

## Our View: Northland is best fit for Preston

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Tonight, the Preston Norwich Hospital Advisory Board is expected to select which of the two proposed developments it will recommend to the Board of Selectmen.

It is not an easy decision. Whichever proposal is selected will significantly change the face of the community and, to a lesser degree, the region.

Both Preston Gateway Partners LLC's proposal for a large-scale retail and residential development and Northland's luxury resort and high-end homes are attractive in terms of benefits to the community. They also are equally daunting in terms of their impact. They are large, but not Utopian in scope. They are what they are: Two distinct and very different plans for the Norwich Hospital property. It's about the future and vision.

This should not be viewed in the short-term. Development of the hospital property will have long-term effects, and the ultimate decision should be made with an eye toward the future and not the immediate.

It is from that perspective, and on our conversations Monday with representatives from both groups, that we recommend the Northland proposal.

The local impact should be the priority. But we hope strong consideration also would be given to the regional impact as well. What is built on the property will have an impact that extends beyond the borders of Preston.

Northland's plans are far more compatible with the existing economic environment in Eastern Connecticut, providing the greatest benefit with the least intrusion on Preston.

Tourism and the hospitality industry are the major economic players in the region, and between the region's two largest employers — Foxwoods Resort Casino and Mohegan Sun — a high-end luxury resort is a far better use for the property.

### Difficult process

The advisory board should be commended for the due diligence and thorough review of both proposals. It has been a time-consuming process under a strict deadline that leaves no room for error. The flaws contained in the independent analysis do not make the task any easier, further delaying the process and adding to the pressure on the committee to complete its task.

We find it difficult to accept the conclusion of the most recent analysis that suggests both proposals would have an equal and minimal impact on Preston's school system. Surely, Gateway's housing component will have a far greater impact than 68 children in the first five years compared to 65 children for Northland during the same period.

We also question the conclusion that the impact on municipal services — police, fire and emergency services — from the two large projects would be minimal and equal. Neither will be minimal. Preston taxpayers will be paying for the impact on schools and services for years to come.

Both represent a significant increase in tax revenues for Preston, offsetting some of that cost. Northland is seeking tax breaks, impacting what the town can expect in tax revenues during the initial stages of development. But the tax breaks are not guaranteed and will be subject to negotiations of a development agreement.

Gateway's housing addresses the region's housing shortage, but this is not the site for that. Nor is it right for a large-scale retail mall development. It's simply not the best use for this property, has no real regional benefit and its impact on the local community is significant.

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