

## SATURDAY OPINION

TODAY'S ISSUE

## Pro&amp;Con

Is CIGNA's Master Plan For Development  
The Right Approach For Bloomfield?

## Yes. A Major Boost For Town

ED STOCKTON

**B**loomfield has always been a beacon of innovation and progress. Now it has an incredible opportunity to embrace a forward-looking development proposal — put together by CIGNA — that envisions an ideal mix of residential, commercial, retail and recreational elements.

This kind of opportunity comes along once in a lifetime. It should receive an enthusiastic welcome. Unfortunately, however, news media coverage of CIGNA's Bloomfield campus development plan has focused on an ongoing debate about the historical significance of the company's Wilde Building, a modernist, international-style structure that serves as one of three CIGNA office facilities on the Bloomfield site.

Some view the building as a landmark, a first-of-its-kind structure that demands preservation because of its standing as a model for the modern suburban office park. Others see an aging, inefficient, 43-year-old facility that has long outlived its time and usefulness.

The point, of course, is that reasonable people can disagree over the Wilde Building. But lost in this debate is the compelling charm and power of CIGNA's overall development plan. Seen from this larger perspective, no reasonable person can question the clear vision and captivating benefits of such a well-conceived and winning proposal.

The plan, introduced after an exhaustive two-year study, balances the needs of the company with the inherent character of the site and the hopes and aspirations of the surrounding community.

By proposing a low-impact, low-density development, fully 80 percent of the 613-acre site will remain open green space, and 22 acres of wetlands will be created, restored or enhanced, preserving all but nine of the existing 175 acres of state-defined wetlands on the site.

Clearly, the natural beauty and rural flavor of the property will be meticulously maintained.

Also, by enriching its plan with a residential and recreational focus, CIGNA has not only lent welcome support to Bloomfield's own development vision — which calls for an

increased emphasis on single-family homes and a diversified tax base — it has also introduced a means to help bring that vision to life.

According to an independent study by the Connecticut Center for Economic Development, CIGNA's proposal will generate \$14 million per year in additional tax revenues for the town and surrounding communities.

The state, too, will benefit. The same study estimates that CIGNA's development will boost state coffers by \$27 million per year and add 6,000 jobs to the region.

By remaining sensitive to regional development plans, CIGNA's project offers an attractive complement to activities under way in Hartford, and it does so without seeking the seemingly obligatory state and federal subsidies that inevitably lead to increased taxes.

CIGNA's plan, with its cornerstone championship golf course and conference center, augments rather than competes with Adriaen's Landing, providing another magnet for potential conventioners and attracting new residents to support the ambitious retail and recreational components of the Adriaen's Landing project.

Yes, CIGNA will also benefit. The company will be able to construct the new office facilities it needs to compete, win and meet the business obligations of a 21st-century corporation.

But unlike some of its corporate brethren, CIGNA has maintained a commitment to its home for the past 40 years and has favored us with a proposal that envisions not only an ongoing CIGNA presence, but an ongoing involvement as a concerned and solid corporate citizen.

Sometime in the near future any lingering concerns about architectural relevance will be resolved, and CIGNA will move forward with its master plan.

As it does, we should all embrace it. Not because it is good for CIGNA, but because it is a model for integrating corporate and community needs. This is the right plan at the right time, as visionary in concept for the new millennium as was CIGNA's original move to Bloomfield nearly 50 years ago.

*Ed Stockton served six years as Bloomfield's mayor and six years as Connecticut's commissioner of economic development.*

## No. Don't Destroy An Irreplaceable Asset

LAURIE JULIAN

**P**arts of CIGNA's vision for Bloomfield's future may generate tax revenues, but at what price? A hotel, conference center and perhaps the golf course, if designed to stay out of the wetlands, would be a welcome addition. However, the master plan as proposed leaves no space undeveloped and overloads the land. Bloomfield can do better.

CIGNA has stated that the land is an "underutilized corporate asset." To the community, the large campus means so much more.

For more than 40 years, CIGNA made a commitment to maintain its property so the environment and business could coexist. Unfortunately, under the master plan, the largest piece of open space will be dedicated to an 18-hole championship golf course, available to the public only on a limited basis.

The CIGNA property is one of the largest and most accessible undeveloped tracts remaining in Bloomfield. The land includes a rich array of nature and 165 acres of wetlands, and is home to abundant wildlife.

The campus is also home to the internationally acclaimed Wilde and Emhart buildings, which under the plan will be demolished. Most important, the campus is a significant part of Bloomfield's pride, identity and heritage.

Bloomfield's future will be shaped for all time by this plan. The town would be better served by considering all interests, not just the largest corporate taxpayer's. It should not be CIGNA's vision for Bloomfield but the community's vision that determines the use of this extraordinary site. CIGNA intends to sell off most of the parcel to developers. CIGNA's presence will be limited to 30 acres and will be much smaller physically and fiscally.

Eighty percent of the community places preserving open space as a high priority, notes the town's 2000 Plan of Development. Under the CIGNA proposal, farmland, forest land, meadows and wetlands will be converted to a "gem of economic and social activity" in the form of new office buildings, a hotel, conference center, 400 housing units, a golf course and an enclave of new boutiques

and restaurants. The location is inappropriate for a development of this size.

The town Planning and Zoning Commission's recommendation for Bloomfield's future is this: "Preserve Bloomfield's agrarian roots and attractive small town atmosphere." The current proposal does not reflect this vision.

The prudent decision would be to scale back the project.

Such a policy would be consistent with the state's open-space program and the town's development scheme. To sustain this positive image and attract new residents, the natural environment must be maintained, enhanced and promoted, not destroyed.

CIGNA's plan is purported to have enormous economic benefits. However, the figures presented so far have been based on full development.

To what extent the master plan will be accomplished is unclear and will be determined by market conditions, as CIGNA acknowledges. Don't forget Silver Brook (CIGNA's plan in the late 1980s to build a hotel, conference center and retail shops, which was much smaller and never came to fruition because of market conditions).

How will this plan make Bloomfield a more desirable place to buy a home and raise a family or improve the education system? Replacing valuable open space with a subdivision of homes targeted for empty-nesters is not the solution. How will this affect Bloomfield 10 or 20 years from now? Even the town acknowledges in its 2000 Plan of Development a real concern about the ability of the community to sustain itself in the future as the population ages. CIGNA's plan does not address this concern.

In sum, a hotel, conference center and golf course would be beneficial and serve the interests of the town, CIGNA and the community. If this could be balanced with preserving open space and the landmark Wilde and Emhart buildings, the plan would be a real plus.

However, the plan in its current form overburdens the land. Overdeveloping this land and destroying irreplaceable assets would be a real loss.

I hope Bloomfield and CIGNA can come to some resolution, permitting parts of the master plan, while saving that part of Bloomfield that the community loves so dearly.

*Laurie Julian is a Bloomfield homeowner.*