

Choices in Warren

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Warren got its first real look the other day at plans to redevelop the old American Tourister plant. A standing-room-only crowd packed a public hearing of the Planning Board on the proposed 350 residential units in the suitcase factory's 16-acre site along the Palmer River.

Many people liked what they saw. Others wondered whether Warren's population of 11,000 could absorb 600 or more new neighbors without disrupting traffic and parking patterns, or jacking up the cost of living in town. John Rosenthal, developer of Tourister Mills for Meredith Management Corp., noted that the town could expect to reap \$2 million a year in new property taxes. Who can argue with that?

Spencer Morris could. "Historically this site has been a source of employment for the citizens of Warren," the Warren Preservation Society's president said at the hearing. "We're wondering why this can't continue."

Easier said than done. The proposal envisions 40,000 square feet of retail, but those could hardly replace the hundreds of high-paying jobs making luggage that have vanished over the years. That sort of job is, in all probability, gone.

In all probability? Well, economic development is a crapshoot even in the best of times. We trust that before it opened the door to residential, the town tried to find a new industrial or high-tech manufacturer for the site. Even if one had been found to relocate to Warren, how much would the town have had to bribe it to come, and how long could Warren bank on its staying?

Meredith Management's proposal is itself a toss of the dice. The condo market's current softness might have reversed in two years — or it might deepen. The age-old question pertains: If they build it, will they come?

And the age-old answer remains the same. Who knows?

Nobody can ever answer such questions for sure. But Warren can use the public-hearing process to find more certainty in the answers to questions of even greater profundity: "What kind of place do we want Warren to be?" Usually, the answer is "The kind of place we're used to." And there's nothing wrong with that. But neither is it wrong for other citizens to seek more development for more property taxes for better schools — or more development for more shops, cafés, galleries and things to do in a town they think could move more swiftly into the future.

Warren can make those choices. In fact, it cannot not make those choices. If a packed room of naysayers sends a developer packing, that is a choice. If not, that's a choice. If civic leaders ramrod a project through in the face of opposition, that's a choice, too. Opponents can work

harder next time. A new set of town leaders may be chosen at the next election. Warren is a democracy, and as long as Warren votes, Warren chooses.

We like the look of Tourister Mills, but Warren will choose.