



TOWN OF WETHERSFIELD

Planning and Economic Development Department

2019 Annual Report

The following report is a look back and summary of the accomplishments and efforts that were undertaken over the past year to make Wethersfield a better place to live, work and play. Many thanks to all of the volunteers, partners and stakeholders who actively participate in and support these efforts.

Planning and Economic Development Department - Mission

The mission of the Planning and Economic Development Department:

“To provide effective planning and economic development services that will guide the orderly growth, development, and expansion of a diverse tax base, while creating jobs and improving the quality of life in the Town of Wethersfield.”

This mission is to be accomplished through the implementation of policies, strategies, and programs as adopted in the Town’s Plan of Conservation and Development, Economic Development Strategic Plan, and other specific area plans and through the use of the Town’s business assistance programs, marketing strategies, ordinances, zoning and subdivision regulations.

The Department is staffed by the Economic Development Manager/Town Planner and the Assistant Planner.

The Department administers the planning and economic development activities for the Town of Wethersfield through five (5) programmatic areas:

1. Economic Development/Redevelopment
2. Development Permitting
3. Planning
4. Heritage Tourism
5. Grant Administration

Boards and Commissions

The Planning and Economic Development Department staff provides technical assistance and administrative support for a variety of volunteer Boards and Commissions including:

- The Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC),
- The Economic Development and Improvement Commission (EDIC),
- Redevelopment Agency,
- Heritage Tourism Commission, and
- The Design Review Advisory Committee (DRAC).

Additionally, two (2) subcommittees were recently created and staff support these efforts:

- Bicycle and Pedestrian Stakeholders Committee, and
- Old Wethersfield Parking Study Committee.

Each year, thousands of hours of time is volunteered by the many members of these Boards and Commissions in the effort to make Wethersfield a better community.

During 2019, the Department supported and/or participated in ninety- one (91) public meetings.

Development Activity

The Department's regulatory function is guided by a nine (9) member Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) whose volunteer members formulate land use and development policy and implement regulations for zoning and the subdivision of land in the community.

Another five (5) citizen volunteers participate in the development review process as members of the Design Review Advisory Committee (DRAC), playing a key role in implementing the Town's land use and development regulations. During 2019, thirty-six (36) applications were processed by the PZC and DRAC.

Development Coordination

Staff provide assistance and counsel to persons and businesses interested in development opportunities within the community and coordinate the interdepartmental permit review process and acts as the "point of contact" for individuals looking to conduct business in Town. This work is accomplished in partnership with many other Departments, including: Building, Engineering, Fire Marshal and the Health District.

During 2019, staff responded to over fourteen hundred (1,400) development related inquiries.

Building Permits

During 2019, a total of eighty-four (84) commercial building permits were processed by the Planning Department totaling \$23,247,877 in construction value. A total of 2,223 building permits were issued by the Town in 2019 an increase of 15% from the previous year. The value of this permit activity was \$48,768,411 which was an increase of 109% from the previous year and one of the highest years on record. Commercial valuation increased by 117% from the previous year and was also reported as one of the busiest years on record.

Development Projects

Among the major projects approved, under construction or completed in 2019 include:

- Conversion of the vacant former CCMC School at 170 Ridge Road into 34 residential apartment units.
- Conversion of the former office building at 1160 Silas Deane Highway into 39 apartment units and first floor office space as part of the Borden project.
- Construction of a new 7-Eleven and Pizza Hut at 1812 Berlin Turnpike.
- Construction of a new 10,000 s.f. day care center at 88 Executive Square (The Learning Experience).

- Reconstruction of the former Cove Deli building at 285 Main Street for the purpose of creating a new restaurant (Noci's Kitchen).
- Conversion of the former Blades Salon building at 161 Main Street for the purposes of a new restaurant (The Charles).
- An outdoor event venue along the banks of the Connecticut River at 100 Great Meadow Road.
- Redevelopment of the former Church Homes property at 275 Ridge Road and the construction of a new building for 64 apartment units.
- An addition to the Webb Deane Stevens Museum at 211 Main Street for the purposes of adding a new education and visitor's center.
- Approved plans for the construction of a new building at 24 Maple Street for the purposes of a new restaurant (ABC Burger).
- Demolition of the former Fun Zone building at 1178 Silas Deane Highway and construction of a new mixed use building that will contain 111 apartments and ground level retail and restaurant space as part of the Borden project.
- Demolition of the former Puritan Furniture building at 1210 Silas Deane Highway for the purposes of the redevelopment of the site for medical office tenants.
- Construction of two (2) new buildings for retail and warehouse space at the Cedar Mountain Stone and Mulch site at 1943 Berlin Turnpike.

Economic Development and Redevelopment

The Town of Wethersfield implements a variety of programs, events and initiatives to assist with the orderly growth, development, and expansion of the Town's tax base, job creation and improvements to the quality of life in Town.

Economic Development and Improvement Commission

The Economic Development and Improvement Commission (EDIC) oversees a variety of economic development programs that the Town has created to assist the business and development community. The EDIC is an eleven (11) member volunteer Commission established to:

“Promote Wethersfield as an attractive location for new business, retain and expand our valued existing businesses and to increase the tax base and employment opportunities in Wethersfield.”

The commission coordinates the activities of all organizations interested in promoting economic development in the town. The commission works closely with the Town Council, the Wethersfield Chamber of Commerce, the Heritage Tourism Commission, the Planning and Zoning Commission and the Redevelopment Agency.

Redevelopment Agency

In 2019, the Town Council reauthorized the Redevelopment Agency. This five (5) member Agency was created to “Promote the redevelopment and revitalization of the limited available commercial lands and buildings in Wethersfield in ways which implement the Town's Plan of Conservation and Development. To achieve redevelopment and revitalization through partnerships with property owners, tenants, potential developers, and state, federal and regional government agencies. To pursue actions that will

leverage private investment, increase property values, create quality development, and provide entrepreneurial and employment opportunities.”

In 2019 the Agency initiated conversations with property owners and developers interested in the redevelopment of several key sites in Town. The Redevelopment Agency also initiated a temporary moratorium on self-storage development in partnership with the Planning and Zoning Commission.

Business Openings

In 2019, the EDIC reported that there were forty (40) business openings in Wethersfield. The Commission supported many of these businesses with ground breaking or ribbon cutting ceremonies. During 2019 the Commission celebrated nine (9) of these events.

Some of the business activity that occurred last year included:

7-Eleven/Apple Green	275 Ridge	Grange Fresh
Verizon	Slip Away River Tours	The Learning Experience
Jackson Hewitt	Sprint	Zen’s Toyland
Axe-It	Annpurna	Crunch Fitness
Pediatric Health	Village Chiropractic	The Borden @ 1160

Special Events

During 2019, the Commission sponsored or participated in four (4) special community events in support of the business community;

- In January, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce participated in the annual State of the Town Breakfast to report on economic development activity over the past year.
- In April, the Commission hosted a training event “Fundamentals of Economic Development A Transformational Approach” in partnership with CERC and CEDAS.
- In November, the Commission in partnership with the CT Green Bank hosted a breakfast meeting to promote funding opportunities for energy efficiency through the C-Pace program.
- In December, the Commission hosted the annual Salute To Business and Holiday Social and recognized a variety of local business achievements over the past year.

Over two-hundred and fifty (250) businesses were represented at these events in 2019.

Developer/Property Owner Contacts

Over the past year, the EDIC, Redevelopment Agency and staff consulted with numerous developers, property owners, business owners and representatives with interest in doing business in Wethersfield. This effort resulted in conversations regarding ninety-two (92) individual commercial businesses or properties in Wethersfield.

Social Media, Marketing and Communications

In 2019, the Commission initiated three (3) new social media efforts in support of the Town’s economic development programs. In October, the Commission established a new Facebook presence through the creation of the Wethersfield Planning and Economic Development Facebook page and in November with

the creation of the Wethersfield CT Economic Development & Improvement @wethctedic Twitter account. Both of these efforts are designed to promote and share the good news about economic development in Town.

The EDIC has also launched a new website thegreatelm.com (The Great Elm) designed to share information about the things that are important to the residents of Wethersfield. The website helps individuals and families find local groups and organizations, events, community meetings and local things to do.

Over eight-hundred (800) events and community meetings were listed and promoted through the Great Elm website during 2019.

By the end of 2019 the Great Elm Facebook had 844 Followers and reported 198,220 impressions.

Staff also maintain a database of business and property owner email contacts which is used to share news about business activity and community events and meetings. There are presently 1,400 contacts in this database.

During 2019 staff produced four (4) development status reports for the EDIC and Town Council.

Media Coverage

Staff respond to numerous media inquiries each year to assist with news stories. Wethersfield development activity and local businesses were highlighted in a wide variety of media outlets during 2019. At least forty-seven (47) stories were written or produced that featured Wethersfield businesses and/or projects. The stories appeared in:

- The Hartford Business Journal
- CT Mirror
- New Haven Biz
- Wallet Hub
- Connecticut Economic Digest
- Inside Self Storage
- Hartford Courant
- WFSB
- New England Real Estate Journal
- Fox 61
- MassLive.com
- Journal Inquirer
- WNPR
- Hartford Magazine
- WTNH

Stories included coverage of the following:

- The Borden Apartments
- Puritan Furniture Redevelopment
- Gordon Bonetti Florist
- D and D Market
- Self-Storage Moratorium
- Best Small Cities
- City Fish Market
- Integrity N Music
- El Pollo Guapo
- Marshall's Plaza
- That Bookstore
- Village Pizza
- ABC Burger
- Old Wethersfield Country Store
- Lucky Lou's
- River Restaurant
- Chase Bank
- The Learning Experience
- Xvivo
- CBS Xerox

- Fresh Monkee
- Cardio Express
- Planet Fitness
- Zen’s Toyland
- Right At Home
Homecare
- Mc Barber
- Zen’s Toyland

Business Incentives

The Town actively promotes its three (3) business incentive programs to encourage investment in the community:

- C-PACE - The Town of Wethersfield is a C-PACE eligible community. This program allows building owners access to financing for costs associated with eligible energy efficiency projects.
- Façade Improvement Program - The Town of Wethersfield has established a matching loan program to provide a source of financial assistance to commercial property owners and tenants for exterior enhancements to properties located in the town's business districts.
- Tax Incentive Program - The Town of Wethersfield has adopted this tax incentive policy in accordance with Connecticut General Statute 12-65b and 12-65h (as amended). This policy allows the Town to enter into written agreements with the owners and/or lessees of certain real property located within the Town in order to fix tax assessments of real property.

During 2019, staff distributed twenty-one (21) incentive information packages to interested developers and property owners.

Planning

The basis for all land development regulation and permitting are the Town’s land use and development policies and plans. Planning Department staff work with the Planning and Zoning Commission and other Town Departments and staff in undertaking plans and studies that help to better understand and respond to emerging trends and future community needs. Below is a summary of the major planning projects Department staff have been leading over the past year:

Old Wethersfield Parking Study

In an effort to assess the current and future parking demands for the Old Wethersfield business district staff initiated an update to the previous parking study (1998) conducted for the Village Business (VB) District. The study includes an inventory of existing parking resources, a parking demand study, a community survey and a robust community engagement process. The final recommendations are expected to be provided in the first quarter of 2020.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

In partnership with Bike Walk Wethersfield staff are preparing the Town’s first Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. Working with a Stakeholders Committee consisting of community members and Town staff the planning process has included an inventory of existing conditions, a community survey, public workshops and significant public involvement. It is anticipated that the final document will include both a pedestrian and bicycle improvement plan for inclusion in the Town’s Plan of Conservation and Development.

Complete Streets Policy

Working closely with the Town Engineer and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Stakeholders Committee staff have prepared a draft Complete Streets Policy. A Complete Streets vision states a community's commitment to integrate a Complete Streets approach into their transportation practices, policies, and decision-making processes. This policy will be submitted to the Town Council alongside of the final Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan in 2020.

Self-Storage Moratorium

Over the past few years several developers have contacted the Department with an interest in the development of additional self-storage facilities in Town. The Redevelopment Agency studied this issue and suggested that the Town's zoning regulations should be reviewed for potential revisions. The Agency filed an application to the PZC to establish a moratorium to provide the opportunity to review and possibly revise the Town's zoning regulations for this type of development activity. In September the PZC adopted a temporary moratorium for the submission and receipt of applications for self-storage facilities in the community. The Agency is presently studying this issue.

Heritage Tourism

Since 1999 the Wethersfield Heritage (Tourism) Commission has overseen the promotion of Wethersfield to visitors. The mission of the Wethersfield Heritage Commission is:

1. To develop, recommend and coordinate proposals and programs and methods to assist, initiate, encourage and sponsor activities in all fields of culture and the arts for Wethersfield; and
2. To strengthen the local visitor experience, promote business development in Wethersfield, enhance tourism opportunities, and enhance interpretive aspects of the community.

The Commission consists of eleven (11) members representing various community organizations and interests and has established a number of ongoing programs:

- The maintenance of a tourism specific website and social media presence to promote the Historic Wethersfield brand www.historicwethersfield.org
- Design and distribution of high quality color print collateral to promote the sites and attractions found in Wethersfield.
- A marketing and media campaign to promote the brand through press releases, newspaper, magazine, radio and television promotions.
- Maintenance of a year round calendar of events.
- Distribution of a monthly E-Newsletter promoting local events and news.
- Visitor inquiry information packets for distribution to interested potential visitors.
- Partnerships and coordination with State, Regional and local tourism stakeholders.
- Support of special events and projects designed to improve the visitor experience.
- Management of a number of grant-funded projects.

Digital Marketing - Websites and Social Media

The Historic Wethersfield brand is promoted through a variety of social media platforms including the Historic Wethersfield website and a Twitter, Instagram and Facebook account. Additionally, a YouTube channel has been created and a monthly E-Newsletter is maintained and distributed.

A partnership has been established with Visit New England.com and CTM Media to further spread the word about Wethersfield.

Each of these platforms experienced significant increases in viewership over the past year.

During 2019, the following insights were reported:

	<u>Subscribers/Followers</u>	<u>Impressions</u>	<u>Views</u>
Twitter	324	55,585	
Instagram	1,662	213,792	
Facebook	3,343	832,916	
YouTube	100		3,001
Website			101,922
Newsletter	947		12,107
Visit New England.com			162,870
Exploreboard (CTM Media)			
I-95 Service Centers			90,919
Visitor Network			87,366

Print Material

The Commission continues to design, print and distribute a variety of high quality print collateral to promote the sites and attractions found in Wethersfield. The Commission has designed two (2) seasonal rack cards (summer and fall) and each year they are distributed as follows:

- Connecticut State Welcome Centers 50,000
- Eastern Connecticut and Mystic
- I-84 and I-91 CT Hotels
- I-91 Massachusetts Hotels
- CT AAA Tourism Information Centers

Additionally, print ads were placed in the following publications:

- CT Visitor Map 100,000
- Greater Hartford Visitor and New Resident Guide 10,000

The Commission also designed, printed and distributed 2,000 brochures/maps highlighting the Heritage Walk.

2,000

Media Coverage

Wethersfield tourism and heritage was featured in a number of media outlets in 2019. More than a twenty (20) stories, blogs and articles appeared:

- NBC CT
- Hamlet Hub
- WTNH
- Essentially America UK
- USA Today
- Full Power Radio
- Getaway Mavens
- Connecticut Magazine
- Archaeology
- Live Science
- Visit New England
- Greater Hartford Visitor and New Resident Guide
- Fox 61
- Boston.com

These stories included coverage of the Lifetime Channel Christmas Movie - Rediscovering Christmas, the start up of Slip Away River Tours, the Webb Deane Stevens Museum Visitor Center addition, the Archaeological Dig at the Webb Deane Stevens Museum, Cove Side Carnival, Porchfest, Fall Foliage, Witch History and Christmas Holiday Season.

Event Calendar

The Commission has taken a leading role in the community to coordinate and maintain a comprehensive listing of community events that occur each year. Over two-hundred (200) local events were listed and promoted through the Historic Wethersfield website and the E-Newsletter distribution. Twelve (12) E-Newsletters were distributed in 2019 with over 12,000 views.

Grant Administration

During the past year the following grants were managed by the Department:

Community Connectivity Grant Program (CCGP)

In January the Town was notified by the State of Connecticut Department of Transportation that a \$393,300 grant was awarded for a series of pedestrian and bicycle safety improvements in various locations in Old Wethersfield through the CCGP program. In partnership with the Engineering Department preliminary plans were prepared and a public information meeting was held in October to solicit community input on the preliminary designs.

AARP Community Challenge Grant

In partnership with Bike Walk Wethersfield and the Central Connecticut Health District (CCHD) staff filed an application to AARP's Community Challenge Grant for funding for a variety of bicycle and pedestrian improvement projects. In July the Town was awarded \$10,000 from AARP to be used for the installation of bike racks, benches, bike/walking route maps and signage throughout the community.

Transportation Alternatives (TA) Set Aside Grant

In partnership with the Engineering Department staff coordinated the preparation and submission of a \$1,800,000 grant application to the Capital Region Council of Government (CRCOG) for funds to improve the Heritage Way Bike Trail with a connection to the planned Putnam Bridge Trail. The project includes a series of bicycle and pedestrian improvements along Marsh Street and Great Meadow Road that will connect Old Wethersfield's Main Street with the planned Putnam Bridge Multi Modal shared use trail on Great Meadow Road at the intersection with I-91 exit 25 off-ramp. The project was not selected for funding and staff will be researching other funding sources.

Continuing Education and Training

Staff attended or participated in a variety of educational and training sessions in 2019 covering the following subject matter:

- Bicycle Safety
- Economic Development Marketing
- The Development Process
- Business Creation
- Zoning Enforcement
- Façade Improvement Program
- Social Media
- Green Energy
- Business Incubators
- Art of Planning
- Brownfields
- Tax Increment Financing
- Multi-Family Housing
- Form Based Codes

Special Projects

The Department coordinated a number of special projects for the Town over the past year.

Community Photo Contest

In November, in partnership with the Heritage Tourism Commission staff advertised and promoted the Annual Community Photo Contest. Staff administer the contest submissions and judging and in December coordinated the award program at the Salute to Business event.

Town Guide and Calendar

Each year staff work closely with the Town Manager's office to research, design and publish the Town's Annual Guide and Calendar for distribution to the community. The Guide includes a directory of community information, important phone numbers and a list of community organizations. A calendar of community events and meeting dates is also included in the Guide. The Guide is enhanced through the use of the photos submitted by the Community Photo Contest.

2020 Census

Staff have been coordinating with the U.S. Census Bureau in preparation for the 2020 census count.

Location Assistance – Rediscovering Christmas Movie

During July, August and September staff assisted the location coordinator for the Lifetime Channel Christmas Movie with potential film locations throughout the community. This is the second year in a row that a movie has been filmed in Wethersfield and staff have assisted in the location coordination.

Old Wethersfield Business Directory and Map

The Heritage Commission has retained local graphic artist Phil Lohman to design and prepare a new free standing kiosk to list businesses and visitor destinations in Old Wethersfield. The kiosk will be modeled after the Heritage Walk kiosks and will contain a map highlighting business and visitor destinations.