

NEWS

More than 200 packed Branford hearing on proposed BJ's. Most opposed

By **Mark Zaretsky**, *Staff Writer*

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Jonathan Waters, owner of Thimble Islands Shellfish, speaks on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2026, during the third installment of a Branford Planning and Zoning Commission public hearing on an application to build a BJ's as part of a development on nearly 40 acres off East Main Street. The hearing was at Francis Walsh Intermediate School in Branford.

Mark Zaretsky / Hearst Connecticut Media

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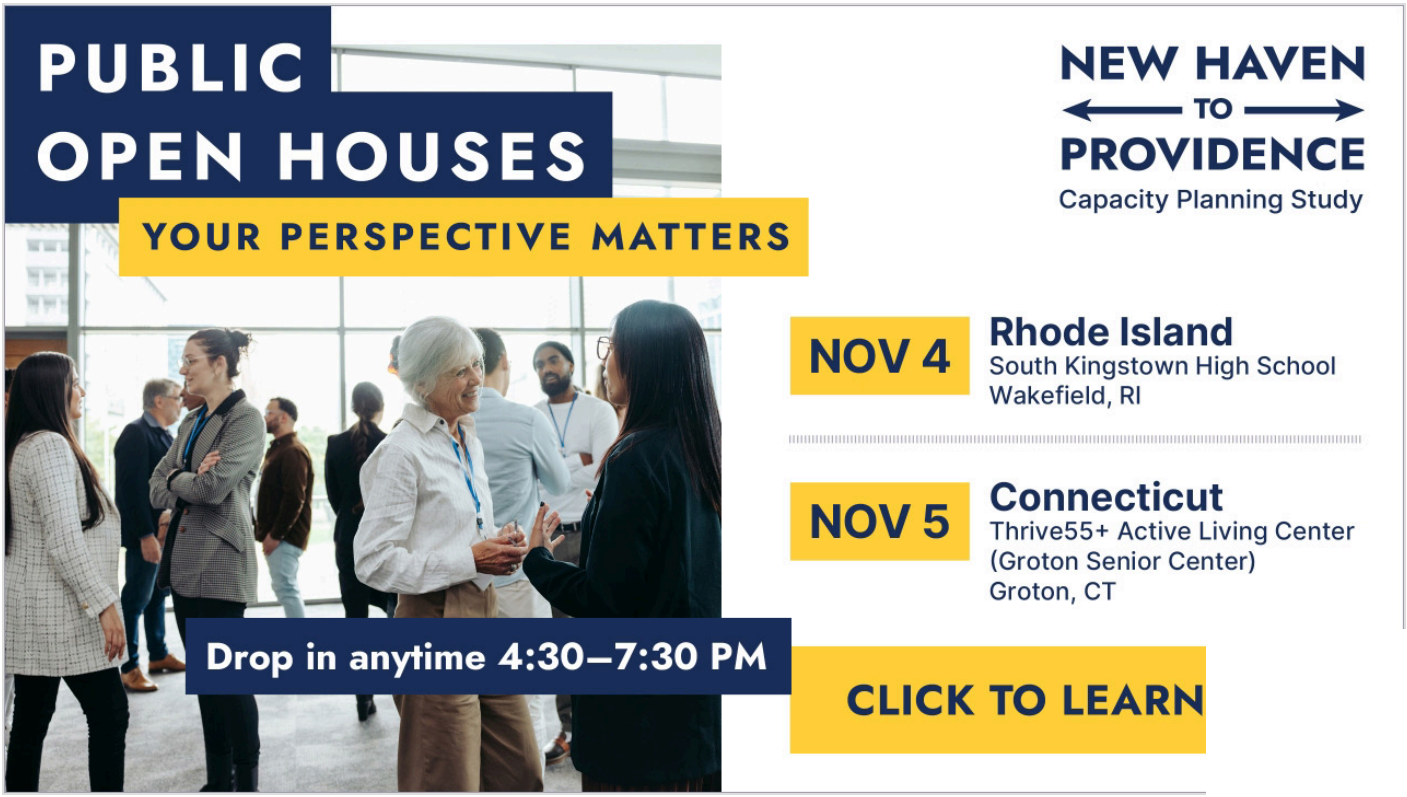
BRANFORD — More than 200 people packed School auditorium Thursday night to offer the opinions on a developer's application to build a Club on the same East Main Street property w 11 years ago.

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Most of the 65-odd people who spoke at the third of at least four public hearing sessions the PZC will hold were against the project, although several speakers went on the record in favor, citing the jobs and tax revenue it would bring and their belief that the property eventually will be developed "one way or another."

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The PZC made no decision. It left the public hearing open. Other residents watched on Branford Community TV and YouTube.

Those opposed to the application cited environmental and traffic issues but also offered more intangible concerns such as the belief that the large development on the former Hilltop Orchards property at Interstate 95's Exit 56 would forever alter the character of the Branford they moved to.

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"I'm very opposed to BJ's moving to this town," said East Main Street resident Shaune Miller, who said Branfordites are "very loyal" to local businesses. Bringing in a big box store such as BJ's will discourage people from moving "to this beautiful coastal community," she said.

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Greater New Haven neighbors such as New H

West Haven.

But Indian Neck resident Todd Petrowski was all in favor of BJ's coming to town.

"I'm 100 percent for this ... and I think we need to take a look at the credibility of the opposition," Petrowski said. "...This is an anti-Wayne Cooke group," he said, referring to Hilltop Orchards co-owner Cooke, who sued the town after the Costco go-round and has been critical over the years of some Branford politicians.

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"One thing they need to get through their heac
developed one way or another," Petrowski sai

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the town" and if Branford denies it, "we could have 9,000 residents there, and instead of closing schools we could be building schools."

The BJ's meetings essentially are one long public hearing, which began Oct. 1 and was continued to Oct. 15 and then Thursday night.

Thursday's session, the only one so far to be held in person and not via Zoom, was dedicated to letting the public speak.

"Our goal tonight is to hear from the public," said PZC Chairman Charles Andres.

A fourth session will take place online on Nov. 5 to allow testimony from experts hired by two community organizations that have become intervenors: Branford Land Trust and Branford Citizens for Responsible Development. That meeting is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. The Zoom address is https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82772420034

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All of the meetings are broadcast on BCTV and streamed on Branford's YouTube channel. Members of the public also may email written testimony to department-planningandzoningpublic@branford-ct.gov.

In addition to the BJ's club, itself, the developers, Sound Development Group LLC & BJ’S Wholesale Club, Inc., have proposed a 16-pump gas station, a 7,600-square-foot sit-down restaurant, two 2,800-square-foot "quick-serve" restaurants with drive-through lanes and a 16,000-square-foot retail strip with a drive-through at one end, according to the application.

The development site, on land at 569 and 573 East Main St. just off Interstate's Exit 56, is behind the Super Stop & Shop store on Leetes Island Road.

"Do we want Branford to continue with big box development and resemble Orange and Milford?" asked Barry Levine of Sachem Road, who said the proposal and the "planned development district" it seeks are "a direct contradition to the 2019 Plan of Conservation and Development.

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"A property owner is entitled to sell his land, but you do so within the confines of the current zoning," Levine said.

Among the speakers Thursday were Branford's current first selectman, Josh Brooks, former First Selectman Jamie Cosgrove and several members of the Board of Selectmen and Representative Town Meeting.

"I feel it's my duty to voice what my beliefs are and what my concerns are," said Brooks. "I do have serious concerns ... I do believe this is going to change the character of Branford ... Yes, there will be tax revenue — $350,000."

But there are costs associated with that, he said. "If we have to hire one more police officer, that's $150,000" for salary and benefits, he said. If the town hires two additional officers, that cancels out the additional revenue, he said.

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Cosgrove said Branford's "diverse tax base ... gives us opportunity," including to do things like preserve open space. But the parcel being discuss has not been part of those efforts, he said.

Paul Criscuolo, who lives down Damascus Road from Walsh Intermediate School and 1.9 miles from the BJ's site, was in favor. "We need tax revenue from developments like the one proposed," he said. "...We need to do something with that property. It's been sitting vacant forever. It's time to get some development going in this town, besides those apartment houses."

But Branford Land Trust member Bob Cooper said, "I am flatly opposed to this project ... I have nothing against BJ's — in fact,
But "we have one earth. it's a finite resource ...
beg you, I implore you, to make the right choic

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Jonathan Waters of Thimble Island Shellfish s
runoff from this development will impact the w

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farmers in Stony Creek and Guilford" while Dan Boller, president of the Stony Creek Association said the associated voted unanimously to oppose the application "because it's not in the best interests of Branford."

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Fred Carstensen, a professor of finance and economics at University of Connecticut and director of the Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis, said in response to talk about the business and taxes BJ's might bring development. Retail simply moves dollars arou goes in there is going to come from somewher

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Carstensen said he was neither for or against the application but a proposal like BJ's "generally does not increase the value of the grand list ... There is no strong case to be made, quantitatively" either in favor or against, Carstensen said. "You should focus on qualitative issues."

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Mark Zaretsky

REPORTER

Mark Zaretsky is a reporter with the New Haven Register. Zaretsky is a Chicago native and longtime New Haven resident and an award-winning reporter and music writer for the New Haven Register and Hearst Connecticut Media Group. His beats include East Haven and Branford, regional issues and occasional blues and roots music stories. He also makes a point of knowing where all the good ethnic and hole-in-the-wall restaurants, bars and bakeries are -- and is an unapologetic Cubs, Bears, Blackhawks and Bulls fan. In addition to his work as a journalist, Zaretsky is a front man for The Cobalt Rh occasionally performs with Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Blues Band.

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