



# SOUND WATCH NEWS

D A R I E N • R O W A Y T O N

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## The 2020 Darien Renaissance



One of the biggest things to happen to Darien over the last few decades is about to get underway with the Corbin District development. The Corbin District has been the blood, sweat and tears for many years of Bay Water Properties and PG Properties, led by David Genovese and his partner, Penny Glassmeyer. It is poised to become the biggest change to Darien in possibly the history of the town. The new design for The Corbin District has been developed by longtime Rowayton resident, Bruce Beinfield, of Beinfield Architecture, working with David and Penny. Bruce and his team are responsible for much of the redevelopment that has occurred in Rowayton and South Norwalk. We sat down with David to hear about his vision and what can be expected as the project moves forward.



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PRSR STD  
ECRWSS  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
PERMIT #303  
NORWALK, CT

\*\*\*\*\*ECRWSS\*\*\*\*  
Local  
Postal Customer



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*The vision of the Corbin District is to create a walkable town center of retail, office, and housing. Bay Water Properties goal is to expand downtown Darien away from the Post Road, creating a village destination rather than just a strip of shops strung along the Post Road. We had the opportunity to spend some time with David Genovese, the driving force behind the Corbin District and get a glimpse into his goals, motivations and what keeps him up at night.*



**SOUND WATCH NEWS (SWN):** Can you describe the overall project and what will happen over the coming months and years:

**DAVID GENOVESE (DG):** Corbin District will have 116 apartments, 82,000 square feet of office and 100,000 first floor retail space. The idea is that a lot of the younger people will come to work by train. A big part of our effort is to make the area walkable and pedestrian friendly. There is a crosswalk that has been approved with flashing beacons near where Webster Bank currently is across the Post Road to Corbin. They would not let us put a traffic light. We will add also walking connectivity from behind 1020 to The Corbin District which is not there currently.

We are doing roof decks on most of the buildings. The through street, people will be able to drive along but we will close it off for farmers markets, concerts and special events. The Connecticut Farmer's market told us they would give us two days per week including the weekend.

The area where the gas station sits has been approved as a bank branch so the idea is that Bank of America will go where the gas station currently is. The current Bank of America storefront is elevated and

has bad landscaping. That is a terrible thing to have in a downtown. There is a whole science around walkability and how far people will walk. There is a saying "50 feet neither blank nor bank."

You want to keep people engaged and have them comfortable walking further, so they go by the stores. People want to walk by a Barret bookstore or a J McLaughlin.

The project will be done in phases with phase one being the area across the street from the current post office.

**SWN:** How is a project in downtown different than others that you have done?

**DG:** When you build buildings in a Downtown, it might be "our property", but it is your downtown. We are kind of caretakers and have an incredible responsibility to get it right. If we do that and give you concerts and farmers markers and the stores you want and the restaurants you want, you will buy in and be part of it. We asked people what restaurants they want and we got close to 400 responses and we chased down almost every single one of them. A lot of our best ideas have come from people in our community.

People are so passionate about what happens here, and people know that if we get it wrong its wrong for a long time. When I was building 1020 Post Road, I'll never forget when I was walking down the street and I think I looked really tired and stressed out. I saw Shirley Nichols who was the head of the Land Trust at the time. We used to trade a lot of notes of what we were doing. She looked at me and said, "You don't look so good. You look kinda tired". I told her, "I am tired and stressed. This is hard work." She said, "Good. It should be hard work. When you are gone, these buildings will still be here and you need to make sure you get it right. She didn't give me a hug. I think about Shirley and those comments often.

**SWN:** Corbin District will forever change the fabric of Darien, how do you think about that responsibility and carry that weight?

**DG:** It is a heavy weight, but I think about it every day. People have recognized for years that Darien has the Post Road running through it and the train line cuts it in half. That has always been the criticism since we began this. But if you look at what is happening, it is already changing...The Darien Butcher Shop, Espresso Neat, Grove Street Plaza are all collectively already having the effect of pulling people off of the Post Road

I have learned through doing a number of projects around town that you can't please everyone. But I am very proud that no developer in area, possibly in the country who has been as transparent around the project as we have. I think most everyone agreed Darien needed a facelift and they were not going to trust someone from out of town to do that. We have a website, a Facebook page, have done a flyover video to scale. We update the public on the zoning process on a regular basis and allow people to comment on it. At one point I was personally answering over 100 question in a day on our Facebook page. I sought out advice from a friend on my strategy and he advised me to continue the path. He said it made the project authentic and real and if you "keep answering questions what you will find that over time all of us will start answering for you." And that is what happened. It has been truly fascinating.

**SWN:** In speaking to folks about Corbin we realized that many were unfamiliar with the scope. Why are so few people aware of it?

**DG:** It is kind of amazing. There have been a lot of newspaper articles and we have an active Facebook page keeping people updated with the process. I think when the shovel hits the ground, people will become much more engaged.

**SWN:** Are there other places that you base the Corbin development off?

**DG:** I have studied a lot of other places that work around the world. Pacific Palisades Village in California is one of them and very similar to what we are doing in Darien with a few exceptions. Pacific Palisades has less housing and no office space. The key is that it is walkable.

**SWN:** You are from Darien, went to Darien High School, your parents are still here. What are your fondest memories of Darien and Corbin district as a kid?

**DG:** My fondest memories for the most part don't involve downtown. Downtown was tired and tattered. There were however a few exceptions. Sugar and Spice was a candy shop inside of Fairbanks photo shop on the corner that had penny candy. That was a big deal to go to Sugar and Spice. A visit to the movie theatre also sticks out in my mind. I saw "Slapshot" at the Darien Playhouse. We all loved hockey and it may have been my first R movie...so that was pretty cool.

**SWN:** And you moved back out from the city back home in the early 2000's?

**DG:** Yes, my wife was from Greenwich, I was from Darien and we moved back out here in 2001. We came back for the beaches and schools and I was working for Credit Suisse at the time. We had friends here and my parents were here. I had moved back to start a real estate company but my focus was not originally on Darien. Our first acquisitions were in South Norwalk in a troubled industrial park near the Sono Icehouse with my father as my partner. Then we built two office buildings up in Wilton with my former boss at Bankers Trust as my partner.

**SWN:** How has downtown Darien evolved?

In the early 2000's, Evonne Klein was the First Selectwoman of Darien and she ran on a platform that include the idea that the people of Darien people wanted a better downtown. The downtown no longer suited the desires of the community. It used to be that people didn't want many restaurants or retail but that was changing.

The Darien playhouse was a focal point and United Artists wanted to close it because a one screen theater was not economic, so they proposed to put in a two or three screen theater and there were (almost) riots in the street. People were worried that a three screen movie theater would cause traffic jams and crime. People said we will go outside of town for the movies, we don't want people coming into town.

There were similar traffic concerns when we built Shake Shack and when Whole Foods was built. It is always a concern, but with good design and good infrastructure it is not an issue. When Whole Foods was built they fixed the exit 11 ramp and it functions much better now than it ever did. I don't think anyone would say that Whole Foods has caused traffic problems in downtown Darien and that is one of the most successful Whole Foods in the United States.

**SWN:** What will happen with the Post Office?

**DG:** The Post Office is currently on lease. We will give them temporary building and then build them a new structure.

**SWN:** How do you work with current and prospective tenants?

Our goal is for our new tenants to be aligned with Darien's changing needs. We are hand picking our new business partners. I have wooed many of the retailers coming to Darien for 10+ years to get them in. I continue to nurture and promote their growth. We really are seeing Businesses now thriving and succeeding.

The shopping experience has changed. Customers now look for experiential shopping. They want destination and multi-purpose shops.



Current Post Road view at corner of Post Road and Corbin Drive

Coffee shops within gift shops like Brown and Co. Grieb's Pharmacy is talking about adding a soda counter. This is where we are seeing change and as partner/landlords we need to foster this new retail world.

**SWN:** What keeps you up at night?

**DG:** One of the things I obsess about is that we don't create the Hamptons in Darien. If you look at the people we have chosen to work with, it is Elaine Kirby from Kirby and Co., Rosey from Everything Rosey. These types of tenants are the focus. Greenwich and Westport already have all the national chains. My feeling was let them do that and we want to do locally owned...unique and cool.

What I am hearing now is that people want New England unique plus a little New York cool. When someone is 38 or 40 years old and in a "begrudgingly" or in a worried state of mind, moving from New York out to the suburbs we want them to look at Darien and say, "you mean I am moving out here for my family but I can still go to places I am familiar with from the city like Barry's Boot Camp or Chopt." So, it's a balance. They go through this thought process and then discover at the same time places like The Sugar Bowl or Flour, Salt and Water bakery. Candidly, I stole a line from Rick Caruso, one of the best developers in the US and who developed Palisades Village which opened last year. Beverly Hills is Greenwich, Darien is not Beverly Hills. Caruso said about Palisades this is where Hollywood meets the sea. Well I tweaked his words, and often say that Darien is where New York meets New England is where New York meets New England.

The team here at Sound Watch News is excited to see how the Corbin District evolves. We spoke to Jeremy Ginsburg, Director of Planning and Zoning in Darien. He highlighted some of the major changes in Darien's history back to when the train tracks were built



**Darien: Where New York meets New England**

though town in the 1800's, to the 1980's when condos were allowed in town, to the late 90's when Avalon's 189 apartments were built in Noroton. Mr. Ginsburg agreed Corbin ranks up there as one of the most significant changes for the town of Darien. He agreed that "what may have worked in the 1950's does not work today. Most of the buildings have not been touched for decades." We also spoke with Jessica Curtis, Senior VP at CBRE who is handling much of the leasing activity for Bay Water Properties. She highlighted David Genovese's tenacity, attention to detail and always working with a sense of integrity. She mentioned the details like Grove Street Plaza where the sidewalks are heated. Other developers will usually engineer the details like that out but Ms. Curtis emphasized that David really "sticks to his vision."

*If you have any comments on Corbin District, please email us here at [team@soundwatchnews.com](mailto:team@soundwatchnews.com). We would love to hear your thoughts.*

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