



Packet Editorial 03/07/06

We know there are plenty of people out there who think the 10 scariest words in the English language are, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help you."

So we can fully understand why some West Windsor residents are skeptical of the effort, spearheaded by Mayor Shing-Fu Hsueh, to redevelop the area around the Princeton Junction train station. It isn't that they necessarily object to the mayor's idea; in fact, they generally agree that the area around the train station could benefit greatly from redevelopment. What they fear - and not without some justification - is that government will almost always find a way to take a good idea and implement it badly.

Just think back to some of the Great Society programs of the '60s. In the interest of fighting poverty, the federal government took on the task of leveling blighted neighborhoods and erecting shiny new high-rises - which had the effect, over time, of transforming many urban areas from horizontal to vertical slums. The idea wasn't bad; the implementation was.

And that's what some residents fear will happen in West Windsor. Where an unsightly parking lot now stands, a new mixed-use development will sprout up - with sparkling new residential, retail and office buildings drawing lots of oohs and aahs from onlookers and self-congratulations among politicians. Then, over time, the novelty will wear off, the occupancy rates will plummet and the buildings will fall into disrepair while the township is left to cope with more traffic, more schoolchildren and higher taxes.

We don't think that's going to happen - not only because we trust Mayor Hsueh and the Township Council won't let it happen, but also because we're confident the Princeton Junction Neighborhoods' Coalition won't let them let it happen. This group of concerned citizens is staying on top of the redevelopment process every step of the way, and no shortsighted, slipshod or half-baked plan is going to get past its diligent oversight.

Unless, of course, the PJNC renders itself irrelevant. And that may yet happen.

Already, there are some members of the coalition who are plainly positioning themselves to oppose anything the mayor and council might ultimately put forward. Others are demanding specific answers to questions that haven't even been raised yet: What's the mix of residential, retail and office space going to look like? How many units will be built? How tall will they be?

To be effective, the coalition needs to be a constructive participant in the process - not a carping obstructionist. The PJNC needs to send a clear signal to Mayor Hsueh, the Township Council and the community as a whole that, while it may be suitably skeptical of government's ability to implement even a well-conceived redevelopment plan, it wants to work with them, not against them. It wants to ensure that there is an appropriate level of citizen input into the decision-making process. And it wants to help craft a plan that its members, along with the township's elected leaders, feel is best for the entire community.

If the coalition takes this approach, it will play a vitally important role in helping to shape West Windsor's future. If, on the other hand, it allows itself to descend into cynical opposition, it will become its own worst enemy - and will be perceived, properly, as an enemy of progress in the community. Right now, the PJNC is toeing a very fine line. For its own sake, as well as West Windsor's, we'd be pleased to see the group position itself firmly on the constructive side.