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Public asked to help decide West End's future

By JACKIE MAJERUS, Press Staff



"The Hiker," a Spanish-American War monument in front of Rockwell Park and Muzzy Field, looks like he may be wondering what is going on in the West End of Bristol. Rob Heyl photo

BRISTOL — West End residents — from the past and present — business and property owners and anyone else with a keen interest in the area are invited to take part in planning the neighborhood's future.

Ideas of what the neighborhood can and should become — as well as thoughts about what is good in the West End now and what can be better — will be the subject of a public workshop on May 3.

City Planner Alan Weiner said the workshop will be "a hands-on and participatory event," not just a time for city staff and

outside consultants to ramble on endlessly about what they think. Instead, he said, the intention is to get ideas flowing, to get people talking about the past, present and future of the West End in a constructive way, to find common ground and plot a strategy for moving ahead as a community.

"No idea is too radical or outrageous, at least going in," Weiner said.

One of the consultants who will be at the workshop speaks Spanish, said the city planner, so if there is anyone who needs a Spanish interpreter, she will be there.

"We want everybody," Weiner said.

The Saturday session is part of the \$80,000 city-funded study already under way by the Capstan Group consulting firm and the Yale Urban Design Workshop.

While all ideas and concerns are welcome, Weiner said organizers won't let the workshop turn into a gripe session about the neighborhood.

"We want to be upbeat," he said.

Some of the "quality-of-life" issues likely to be part of the discussion are public safety, housing, economic development, education, land use and zoning, recreation, open space and the Pequabuck River, traffic, parking and sidewalks, abandoned properties, blight and social services.

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The study is defining the West End as bordered generally by South Street on the south side, by Rockwell Park and Jacobs Street on the north side, by West Street on the east side and by Park and Divinity streets on the west side.

People are "very passionate" about the West End, Weiner said, and that's a good thing.

The workshop is scheduled from 9 a.m. to noon at the Bristol Boys & Girls Club on Laurel Street. There will be refreshments and child care available.

Older children are welcome to participate, said Weiner, and may well come up with ideas that adults haven't thought of.

The organizers of the workshop want people who attend to scope out the

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neighborhood in advance and think about what they'd like to see there in 20 years. They're asking people to make some notes of what they'd like to keep or change and if they have a camera, to take some photos of the things they like most and don't like. They can bring the photos to the meeting or e-mail them to the consultants in advance, to wang@cpstn.com.

"We want people to be very active in this workshop," Weiner said. "Doors are open to anyone who is willing to spend three hours in a positive environment trying to make some things happen."

He said they're especially interested in "stakeholders," or people who live, work or own property in the West End. But Weiner said "anyone who feels a certain affinity for the neighborhood" is welcome.

"You don't have to live there," he said.

The infrastructure in the West End is strong, much of the housing stock is in decent shape or better and many of the residents have lived there a long time and take pride in their properties.

It's "walkable," Weiner said, with interesting buildings and some historic ones.

"It's a neighborhood that's got good bones," he said. "It's got all the earmarks of a classic urban neighborhood."

But all isn't rosy in the West End, Weiner knows. He said if there weren't concerns and issues, there wouldn't be a need for the study.

The area, which has had problems with safety and deterioration of some of the housing stock, among other things, is "fraying around the edges," said City Planner Alan Weiner.

It isn't beyond repair, he said. This is the time to take stock of the neighborhood, study it, stabilize it and improve it for the future, he said, and more business investment would help.

"It's still a pretty solid neighborhood," Weiner said. "What most people see in that neighborhood is what's along Route 72. There's so much more when you get off of the main street."

He said this is the first big public workshop in keeping with the study. He said there may be more, but they could take a different shape and haven't yet been scheduled.

Weiner said anyone who is interested can attend, even for part of the time if they can't devote the whole morning.

The West End study, which began in January, is supposed to be finished by the end of the year, he said, but may extend a few months into 2009.

For more information about the study, visit www.cpstn.com/westend or call Gloria Wang of The Capstan Group at (203) 785-0130.

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