Wednesday, February 27, 2019

Testimony to the Appropriations Sub-Committee Conservation & Development
From: The Westville Village Renaissance Alliance

Dear members of the Appropriation Sub-Committee,

I would like to thank the committee for their past support and ask them to continue to fund the Westville Village Renaissance Alliance, a small but mighty organization central to the economic vitality and cultural identity of Westville Village. As you may know, Westville Village is a historic commercial district in the heart of a New Haven neighborhood, Westville, a place that people of all ages, incomes and ethnicities are proud to call home. Westville is known and loved for its vibrant arts scene and its strong community spirit. And these things make it a wonderful place to live, and the kind of place where people want to live. It is a true success story of creative place-making.

In the two years since we last testified to this body, Westville has been flourishing. We have cut the ribbon 10 new businesses in our small district, eight of them in the past nine months, and there is additional development, large and small, on the immediate horizon. Anchor businesses have expanded. Many of our problematic properties have changed hands, or are under contract. Even our long-neglected neighborhood skatepark saw a transformative renovation. Chapel Haven, a pioneering residential school and independent living facility serving adults with disabilities, doubled down on their commitment to Westville, investing 40 million dollars on a full campus renovation, and even opening a storefront selling amazing arts and crafts made by their adults.

This growth is notable for the diversity of the business owners and the decidedly creative bent of their entrepreneurship. We are now home to Connecticut’s first Cat Café and a thriving record shop. Selling only vinyl. These new businesses are increasing Westville’s foot traffic while not entirely being dependent on it. These are 21st century businesses, with strong online presences. They build on the momentum created by other hybrid businesses like Lotta Studio, a photo studio that provides co-working for creatives and houses 13 individual artist studios; and fashion designer Neville Wisdom’s shop – which incorporates his manufacturing and his showroom. These entrepreneurs are on the front lines of making modern main streets work, and they have brought a young, vibrant energy to Westville.

WVRA has served as a centralizing body for this recent renaissance, and played many critical roles - through business recruitment, advocacy and support; through streetscape maintenance and investment; through marketing efforts to define our identity as a creative, diverse and family friendly community; through public art commissions, and through a formidable slate of community events – including the annual ArtWalk, the Hi-Fi Pie Fest summer concert series and pie-baking competition, and more recently the Citywide Open Studios Westville Weekend - that draw thousands of visitors annually.

WVRA has a strong arts focus - in our own events, in our marketing efforts for Westville, in our commitment to public art, and in our support and amplification of the artists, and arts-related businesses that are the beating heart of our community. We recognize the important role the arts play not only in the Village’s identity, but in its economic vitality. Indeed, I would argue that Westville’s artists and strong arts identification has been the primary driver of the significant revitalization we have seen in the past few years.
In an effort to directly address the underlying issues that can be barriers to development and growth, we partnered with the Yale Law School Community and Economic Development Clinic to draft legislative changes to the city zoning code to incentivize mixed use development. Those changes were passed and enacted this past summer, and have already generated increased interest from developers.

Westville faces the same challenges many other main streets face, stubborn empty storefronts, problematic property owners, the questionable future of retail. There is still a lot of work to do. We will continue to recruit, support, amplify and advocate for Westville while providing our vibrant community with a year’s worth of opportunities to come together and celebrate. And I hope you will continue to provide us with this critical support.

Elizabeth Donius
Executive Director
Westville Village Renaissance Alliance