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Put Army Base On New Britain Brownfield

By CATHERINE JOHNSON

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It seems everyone has gotten the message about smart growth planning these days — except the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Army's attempts to locate a new reserve training center in Middletown have gone from one bad site to another. Unless someone intervenes, this will be a disaster.

The first site selected last October for the proposed 273,000-square-foot training facility was a 40-acre meadow better suited to conservation in the city's Maromas section, a largely undeveloped area.

In June, after near unanimous opposition, the Army backed off and found a new site, an 88-acre piece of industrially zoned land off Middle Street in the city's Westfield section. But the new site has met with staunch opposition from Westfield residents, who cite problems with water pressure, traffic, wetlands and fire protection and say the site offers little economic benefit. They are right.

The point here is that there are better sites available only a stone's throw from Middletown. But the army is looking only in Middletown, because of a very narrow reading of the legislation authorizing the new center. The law calls for "a new base to be located in Middletown, if a suitable site can be found."

The Army has interpreted this to mean it **MUST** be in Middletown. Why?

The base requires upward of 30 acres and there are almost no greenfield parcels of that size left in Middletown. The city searched five years ago for such a site for a new high school and decided to redevelop an existing school site because no sites were available. Sites for an army base have even tighter constraints because they must be next to a highway. Joe Redlinger, the real estate manager for this effort, said at a presentation in January "had the legislation been written to say 'in the vicinity of Middletown,' the Army Corps would have more wiggle room and more options to find a site."

Also, the federal government has a policy that it doesn't buy or use contaminated land, including land

the government itself contaminated. This is why sites large enough for the base, which happen to be brownfield sites, are not being considered. By refusing to consider anything other than virgin land, the government is making a mockery of Connecticut's smart growth and conservation initiatives. There are numerous existing industrial sites that have the requisite acreage as well as direct highway access, sewer and water connections and the added plus of rail.

This is wrong.

The facility ought to be built on an established industrial parcel adjacent to a downtown. It is less expensive to clean up such a brownfield than it is to drag all the necessary infrastructure into the country. If we aren't recycling these parcels, that means we are erasing farmland and woodland. A base next to downtown connects to the local economy. A base in the boonies does nothing.

There are so many places in central Connecticut that would love to revitalize a former industrial area with an influx of workers and reservists. They should have the opportunity to make their case. Two sites that come to mind are in New Britain: the New Britain Business Center on South Street and Hartford Square/Gateway Crossing off the Corbin Avenue exit.

The new training facility should also connect to transit. As fuel becomes more expensive, we must think about moving troops by transit, as was done in World War II. My father got on a train in Hartford in 1942, enlisted in New Haven, was trained in Pennsylvania and boarded a troop ship in California, all by public transit.

We need intervention. If Gov. M. Jodi Rell intends to have her smart growth initiatives in Connecticut taken seriously, she needs to get on the horn to the Army brass and get them to broaden the search outside of Middletown. The author of the legislation — whoever that may be — needs to step forward and help correct his or her mess.

Gov. Rell has got to get brownfields into consideration. She should offer to have the state clean whatever site the Army chooses, in the appropriate time frame. Connecticut can seek reimbursement when the federal government wakes up and changes its policy.

Catherine Johnson is an architect and planner based in Middletown.

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