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Historic change worthy of support

The countdown to a watershed moment in Naugatuck's history has begun. On May 7, Election Day, borough voters will rule on a development proposal that will change the face of the community.

The subject of lengthy negotiations and numerous public presentations, Renaissance Place would pump \$707 million into the community in four phases. The first, which calls for 387 condominiums, a movie theater, offices, retail stores and parking garages, would require \$152.6 million in private investments and \$29.2 million in public money. Mayor Ronald S. San Angelo, who deserves much of the credit for the project advancing this far, expects state and federal grants, plus increased property-tax revenue from the new development, will render tax increases unnecessary.

Developer Alexius C. Conroy, known for his downtown-redevelopment work in Providence, R.I., and Norfolk, Va., believes the Naugatuck Valley is poised for a boom spearheaded by people who work in Fairfield County and metropolitan New York. Signs of this boom, driven by crowding and high real-estate costs downstate, are visible in the lower valley. Mr. Conroy and his investors believe Renaissance Place's proximity to the Metro-North commuter-rail line, Route 8 and the Interstate 84 interchange will attract home-buyers and businesses.

Borough leaders promise to engage the public in a vigorous conversation about the project, and to their credit, they vow to treat the May 7 advisory referendum as if it were binding. The project would preserve and highlight Naugatuck's best features, including much of its architecture. Some aspects of the later phases seem pie-in-the-sky, especially the plans for solar-energy development in a valley and a region uniquely unsuited for it. But residents can take solace in Mayor San Angelo's promise not to use eminent domain to turn private property over to a developer.

As a practical matter, Naugatuck is transitioning from its industrial past. Its factories are gone, its air and water clean, and its economy irrevocably altered. Renaissance Place builds on that emergence, relying on vision and can-do spirit to meld what Naugatuck was with what it can be. Residents who examine the project's details will be skeptical, and well they should be, so dramatic is the intended transformation. But they also should be receptive because such opportunities rarely knock twice.