development patterns often lack a strong “sense of place” and this can result in a utilitarian / automobile-oriented area which is comprised of individual uses / destinations.



**Strip-Type
Development Pattern**



**Village-Type
Development Pattern**

Natural Resources Defense Council / Urban Advantage

Development patterns in Noroton Heights reflect the prevailing architectural and site layout trends at the time the area was developed. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, detached buildings with large parking areas were the normal approach to suburban development. There is little provision for pedestrian accessibility within the Noroton Heights area and the area functions primarily based on single purpose trips (commuters to the train station, people shopping at stores, workers in the businesses).

In addition, the Noroton Heights train station has not kept up with the times. The station has a number of inadequacies (building, platforms, parking, access, etc.) and has not been renovated or improved in some time.

Still, Noroton Heights has the potential to be so much more. Noroton Heights could become a secondary village-type area in Darien and could become more of a pedestrian-oriented place with a broader variety of uses. The “transformation” of Noroton Heights should be considered and pursued.

While increasing the vibrancy of the Noroton Heights will likely require allowing an increase in density / intensity / activity, Darien should strive to ensure that new development maintains an appropriate character and scale.

Key Opportunities

Some of the key opportunities for Noroton Heights include:

- Increasing the overall vibrancy of the area
- Providing locations for additional goods and services
- Enhancing the tax base
- Leveraging off the rail and bus services
- Providing housing options to meet changing housing needs
- Enhancing the overall quality of life in the community

Recommendations For Consideration

- 1. Establish an overall vision to guide future development based upon a mixed use and pedestrian-oriented place**
- 2. Work with CTDOT and others to make public improvements**
 - a. Renovate the train station (building, platforms, bridges, etc.)**
 - b. Fix surrounding roads / bridges**
 - c. Expand / simplify train station parking**
- 3. Amend the Noroton Heights zoning to guide private development**
 - a. Establish a new “grounded” zoning district**
 - b. Designate the Noroton Heights area (including the parking areas) as a “village district”**
 - c. Review and refine parking requirements**

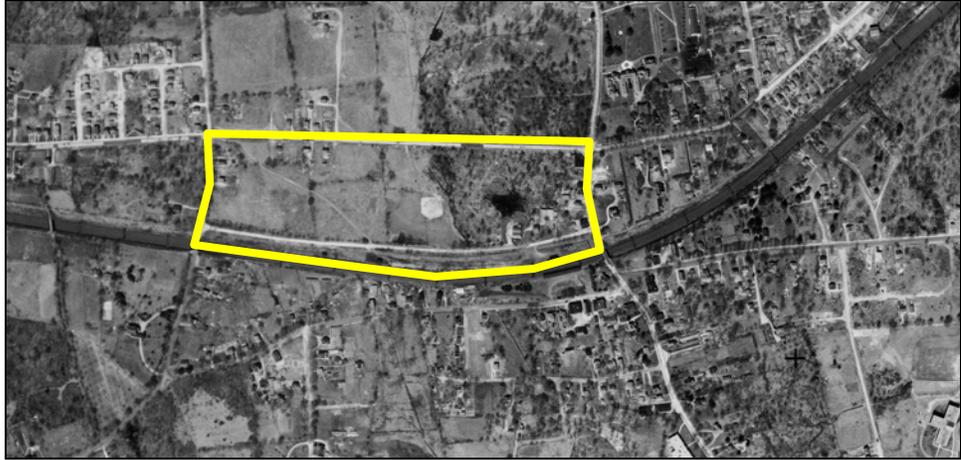
Evolution

Change has been occurring in Noroton Heights for some time. As the pictures on this page show, change can be expected to occur over time.

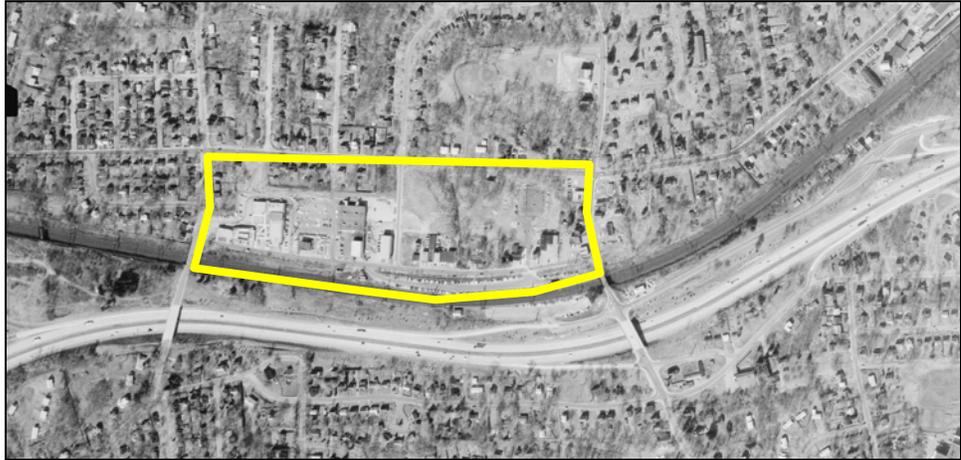
The key role for the POCD is to suggest how to guide future growth and change so that it accomplishes community desires.

History

1934 Aerial



1965 Aerial



1996 Aerial



Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges

1. **Traffic Capacity** – Noroton Heights is challenged by the capacity of the current roadway system:
 - the bridges over Interstate 95 and the railroad tracks
 - key intersections (Ledge Road, West Avenue, Heights Road)
2. **Automobile Orientation** - Noroton Heights has functioned as an automobile oriented place for 50 years or so and this may make it challenging for people to consider an alternative configuration
3. **Inertia** - People may be resistant to change
4. **Stormwater** – Drainage and flooding are a continuing concern
5. **Regulations** - Some regulations inhibit development of a village-type environment

Opportunities ...

1. **Transit-Oriented** - The availability of transit (bus and rail) provides an opportunity for higher intensity / density with lower parking and more of a “sense of place”
2. **Street-Oriented** - The ability of uses in Norton Heights to orient to the “street” (whether a public street or a private way that looks and functions like a public street) and create a “sense of place”
3. **Capacity** - Noroton Heights has the capacity to accommodate more uses, mixed uses, and provide more for the community
 - Vibrancy / Activities / Goods / Services
 - Walkability
 - Housing options
 - Increase in property values / tax base

Opportunity

There are four main assemblages of private land in Noroton Heights:

- West side (Palmer land)
- West Central (existing Palmers Market and west side of Edgerton Street)
- East Central (properties at the northwest corner of Heights Road and Edgerton Street)
- East side (Federal Realty land)

Two of these four areas are considering development options and this represents an opportunity to “transform” the character and function of the Noroton Heights area.

Challenge



Opportunity



Walk Score

A “walk score” is a measure of walkability and is based on a “web app” methodology available at walkscore.com. The walk score reflects the diversity of uses and destinations in an area and the provisions for pedestrians.

According to the Walk Score website, research related to walk scores has found that walkable places perform better economically. Studies have found that residential and commercial rents and sale prices are higher in more walkable areas.

Town-wide, Darien receives a walk score of 25. In the Noroton Heights area, the walk score is about 61.

Walk scores for some communities are as follows:

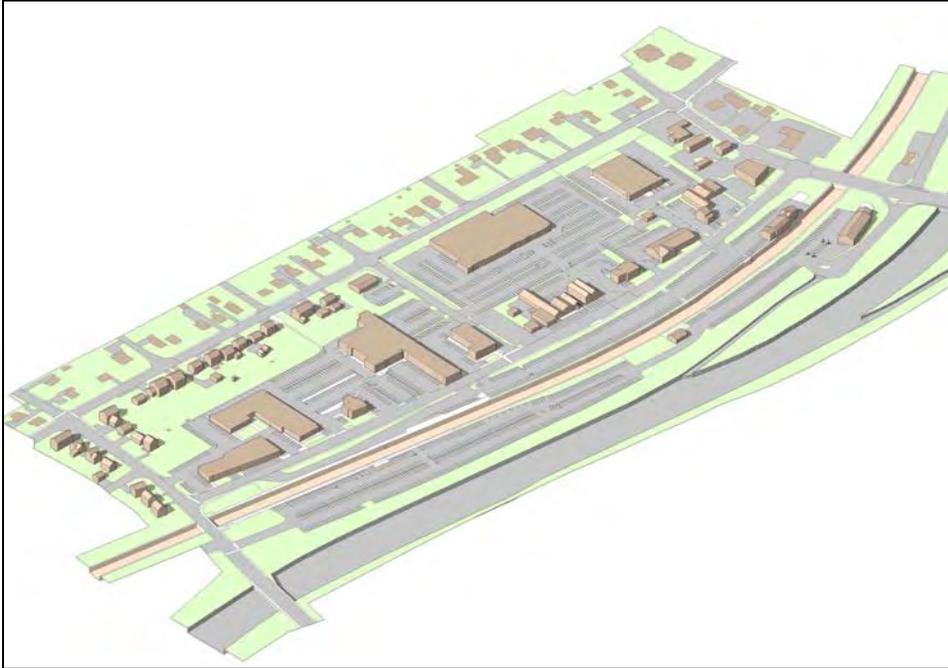
Location	Score
Princeton, NJ	95
Newport, RI	94
Greenwich	93
New Canaan	89
Fairfield	84
Ridgefield	81
Darien	71
Westport	69
Mystic, CT	69
Madison, CT	61
Noroton Heights	61
Wilton	55

Existing Conditions

The following table summarizes some key parameters of Noroton Heights:

Metric	Developed Sites	Overall Area (including streets, rail line, parking)
Land Area	788,305 SF	1,625,310
Gross Floor Area	220,745 SF	220,745SF
Floor Area Ratio	0.28	0.13
Parking Spaces	1,170	1,956
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,170 off-street • 779 +/- at station lots • 7 public on-street (approximate count from aerial photo)		
Parking Ratio (spaces per 1,000 SF of GFA)	5.30	8.86
Walk Score	61	
Average Daily Traffic	16,400 on Noroton (S of Heights) 12,100 in Noroton (S of Hecker) 6,000 on Ledge at Noroton 2,700 on Edgerton 6,600 on Heights at Hollow Tree Ridge 7,500 on Hollow Tree Ridge (N of West)	

Overall Built Form



Specific Area Built Form



History

The area now referred to as Noroton Heights was established in the 1950s in response to the construction of Interstate 95. Business uses which had been located on Noroton Avenue were displaced by the highway construction and a new commercial area was established nearby to accommodate those business uses. Over the years, additional business uses were established in this area.

Assessment

Noroton Heights Currently Lacks Many Attributes Of Villages ...

Due to the prevailing development trends of the 1950s, Noroton Heights was established as an automobile-oriented place to highlight convenience for the modern shopper. That development pattern generally involved larger flat-roofed buildings set back from the street with large and visible off-street parking areas located between the building and the street. .

Although Noroton Heights does not exhibit many of the attributes typically associated with villages (Noroton Heights scored 34 out of a possible 70 points in the following chart assigning 1-5 points to the attributes), it has a location that could support a transformation from an auto-oriented place to a pedestrian-oriented village area.

Village Attributes	Stronger	Weaker	Comments
1. Appropriate Configuration			
a. Appropriate Location	●		Train station, on and near key routes
b. Appropriate Size	●		Walkable distance from edge to edge
c. Suitable Structure (Core / Edges)		●	No discernable core, strong edges
d. Organizing Scheme / Street Hierarchy		●	Organizing scheme not apparent
2. Appropriate Role / Function			
a. Critical Mass of Activity		●	Approaching a critical mass
b. Complementary Mix of Uses		●	Orientation is to retail / service
c. Appropriate Role / Function		●	Operates in a strip fashion rather than a node
3. Appropriate Design			
a. Pedestrian-Focused Environment		●	Strong vehicle orientation
b. Appropriate Building Scale / Design		●	Strong "strip" orientation
c. Active Streetscape / Street-level Uses		●	Little orientation to streets
4. Systematic Parking Approach			
a. Appropriate Number of Spaces / Ratio		●	Strong "strip" orientation
b. Appropriate Type / Location		●	Strong "strip" orientation
5. Coordinated Management			
a. Area-wide Management		●	Common management not yet apparent
b. Shared Marketing / Promotion / Events		●	Common marketing not yet apparent

Planimetrics

But Property Owners Are Seeking To Realize The Potential ...

In the last decade, commercial property owners in Noroton Heights have expressed interest in redeveloping the properties. A “Noroton Heights Redevelopment zone was adopted by the Planning and Zoning Commission in 2010 (section 680 of the Zoning Regulations).

**Stop and Shop Area
2008 Concept**



**Stop and Shop Area
2008 Concept**



**Palmer’s Market Area
2015 Concept**



**Stop and Shop Area
2015 Concept**



The key consideration for the POCD will be how to guide any such redevelopment to:

- Create a place with more of a “sense of place”
- Coordinate private activities with public facilities in the area (especially the train station)
- Address traffic congestions and other impediments
- Maintain appropriate transitions to the adjacent residential neighborhoods
- Maintain and enhance the overall character of the community

Recommended Strategies For Discussion

1. Pursue An Overall Approach

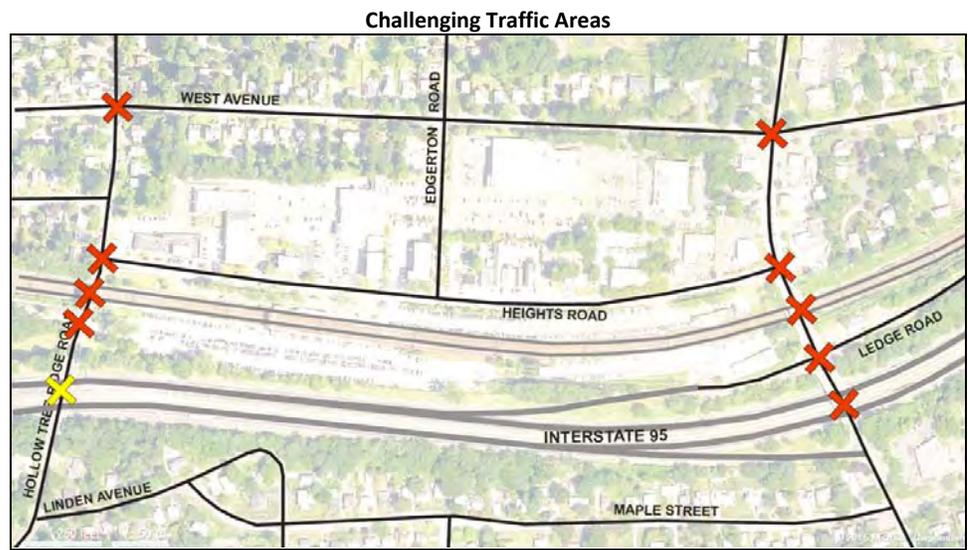
- a. **Support Transformation of Noroton Heights**
 - Seek to create a vibrant and dynamic place with a “sense of place”
 - Encourage “resilient adaptation” / evolution of Noroton Heights over time
- b. **Be Pro-Active**
 - Seek to be pro-active in terms of establishing and implementing the vision for Noroton Heights rather than simply be react to development applications
- c. **Focus On The Streetscape**
 - Focus on the streetscape (the “public realm”), not just private lands

2. Address The Road System

- a. **Work With Property Developers WCCOG, CT-DOT, And Metro-North To Address Problematic Crossings / Intersections:**

- Noroton Avenue**
- At I-95
 - At Ledge Road / station parking driveway
 - At railroad tracks
 - At Heights Road
 - At West Avenue

- Hollow Tree Ridge Road**
- At I-95
 - At station parking driveway
 - At railroad tracks
 - At Heights Road
 - At West Avenue



3. Organize The Space

At the present time, Noroton Heights consists of large parcels with very little pedestrian orientation. The development pattern should be changed to more of a pedestrian orientation.

a. Envision A Future Train Station Location

The current station building is isolated and has limited influence on the overall form or function of the Noroton Heights area. While the station could be rebuilt in or near its current location, relocating the station building opposite Edgerton Road would make a stronger connection to the overall village-form and create a focal point. This location is approximately at the point where the rail tracks straighten out and would be the eastern end of the westbound platform. A pedestrian bridge could go over the rail tracks to the parking on the south side of the tracks.

Train Station

A renovated train station could also support a café / restaurant and other uses if it is:

- located at an appropriate spot,
- well designed, and
- supported by surrounding uses

A renovated train station should also make provision for convenient access and parking, pedestrian bridges, bathrooms, climate control, covered platforms, better lighting, enhanced security, and other amenities.

Option A – Station Building Remains In Current Location

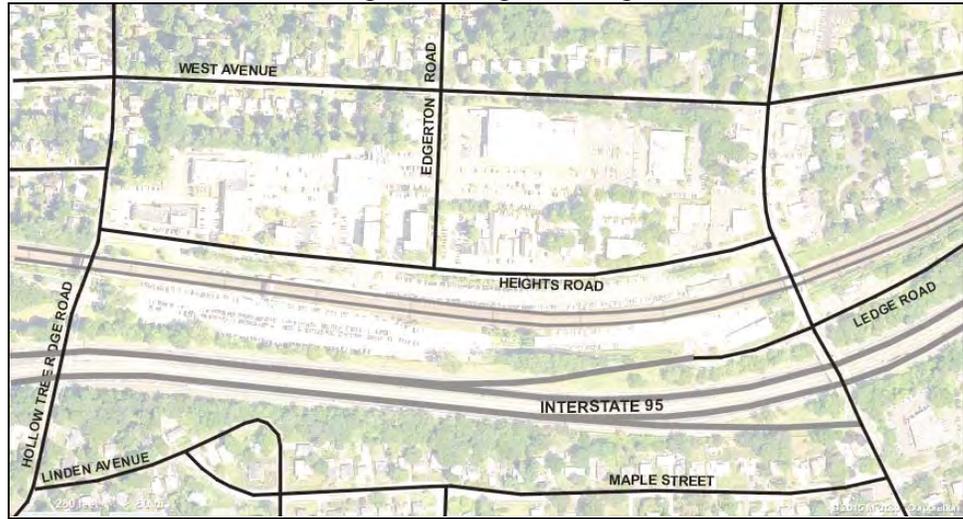


Option B – Station Building Is Relocated to Edgerton Road

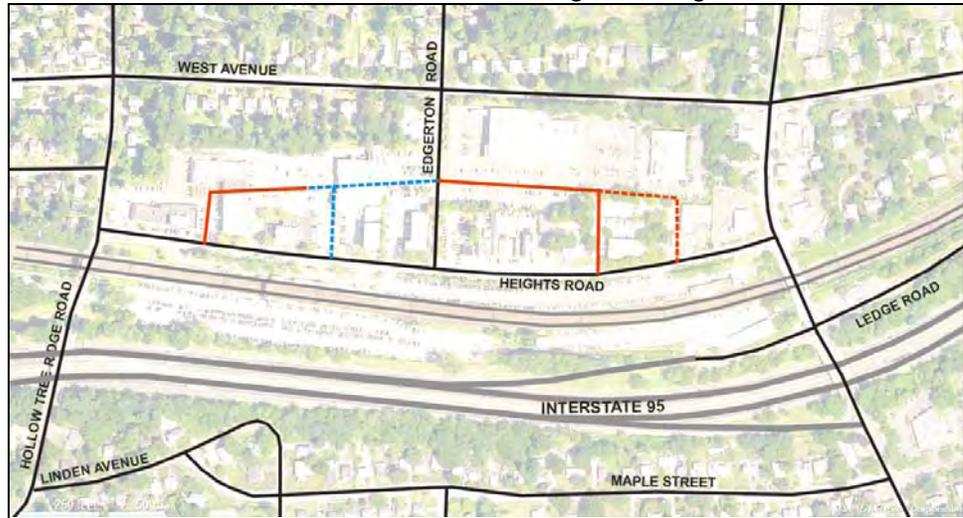


b. Establish An Overall "Roadway" System

Existing Street Configuration Diagram



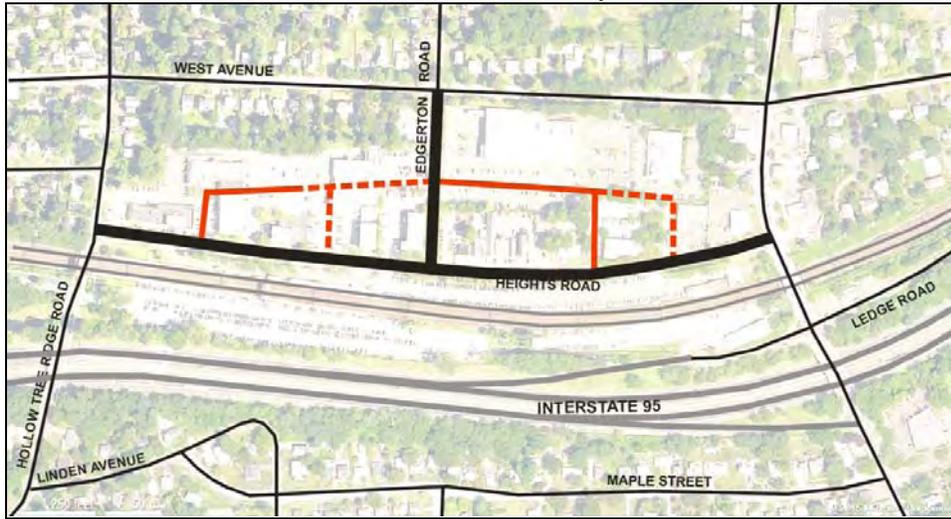
Recommended Future Street Configuration Diagram



What Do You Think About Creating A "Roadway" System?

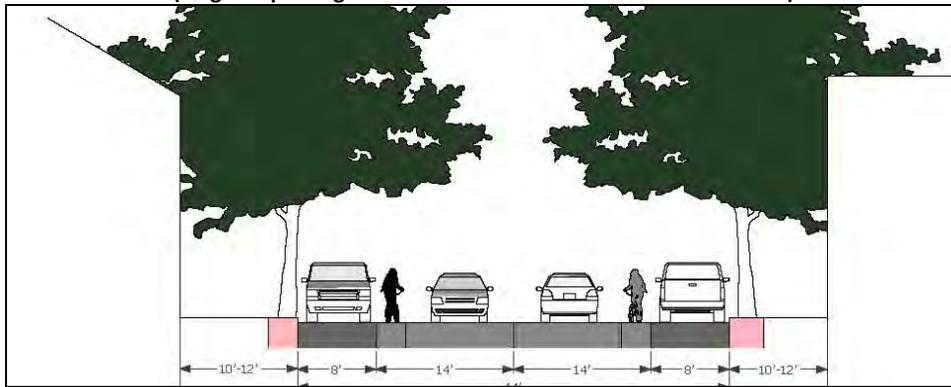
c. Categorize Streets For Lane Assemblies / Hierarchy

Possible Street Hierarchy

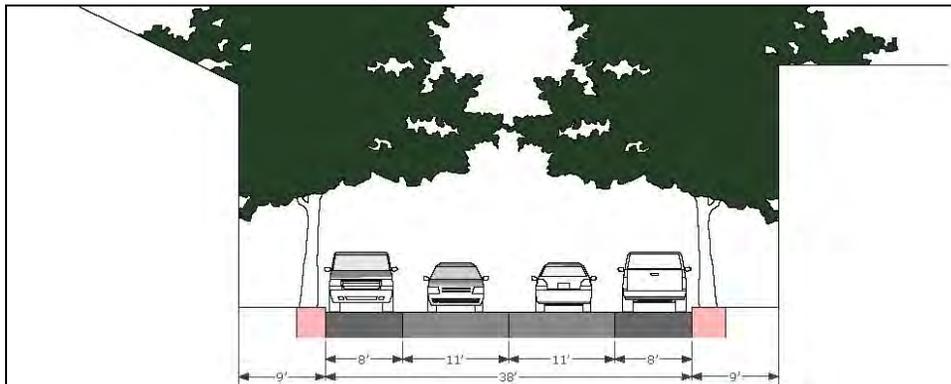


- Street Cross Sections - A street hierarchy system could be used to vary lane assemblies, sidewalk widths, parking arrangements, set-backs and/or heights by street type

Possible Cross-Section
(diagonal parking on one or both sides could be an alternative)



Possible Cross-Section



4. Consider Train Station / Parking Options

a. Expand Train Station Parking

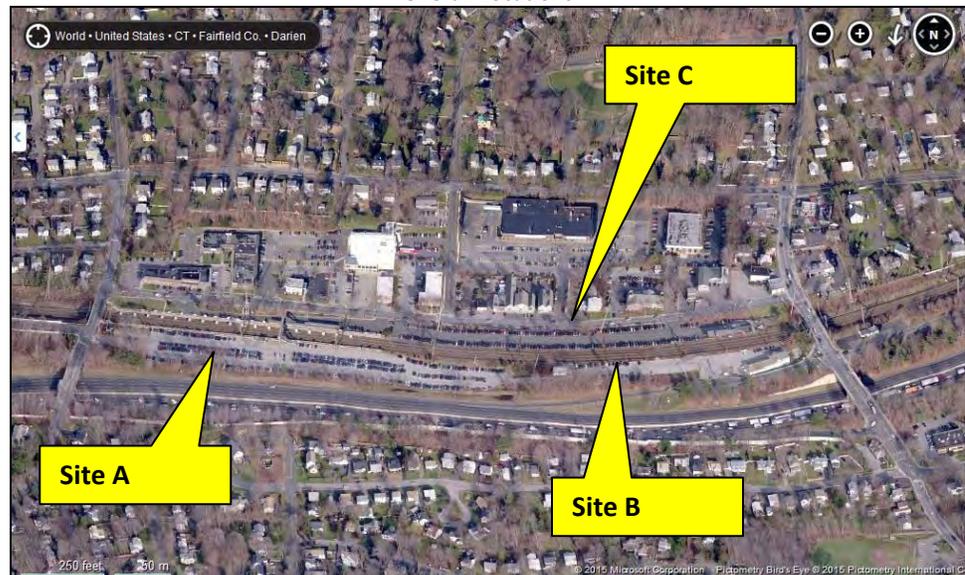
Convenient parking (or lack thereof) is a continuing issue at the Noroton Heights train station. There is ample land around the train station owned by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CT-DOT) which could be used to expand the parking supply.

Historically, the general arrangement in Darien and in other communities with train stations has been that CT-DOT leases the land to the Town for parking. The Town operates the parking facilities and retains the revenue in a dedicated account. The revenue is used to maintain the parking facilities and keep them in a “state of good repair.” Revenues can also be used for capital improvements.

At the present time, however, the CT-DOT lease has expired and so it is not clear what the arrangement will be for future improvements:

- With a lease, the Town will have the ability to plan for capital improvements in conjunction with the State and the ability to ascertain the funding sources needed.
- Without a lease, capital improvements may languish and CT-DOT may decide to implement their own program at the station.

Overall Locations



b. CT-DOT - Site A

Due to the location of this site and its access, parking for the train station is the recommended use for this site. Transit-oriented development is not recommended. If a parking deck or parking structure was constructed, daily parking (presently on the north side of the tracks on Site C) could be relocated to this facility.

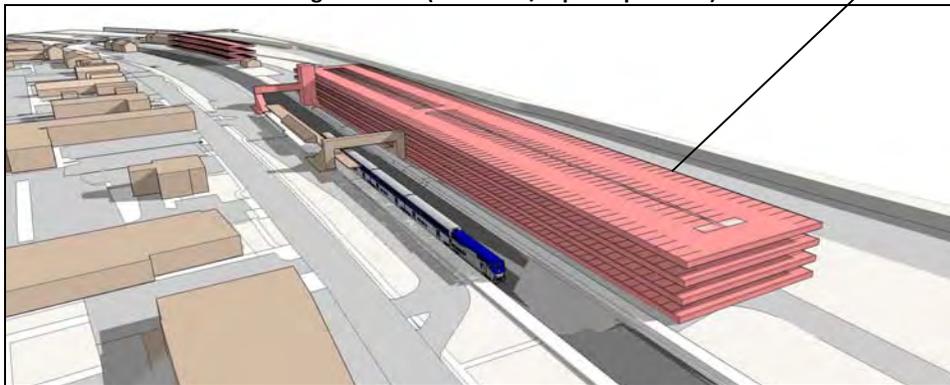
Surface Parking (Current Condition)



Parking Deck (add 360 +/- spaces)



Parking Structure (add 360 +/- spaces per level)



Should Station Parking Be Concentrated On The South Side?

A parking deck or a parking structure on the land between the railroad tracks and Interstate 95.

c. CT-DOT - Site B

Due to the location of this site and its access, parking for the train station is the recommended use for this site. Transit-oriented development is not recommended. This site may also have long term utility for reconfiguration of the highway ramps.

In the short term, surface parking may be best (for overflow from Site A). Longer term, a parking structure may be appropriate. Any proposals must consider the impact on the ambulance facility located here (Post 53).

Should Overflow Parking Be Located Near Post 53?

Surface Parking (Current Condition)



Parking Structure (add 90 +/- spaces per level)



A parking structure on the south side of the tracks near Post 53 and Noroton Avenue.

d. CT-DOT - Site C

So that Heights Road is not a “one-sided” road, this site may have potential for development provided the daily parking is relocated to Site A.

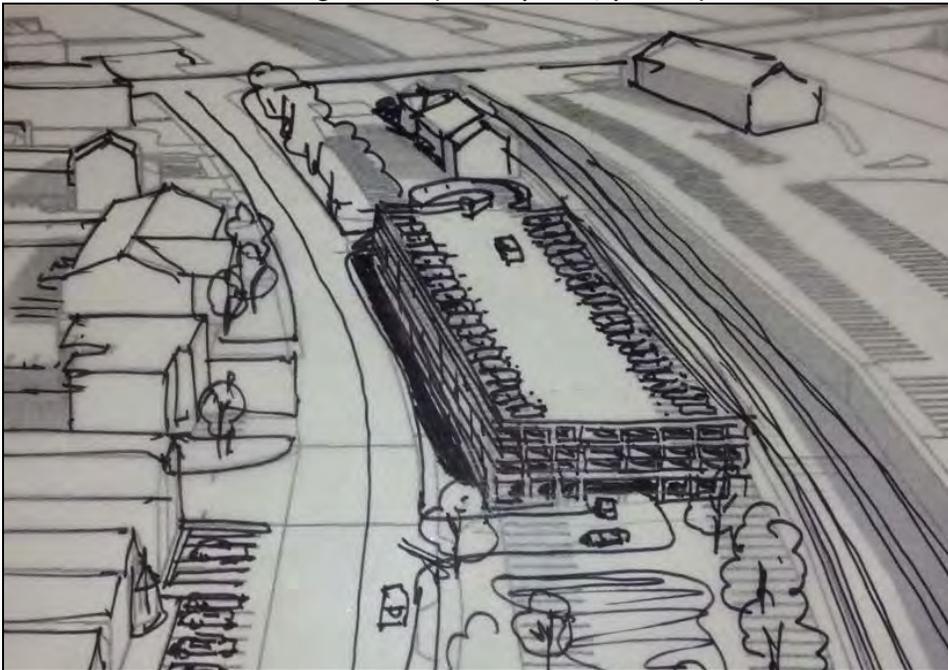
Development With Surface Parking And Liner Buildings



If station parking was relocated elsewhere, this land could be converted to a transit-oriented development.

Should Heights Road Be Turned Into A “Two-Sided” Street?

Parking Structure (add 90 spaces +/-per level)



5. Manage Parking For Non-Station Areas

a. Consider Encouraging / Requiring On-Street Parking

Visible on-street parking creates the perception of convenient parking for customers and visitors, provides the potential of getting a convenient parking space, protects the pedestrian space on the sidewalk, and calms traffic.

Recommended

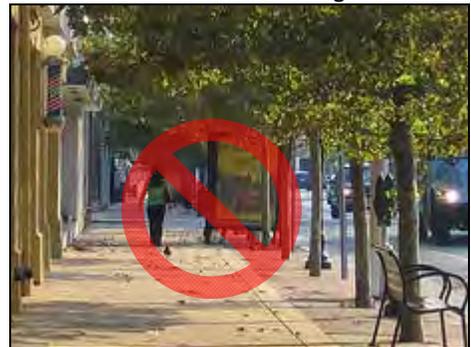
Not Recommended

Favored Where
Less Space Available

Parallel Parking



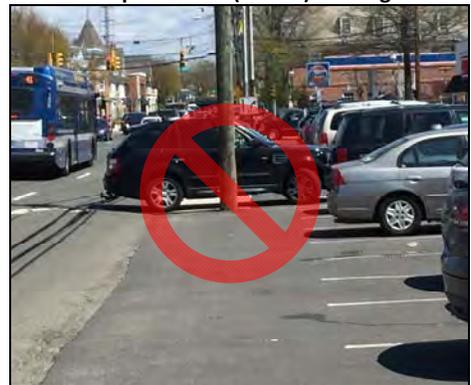
No On-Street Parking



Diagonal (Pull-In) Parking



Perpendicular (Pull-In) Parking



Favored Where
More Space Available

Diagonal (Back-In) Parking



Perpendicular (Back-In) Parking



b. Heights Road

On-street parking on Heights Road might be one way to enhance the village character of the Noroton Heights area. Due to the proximity of such parking to the train station, some enforcement of parking time limits might be considered.

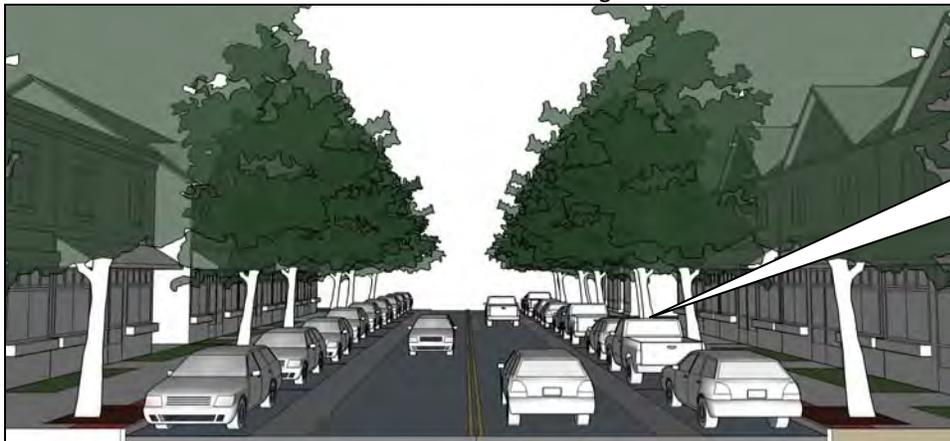


No On-Street Parking



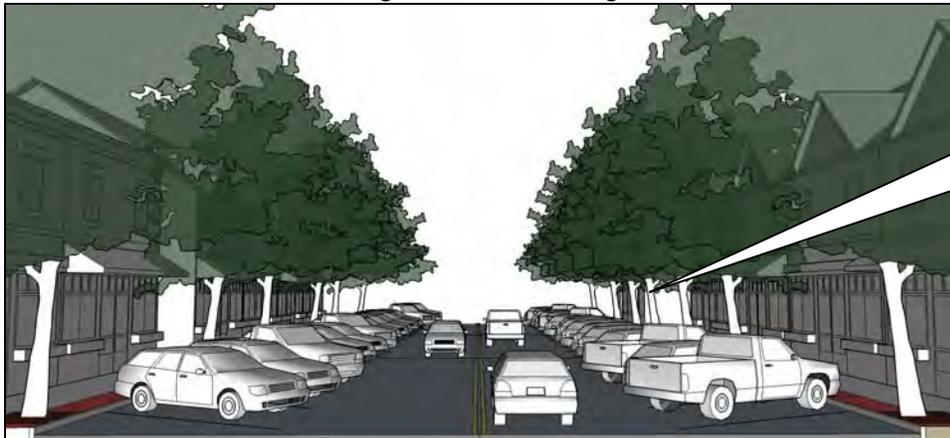
Pedestrians can feel exposed to moving traffic.

Parallel On-Street Parking



Pedestrians feel buffered from moving traffic. Spaces help support adjacent uses.

Diagonal On-Street Parking



Pedestrians feel buffered from moving traffic. Roughly twice as many spaces to help support adjacent uses.

c. Other Parking Considerations

Rely Primarily On Private Parking

Except for parking at the train station and “on-street” parking where considered appropriate, it is envisioned that the parking needs of different activities will primarily be addressed by private parking.

Revisit Parking Ratios

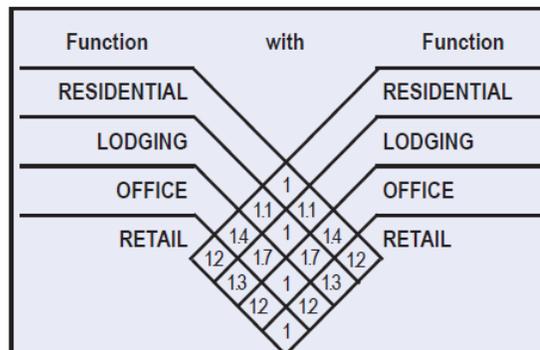
Since Noroton Heights may retain some of its automobile-oriented attributes, parking ratios may need to reflect this. However, the shared parking factor could also be considered since it reflects the reduced parking need from mixed uses.

Parking ratios in Noroton Heights might be different than downtown or Route 1!

	Strip –Type Pattern	Hybrid Pattern	Village-Type Pattern
RESIDENTIAL	2.0 / dwelling	1.5 / dwelling	1.0 / dwelling
LODGING	1.0 / bedroom	1.0 / bedroom	1.0 / bedroom
OFFICE	3.0 / 1000 sq. ft.	3.0 / 1000 sq. ft.	2.0 / 1000 sq. ft.
RETAIL	4.0 / 1000 sq. ft.	4.0 / 1000 sq. ft.	3.0 / 1000 sq. ft.
CIVIC	To be determined by Warrant		
OTHER	To be determined by Warrant		

Adapted From Smart Code

SHARED PARKING FACTOR



Smart Code

Change Parking Stall Size

Darien requires a 9'x20' parking space while most areas required a 9'x18' parking space. This additional 18 SF per parking space increases the area devoted to parking and increases the cost of parking development by at least 10 percent.

Accommodate Structured Parking In A Controlled Way

- Continue to allow one-story parking structures or parking decks by Special Permit (ZR Section 907)
- Possibly consider taller parking structures if it significantly enhances the overall design and helps contribute to a "sense of place"
- Require an active streetscape in front of any structured parking
- Consider limiting underground parking to one level or counting additional underground levels as a story

**Parking Structure
At Sidewalk**



**Unshielded
Parking Structure**



**Liner Buildings
with Parking Behind**



**Street Level Use
With Parking Above**



Sidewalk Widths

The sidewalks along Heights Road in Noroton Heights are not continuous (i.e. – they are broken up in several locations).

Where sidewalks do exist, they are generally about 4-5 feet wide.

A number of sources recommend sidewalk widths in a pedestrian-friendly village area at 8-12 feet and even wider where outdoor dining and other amenities will be provided.

6. Enhance Pedestrian-Friendliness

a. Focus On The Pedestrian Experience

- Provide for appropriate sidewalk widths
- Require buildings be brought to the “street”
- Create as continuous a street façade as possible in order to avoid gaps in pedestrian environment
- Require open storefronts and uses at street level and encourage active outdoor areas (seating, dining, etc.)
- Connect to outlying areas / neighborhoods

b. Provide And Standardize Pedestrian Accommodations

- Street Amenities
 - Benches / tables / garbage cans / street furniture
 - Street trees / planters / fountains
 - Continue sidewalks over driveways to make it clear that pedestrians have priority
- Intersection Facilities
 - Bulb-outs / bump-outs
 - Pedestrian signals / push buttons
 - High visibility pavement markings
 - Accessible ramps

c. Adapt Model Block Specifications To Noroton Heights

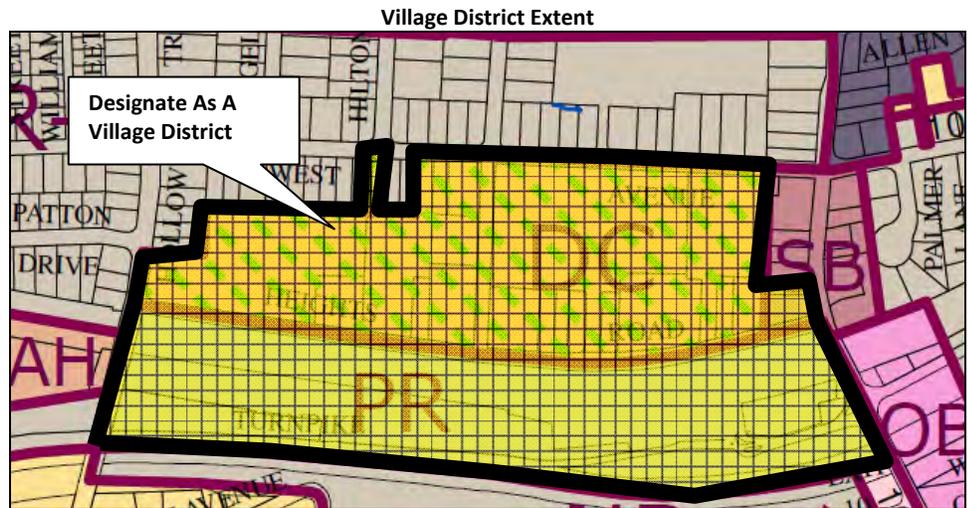
Model Block Specifications (Noroton Heights)



7. Modify Regulations / Guidelines

a. Change The Zoning Approach

- Convert the Noroton Heights Development district (an overlay zone) to a “grounded” Noroton Heights District so that all new development will be in accordance with the overall Noroton Heights vision
- Designate the Noroton Heights Development district and the Parking-Residential district in Noroton Heights as a village district



b. Modify Permitted Uses

Uses To Consider Requiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active street front / street-level uses • Mixed use with residential uses on upper floors
Uses To Consider Changing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lodging • Restaurant / outdoor dining / food use by simpler permit process
Uses To Consider Excluding (or discouraging from prime locations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-story below-ground parking structures (allow one-story only) • Drive-through facilities from locations visible from the street or which impact the street experience

c. Codify Bulk And Dimensional Standards

- Consider establishing a “build-to zone” which provides for a maximum front yard setback (minimum setback / maximum setback) relative to the “street” (and eliminating the 6’ front yard setback to a “street”)
- Clarify the language in ZR Section 685.c regarding building height “where the zone abuts a residential zone” since most sites abut residential zones
- Measure height from the “street” grade where the building faces (except that building height across the street from a residential zone should be evaluated in terms of the residential zone with more height permitted if the building is set back further from the residential zone)
- Require a minimum building frontage (i.e. – percent of lot frontage) unless waived by the PZC to ensure a continuous building wall
- Consider limiting the overall floor-area-ratio achievable and/or consider establishing a residential density limit
- Consider requiring buildings have a minimum building height to establish a pedestrian friendly street enclosure
- Maintain the current building height limitations and maintain the open space requirements for upper floors (sidewalks, walkways, areas shared with vehicles, or covered areas should not count)

Blue Back Square



Storrs Center



d. Maintain / Enhance Design Guidelines

- Maintain the design review process
 - Continue to be support the Architectural Review Board
 - Continue to be sensitive to the historic context of Noroton Heights
 - Continue to encourage / require non-monolithic buildings (articulation, materials, roofing, eaves, finishes)
- Over time, add in additional guidelines for Noroton Heights
 - Consider guidelines to encourage / require “public art”
 - Location of service areas (transformers, meters, delivery, refuse, recycling) identified and screened
 - Screening of mechanical equipment (compressors, exhaust fans, etc.) especially from residential uses

Village Scale / Pattern



Village Scale / Pattern



Village Scale / Pattern



Village Scale / Pattern



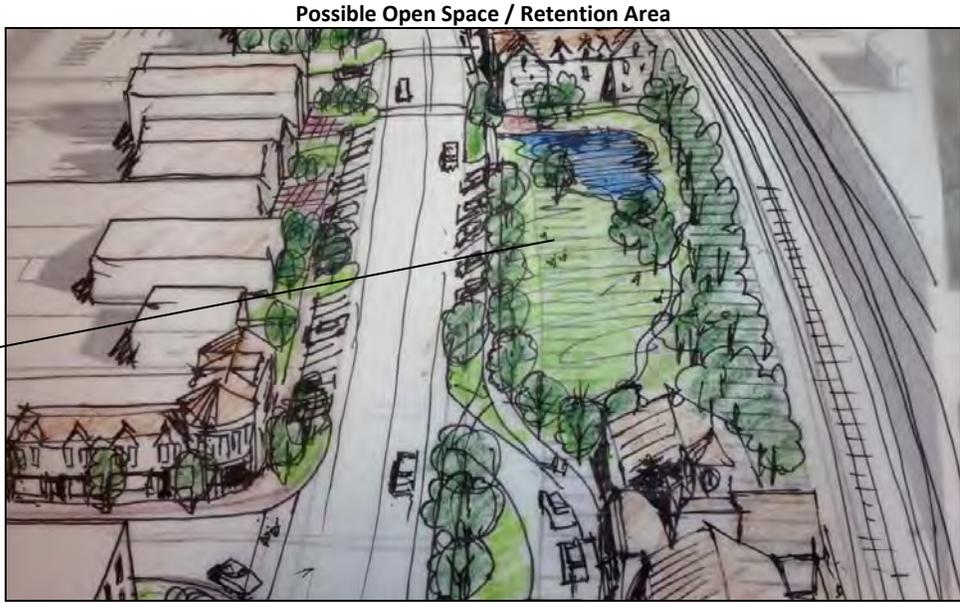
8. Other Strategies

- Coordinate with others to mitigate drainage / flooding issues
 - Upgrade the culvert beneath the railroad tracks and Interstate 95
 - Consider providing for detention to mitigate flooding potential both upstream and downstream of the railroad tracks and Interstate 95



Park with water feature and a shaped basin that retains water in storm events.

A similar feature could be provided on the other side of the tracks as well.



- Enhance utility infrastructure
 - Require undergrounding of wired utilities
 - Extend natural gas to support area development
 - Upgrade / maintain water service (pressure)
 - Seek to expand / enhance “wi-fi” service in the area
- Enhance transit services
 - Make Noroton Heights a primary station for Metro-North (more frequent service, ADA accessibility, etc.)
 - Enhance bus transit services (frequency / shelters / bus pull-off areas)
- Provide amenities for cyclists
 - Shared travel lane for bicycles / Add “sharrow” markings / signage
 - Covered bicycle racks
- At some time in the future, consider the potential desirability of common arrangements for the Noroton Heights area
 - Establishment of an informal Coordinating Committee for common branding / marketing
 - Establishment of a more formal Special Services District

Possible Vision

**For the Draft POCD,
a three-dimensional model
(similar to the graphic below)
can be prepared
to illustrate a possible vision
for Noroton Heights
based on feedback and
direction from the Commission**

Overall Built Form



