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No more retail sprawl

IT IS TIME FOR Northwest Connecticut to engage in a public policy discussion about commercial invasion.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation states that urban sprawl, a long-standing national problem, has entered a new and more destructive phase with the rapid proliferation of huge discount stores and retail outlet malls on the edges of traditional cities and towns.

It is the combination of public policy decisions made on the national, state and local level, superimposed characteristics and economics which makes it imperative that citizens influence this phenomena rather than react to it. Sprawl is low-density, land consumptive, automobile-oriented development located on the outskirts of towns and cities. Sprawl is a product of public policies and private development practices.

For example, federal transportation policy over the past 50 years has encouraged auto dependence by promoting and subsidizing highway construction while failing to prevent the deterioration of rail, bus and other forms of public transportation. These policies undercut efforts to make communities more walkable and ignore the needs and safety of pedestrians.

Local policies have also encouraged sprawl. Well-crafted zoning policies are essential tools for protecting a community's distinctive character. But local zoning laws, many adopted in the 1950s, are unsuited to the goal of maintaining the traditional character of a New England Main Street.

In Winsted, for example, the Yale Urban Design Workshop Charrette Report concludes that the basic vision of Main Street contained in Winsted's zoning regulations is of a suburban strip like that found on Route 44 between Avon and Canton. By requiring inappropriately large front, side, and rear yard setbacks, zoning regulations create excessive distances between buildings, virtually guaranteeing a community's automobile dependence.