

News

Neutral on a Moving Train?

Fairfield politicians and Rep. Chris Shays are excited about the opening of the Metro Center. But how will it affect the changing neighborhood of Black Rock?

By Erin Lynch

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From the get-go, Fairfield first selectman Ken Flatto and U.S. Rep. Chris Shays have both boasted that once the town's third train station is up and running, it will be a benefit not only for the town but for the region as a whole. But there is a group often forgotten about in discussions about Fairfield's Metro Center: Black Rock, the town's neighbor to the east.

The Black Rock section of Bridgeport is just a few city blocks from the soon-to-be Metro Center. The artsy community has slowly developed into a neighborhood bustling with restaurants, shops and a hip bar scene. The community is broadly typecast as a young, eccentric melting pot of immigrants, young professionals and artists and a mixture of upper, middle and lower classes. Although it's still one of the few places to find cheaper rents and somewhat affordable homes, all that could change once the Metro Center is completed.



Sean Corbett

Once the Metro Center is built, trains will stop in three stations in Fairfield (population 48,000) but still only one in Bridgeport (population 130,000)

The 35-acre Metro Center will be a Goliath compared to other stations in the region. It reportedly will consist of almost one million square feet of commercial space, 75,000 square feet of retail space, a Hilton Hotel, an 11-acre nature preserve, a fitness center and spa, restaurants, a teleconference center and—oh yeah—a train station.

Gail Robinson, president of Black Rock's Ash Creek Conservation Association, a realtor and 30-year resident of Black Rock, says her neighborhood has already started to see positive changes since word spread about the Metro Center a few years back. "We have already seen property values go up in anticipation to the train station, and I think Black Rock as a whole is feeling very positive about the station," she says.

"We're going more and more upscale, so more people are coming in," Robinson adds. Within the past few years Black Rock has become a hub in this area for restaurants such as Viale, The Field, Café Travolini and the Ash Creek Saloon (which moved right down the street from Fairfield).

Karen Vogel, who has lived in the neighborhood for about six years, says the new train station will have "a positive effect" on the community since it will not only attract new businesses and higher property values but it will also attract those who are ready to spend some cash.

Bridgeport mayor Bill Finch says he believes the Metro Center "is very, very good for Black Rock, but its impact on the rest of the city is negligible." He says Bridgeporters are generally "very much Metro North advocates," but he is puzzled about why Bridgeport (with only one station) was not considered for an additional station (there's a proposal with the state DOT for a second BeePo stop) given that this will be Fairfield's third train station when it has a population less than half that of the Park City.

As for Black Rock, there's no question that the Metro Center will increase property values and create additional jobs. Shays, a Black Rock resident himself, in 2006 called the station "a perfect example of how a public-private partnership can help ease traffic congestion along the clogged commuter corridors in Fairfield County, while at the same time creating new jobs and related economic benefits for the entire region." (Kurt Wittek, owner of Blackrock Realty LLC, the site-owner for the project, donated \$2,100 to Shays' 2006 reelection campaign.)

Although both Shays and Flatto have said the additional train station will ease congestion, it's a no-brainer that the Metro Center will heighten the two major issues that Black Rock residents face today: parking and traffic.

Last year several Bridgeport communities participated in a Neighborhood Revitalization Zone Project (the NRZ), through the city's Office of Planning and Economic Development, to research the issues neighborhoods are facing and to come up with long and short term solutions. The process began in May 2007 through numerous public meetings, interviews, surveys, research and data analysis and a draft of the report was issued in January and is now in the hands of the Bridgeport City Council.

Black Rock residents outlined 35 issues affecting their neighborhood which—you guessed it—include parking and traffic. The NRZ report says Black Rock is already suffering from "shortages of public parking and poor maintenance and management of parking that exists."

"Parking availability is one of the greatest impediments to successful integration of the many land uses that make up Black Rock," the report states. It also suggests that once the station comes in, Brewster Street, which already is a main thoroughfare used to travel from Fairfield from Bridgeport "is anticipated to experience greater congestion when it becomes the primary connector to the future Metro Center."

Though an advocate, Robinson says, "The difference [caused by the station] is going to be with people who come off of the train and are

attracted to the arts and entertainment aspect of Black Rock...

"Parking is still an issue here and will continue to be. We still haven't come up with a solution on that."

Finch points the finger at the state Traffic Commission, saying it "dropped the ball" when conducting a traffic survey of the area. According to Finch, they didn't take into consideration the effect the station would have on the several streets in its immediate vicinity, including those in Black Rock.

Bridgeport, Finch says, is attempting to address the parking problems throughout the city and suggests that residents should try to utilize public transportation whenever they can. Finch also said while the Metro Center will increase property values, Black Rockers who will be the hardest hit will be the renters in the area. With property values skyrocketing, rent hikes are sure to follow.

"The affordability of housing is something that I'm worried about in Black Rock and it's something that I'm worried about across Bridgeport. I've said this many times and I firmly believe that we've got to build quality affordable homes in Bridgeport," Finch says.

Robinson agrees but says higher rental prices are not necessarily bad. "Some people who could afford to live here might not be able to in years to come...this will definitely increase the rent but it's going to be a value to people who are commuting to Manhattan."

Through his press coordinator, Dave Natonski, Shays' told us: "While I am sensitive to those concerned about an increase in traffic, Black Rock residents will benefit by having a train station within walking distance, especially given the increased gas prices. I am hopeful the state and town will implement this project well."

But one question still remains: What is the City of Bridgeport doing to adapt to the large number of people the new station will likely attract?

Diane Vulcano, president of the Black Rock Homeowners Association and six-year resident, says that Bridgeport hasn't done anything to prepare. "Our focus now is on the development efforts and we have been asking, 'What is the city doing to prepare for it?'" Since the announcement that the new station will be built, Fairfield has gone into overdrive, trying to revive the Commerce Drive/ Black Rock Turnpike section of town. It has focused on widening the streets, putting in additional stop lights and sidewalks, and has given various zoning approvals to both commercial and residential developments, all in response to the Metro Center's arrival.

"Where has Bridgeport been during all this?" Vulcano asked.

Brewster Street, which leads Black Rockers into Fairfield and will be an access point to the new station, is a major concern. According to the NRZ report, Black Rockers say they'd like to see Brewster, which is lined with single family homes, duplexes and apartment complexes, redeveloped in anticipation of the new train station.

"With the new train station development in the planning stages," the report reads, "significant time was spent discussing the development of Brewster Street in response to this new economic driver. Specifically, stakeholders were interested in seeing possible mixed-use development occur in the existing structures along Brewster Street to foster more pedestrian-friendly pathways from the train station, including for example, artists' studios or restaurants on the ground-floor level."

Vulcano, speaking as a resident, says Brewster Street is a mess in terms of traffic, parking and even sidewalks. "In most cases Brewster Street is how people are going to get to Black Rock. If they have one bad experience because of the traffic or parking then they are not going to want to come back here; they are going to go to Fairfield."

She adds, "This potentially is a great opportunity and my fear is that when the Metro Center is put in, then where are the people going to go? How are we going to attract them to Black Rock? Right now, I don't think the city is doing anything,"