

COMMON COUNCIL

July 28, 2005

Mayor Robert Raphael presided at a special meeting of the Common Council held at 7:12 PM on July 28, 2005, at One Court Plaza.

Present:

Mayor Robert Raphael
Ald. James Cushman
Ald. Suzanne Williams
Ald. Jeffrey Thornton
Ald. Joseph Biviano

Also:

Director of Finance/City Clerk William Roberts

Absent:

Ald. A. Anthony Abraham
Ald. Joseph Maiurano

Discussion of TOPS Markets Announcement to Sell Norwich Store – Mayor Raphael referred the subject over to Ald. Biviano, who had initiated the request for the special meeting. Ald. Biviano stated that the major focus should be on soliciting letters of support from the community at large regarding the need for a grocery store within the center of the city. He said such a store is vital to area residents and the local city economy. He recalled that for a number of years, other businesses such as Hannaford and Giant had looked at the possibilities of a Norwich location prior to Tops coming in. He also mentioned that in the past there was a common opinion that the area could not support three major supermarkets. He pointed out that many demographics, as well as economic development and quality improvement projects over recent years up through the present have significantly changed that outlook, and they are a strong plus to the area and downtown potential for supporting such a business. He also mentioned several examples such as the Brown Avenue Housing project, the proposed Beadle project, the major improvements in the works for Golden Age Apartments, and the presence of Peacock Manor, as presenting a strong, growing need for senior citizens to access such a store, being unable to drive out of town to shop for groceries. He said that while Tops has decided to sell its store, the property owner has a vital interest in its holdings on the property and would necessarily want to see it filled. Tops is selling the operation, not the property, which is leased. He restated the importance of seeking letters of support from other businesses and stores, industry, housing, and surrounding areas to aid in the effort to pursue a new business to come in.

Mayor Raphael said he would like to update the Council on several telephone calls he had already made in response to the development. He reported that he had spoken with Tom Fitzgerald, Vice President of Real Estate Management for Tops, asking him if there was anything that the City could do. The answer was no, with respect to the fact that it has already been decided and is final, but however whatever the City could do to help find a buyer would be important. Mayor Raphael said he had also spoken with executives of other stores, but at this point their wishes would not allow him to name them. He said he also spoke with Senator Libous and Assemblyman Crouch, as well as the Chamber of Commerce. He said he would continue to work with elected officials and various supermarket chains to pursue a buyer of the business.

Ald. Biviano said that he too had contacted two supermarkets, but was not at liberty to name them.

Ald. Williams said that she felt a two-pronged effort was needed in terms of not only securing the letters of support, but also making a concentrated telephone call and follow-up effort to woo the interests of other stores.

Ald. Biviano added that it was unique to have a shopping center in the downtown area of a city in light of today's trends, and that as a result it was a vitally important feature to attract other economic activity.

Pat Darling, 154 East Main Street, asked if this meeting was an open forum. Mayor Raphael responded that special meetings usually did not include an open forum portion. Ald. Cushman moved that the meeting be opened to public comment. Seconded by Ald. Thornton and duly adopted, ayes all. Pat Darling then stressed the need to compete with Wal-Mart through an upscale type of grocery store, which would not only appeal locally but also draw customers from outside the area. He said he was already drafting a letter to go to Wegmans. He asked if the Tops site was still in the Empire Zone. Ald. Biviano said it was, but that there have been changes made by the State in the Zones program parameters. Pat Darling asked the Mayor if he would work with him in drafting the letter to Wegmans, and Mayor Raphael said yes, and he would set up a time following the meeting.

Kate Turner, 11 Maydole Street, spoke about many of her customers at Old Thyme Remedies on American Avenue commenting on the importance of such a facility downtown. She said that it was also important to many senior citizens as a popular gathering place to have coffee and visit. She stressed the need to engage the Chamber of Commerce with the Council and be proactive in seeking to fill other vacant stores in the downtown area.

Additional discussion followed, with a consensus that a broad-based effort would be needed and should be pursued to cover every possible aspect.

Adjournment – Ald. Biviano moved to adjourn at 7:31 PM. Seconded by Ald. Williams and duly adopted, ayes all.