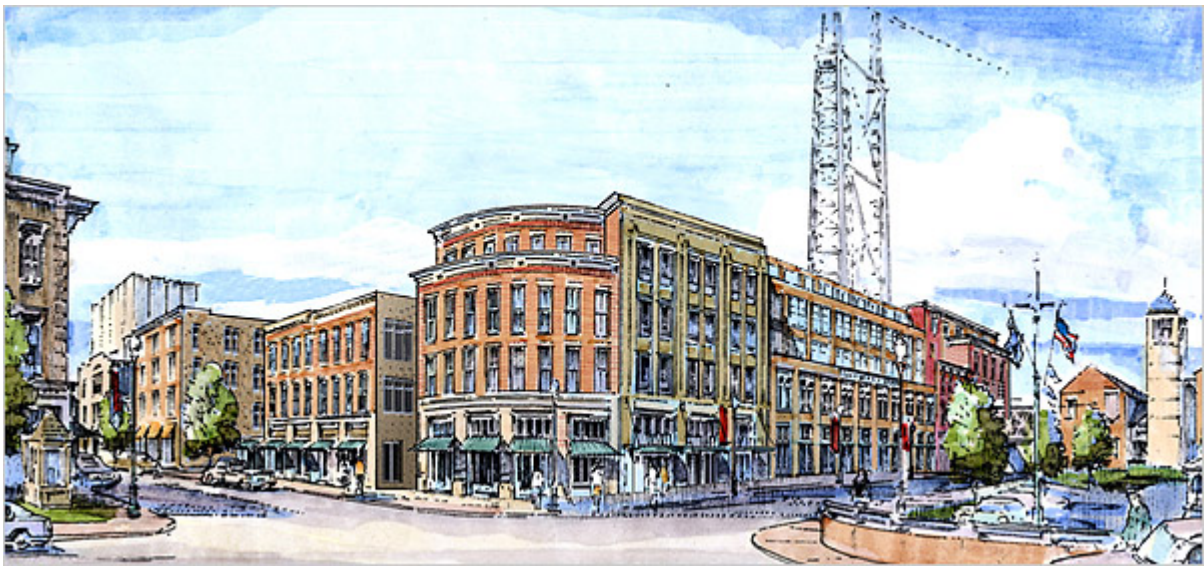


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SQUARE FEET

Hopes for Revving Up Retail in South Norwalk



Beinfield Architecture PC

An architect's drawing of a proposed five-story, 280,000-square-foot mixed-use complex that would retain an old factory's historical facade.

By [SANA SIWOLOP](#)

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NORWALK, Conn. — Urban revitalization usually takes years, if not decades, and so far efforts in South Norwalk have taken the longer path.

Vacant stores on South Main Street.

A 25-year revival effort has slowly introduced condominiums, stylish restaurants and entertainment options into the decrepit former industrial downtown of South Norwalk, a section of this city that generally is situated south of Interstate 95.

The revival has created a business district along Washington, Water and Main Streets. A centerpiece is the Maritime Aquarium, one of [Connecticut](#)'s top tourist draws. This area is often referred to as SoNo.

But so far, South Norwalk has managed to draw only a limited number of the kind of daytime retailers and services that local real estate executives say are needed to turn an entertainment district into a viable around-the-clock community. Some executives say the main demand for retail space along Washington Street is from potential restaurant tenants.

National retailers, on the other hand, have been scarce, with the exception of recent entrants like a [Washington Mutual](#) bank and an American Apparel store. One problem, national retailers say, is that retail slots in the area tend to be small.

But construction may begin as soon as this winter on a major piece of redevelopment that may help rectify this shortcoming.

That project is District 95/7, a million-square-foot mixed-use complex. It would be built by a longstanding Norwalk investor, Spinnaker Real Estate Partners, on 12 vacant acres next to the central business district of South Norwalk, where Interstate 95 and Route 7 intersect. Plans for District 95/7 call for a hotel, offices and housing, as well as 125,000 square feet of retail space.

Another major project is planned in the area by a new investor in South Norwalk, Tarragon Development, an arm of the Tarragon Corporation of [New York City](#). In April, the company bought the Norwalk Company compressor factory building, at 20 North Water Street, opposite the aquarium.

Tarragon plans to retain the factory's historical facade and reconfigure the site into a five-story, 280,000-square-foot mixed-use complex. Plans call for 133 housing units, a 240-car parking area hidden from street view, an interior public plaza that will help connect Water Street to Washington Street, and 27,000 square feet of street-level retail space.

"From a planning standpoint, this building is a critical connection between SoNo and the aquarium," said John L. Burritt Jr., assistant director of the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency.

William S. Friedman, the chief executive of Tarragon, likened the development to “filling in a tooth that’s missing in a smile,” because it will act as the long-awaited bridge between the aquarium area and Washington Street.

Washington, in turn, runs into Main Street, where many buildings, like the venerable Avrick furniture store, are either changing ownership or changing their tenant lineup. There are a number of properties for lease.

Steven Christofor, a Norwalk native who owns a residential and commercial real estate brokerage firm on North Main, says the area is ripe for retailers who sell more high-end products than are now offered. “The audience is here and demanding it,” he said. “I’m reaching out to retailers to let them know that we’re here.”

Parking is a sore point, however. Richard Erlanger, the owner of the Saga gallery and retail shop at 81 Washington, says his area could use three times the parking it has, and that even the nearby seven-floor Maritime Garage, which opened in 2004, has not alleviated a capacity problem.

City officials, as well as those at Spinnaker, which oversaw development of the garage, say it is running at about 75 percent capacity. One problem, they say, may be that too many visitors expect the suburban convenience of not having to walk more than a few dozen feet for parking.

Still, some retailers are taking chances on South Main Street, a part of South Norwalk they avoided just a few years ago.

While the city of Norwalk is grappling with plans for how to best revive the area around the South Norwalk train station, a large new police building on the street has helped draw a small collection of specialty retailers to the part that is closer to Washington Street. These include Chocopologie, a popular 6,000-square-foot chocolate factory and cafe; Studio Snaidero SoNo, a high-end kitchen design store that is a sister store to one in Greenwich; and Ebhome, an eclectic home furnishings store that follows one in Mount Kisco, N.Y.

Another recent investor in South Norwalk, Madison Marquette, a Washington real estate investment and development company, said it sees the area as a shopping alternative to nearby cities like Greenwich and Westport.

Jay Lask, managing director for property investments at Madison Marquette, said his company acquired 90,000 square feet of commercial space along Washington and South Main Streets in

2004 as part of a larger portfolio acquired from Starwood Urban. At first, the company was more interested in other pieces of the portfolio, like those in [Manhattan](#)'s meatpacking district, he said.

Still, the company was pleasantly surprised by the performance of its properties in South Norwalk. Mr. Lask estimated that in the last two years, retail rents along Washington Street and North Main, where Madison Marquette does not own property, have risen 30 percent.

"We never rated it that highly," he said, "but once we got into it, we realized that Norwalk was the hidden jewel."