

# Milligan: I don't blame Rilling for missed opportunity

Nancy On Norwalk online

By Nancy Chapman [1 : 54 am EST December 4 2017](#) [25 Comments](#)

NORWALK, Conn. — Property next to the Norwalk Public Library was on the market for a year before a developer bought it, intent on building apartments in a lot used by library patrons for parking.

Jason Milligan has said this before but recently produced an email to prove it, after being asked about Mayor Harry Rilling's pre-election statement suggesting that Milligan knew it was for sale – when the city didn't – because he's in commercial real estate and had an inside track.

Milligan won Zoning approval for a 69-unit apartment building on the lot at 11 Belden Ave., only to face a legal challenge from the Norwalk Public Library Foundation. A settlement was reached; the city agreed to pay \$460,000 for a six-year purchase option for the lot, but Milligan subsequently balked, with a deadline passing and no completion of the deal.

Rilling in the last days of his campaign promised that he'd fix the parking problem at the Norwalk Public Library main branch.

"We're still working towards a plan," Rilling said in a pre-election interview with NancyOnNorwalk. "I think everybody wants to get it done, and there are other options available to us that we are exploring, as well. That property is very important, and I believe my predecessor, and I know I did, reached out to the owner of that property and asked if they would be willing to consider selling it to the city."

Former Mayor Richard Moccia, who Rilling unseated in 2013, in an email, said, "I never had any direct conversation with the owner that I can recall. That being said, there might have been some contact between the then Library Board and the owner."

"There have been so many conversations and suggestions and hopes and desires over the years regarding the use of the lot to help ease the Library's parking challenge," former Library Board Chairman Stan Siegel said in an email. "I am sure that during the terms of Mayor Moccia, and then Mayor Rilling, that option was raised as a possibility and/or a hope. Perhaps a review of the Board Minutes over those many years would uncover some actual discussions."

Library Board minutes from January 2012 to December 2013 show no mention of parking at the library.

Rilling in the November interview said:

"We were told, 'No, we're not going to sell the property.' I think I might have reached out two or three times. I'm not even sure, but I know I did reach out at least once or twice. Then Jason Milligan, being in real estate, I don't know whether he reached out to the owner of the property, and the owner might not have wanted to sell it to the city for whatever reason, and he ended up purchasing it, but he has an inside track. He's in real estate. He knows perhaps when these things, if this thing came on the market within ... There's no filing ready necessary to put it with the city, the city might not necessarily know that it's on the market, but Jason Milligan found that it was on the market and he purchased it.

We will keep working, and I have all the confidence in the world that, as I said, this problem did not occur in a Rilling administration, but it will be fixed in a Rilling administration."

Milligan forwarded NancyOnNorwalk an April 2014 email from Cushman & Wakefield's Private Capital Group, advertising the property. Milligan bought it in February 2015.

Asked in the pre-election interview if the city had been asleep at the switch, Rilling said, "... If this had been advertised in the paper that, 'Hey, this property is for sale.' It appears in the real estate, sometimes in the business section of the Hour or something, that would be different, but I would like them, the critics, to tell me how they know the city was asleep at the switch? How did they know that this property was on the market and the city didn't? All I know is that I did reach out to the owner, we wanted to buy that piece of property."

He later speculated that perhaps the owner didn't want to sell it to the city because the city wasn't interested in owning the bank on the property.

Rilling was in a conference early last week, and NoN was not successful in attempts to contact him.



Norwalker developer Jason Milligan, left, participates in a June 2 press conference with former Mayor Alex Knopp, center, and Mayor Harry Rilling, announcing a legal settlement that would allow the city to buy an option to purchase 11 Belden Ave.

"My understanding is the city had spoken with landowner when the idea of purchasing that property came up," Assistant to the Mayor Laoise King said. "It wasn't for sale at the time. It shocked us when it came on the market. They knew we were interested. So, we can't speculate why they didn't let us know, but they knew we were interested."

However, "It's not like that's the only solution for parking at the library," she said.

If there's property that the city vitally needs and there is no other way to obtain it, eminent domain is an option, but, "There is a difference between wanting to do something and having to do something," and there's a cost benefit analysis, she said.

"There was an idea that maybe obtaining it would make it easier to park at the library," King said. "The city approached the property owner, they weren't interested in selling it. The city moved on to other ideas because it wasn't deemed at the time something that the city wanted to go through eminent domain on. When it came back around, we started talking to Jason about whether he wanted to sell it."

Milligan confirmed that discussions continue about his property.

That April 2014 email was the first time he heard of it being available, and it was listed on Costar & Loopnet.

"Is it that the city and library board weren't paying attention? Probably true," he wrote in an email. "Appointing Alex Knopp to the library board was a smart move and I doubt this would have happened under his leadership as chairman. I don't blame mayor Rilling for missing the listing."

## 25 Comments

[Rick December 4, 2017 at 7:01 am](#)

please pass the salt the wound needs more

Norwalk is full of this, at least Disney didn't do a segment on city ignorance if they had it would of been a series.

Like the tow scam those facts should surface by next presidential election.

Mike Mushak [December 4, 2017 at 12:11 pm](#)

Good article. No surprise we find out another of the nasty baseless attacks on Harry Rilling wasn't true. The long list included Harry's cancelling the Columbus Day Parade, a desperate and blatant lie pushed by his opposition in the campaign.

This is from Dave McCarthy's famous nasty letter full of lies attacking Mayor Rilling published in the Hour on Sept 15, 2017:

"He didn't spend any time on the library, actively turning down the opportunity to purchase the neighboring lot, then panic buying it for twice its value and now seemingly botching that deal, a deal that could have been handled with a boilerplate option agreement. Maybe we are better off when our mayor doesn't get involved."

So if it wasn't true that Harry Rilling was ever responsible for "actively turning down the opportunity to purchase the neighboring lot", will McCarthy apologize for {...} saying that he did? Fat chance!

In other words, be warned and just consider the source whenever we see anything written with McCarthy's name on it.

*Edited to remove ascribing of motives*

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 4, 2017 at 12:16 pm](#)

I would like to respectfully suggest an alternate title for this article, also culled from the same email in which Jason Milligan stated that he wouldn't blame Mayor Rilling for "missing the listing."

Mayor and Library Board "weren't paying attention" on Library parking, says Milligan.

This is not the first time Mayor Rilling has had vague, incorrect or false recollections of incidents for which the record suggests something different. If the mayor and the library board missed the listing of a property they had an interest in purchasing when the property came on the market, whose fault is that exactly if not theirs? The title of the article begs the question: who is in charge at City Hall if not Mayor Rilling?

Rick [December 4, 2017 at 12:57 pm](#)

obviously Knopp was in charge, the night we started with firetree i rode up in the same car as the team going to see Mr Mayor. Back slapping having a good time talking sh@t i waiting for the doors to open and asked if they were heading to fight the half way house?

I got a perplexed laugh that told me they could care less , the voters spoke thats it now we live hanging on whats goinf to happen next.

I can understand how the library and Firetree and the Mall happened it was arrogance and not digging for all the facts part of any job.

Facts dont change history city hall changes history no matter who is elected.

the more facts surface on the mall that was fact before GGP bought the mall was all red flags that was left out. To this day when news comes out on the mall and possible sale of it comes down to one man who runs GGP board and also Runs the buyout company Brookfield

Bruce Flatt is Chief Executive Officer of Brookfield Asset Management,

Bruce Flatt, Chairman of the Board of GGP

No one thinks for a failing company that Norwalk threw the dice on was important to know?

Like many things it seems the public has always been the last to know.

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 4, 2017 at 1:05 pm](#)

Also Nancy, not to belabor the facts, but Jason Milligan did NOT write that he did not blame Mayor Rilling for missing the opportunity to purchase the library parking lot. He wrote that he did not blame the Mayor for missing the LISTING. Presumably the point of Milligan sharing proof of the listing in 2014 was to refute the Mayor's campaign contention that he was unaware that the lot was ever put on the market. The Mayor was also unaware until the summer of 2016 that Firetree intended to convert Pivot House to a Federal BOP halfway house for pre-released offenders. That too proved to be incorrect, as the Mayor received a letter from Firetree in 2014 spelling out their intentions in excruciating details, including the intent to house prisoners. Whether or not the Mayor overlooked these things is immaterial. When you're the mayor, and you're brokering deals to fix things, it's hard to explain having ignored opportunities to have avoided the blunders that led you there.

Sue Haynie [December 4, 2017 at 1:58 pm](#)

NON, with all due respect, the title of this article is downright deceiving. Milligan in an email states: "Is it that the city and library board weren't paying attention? Probably true," That is the issue.

But, unfortunately, it's too late to worry about parking anymore since Norwalk's now been priced out. Spend short-of-supply tax dollars on parking when the main library needs a major face lift, update and overhaul?

Fix Wall Street, blight, POKO, get the Wall Street train station going, etc. That will drive people to the main library by foot.

Meanwhile, many (most?) folks living in Cranbury, West Norwalk and Silvermine without an accessible library have been trekking to the neighboring libraries of Westport, Darien, Wilton and New Canaan for years. We've been spoiled. These libraries are beautiful, up-to-date and well-funded. Parking isn't enough to bring us back anymore.

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 4, 2017 at 2:15 pm](#)

@Sue Haynie, the headline isn't just deceiving. It's not even backed up by Milligan's own statements. Harry won re-election. He doesn't need to be protected anymore.

US Blues [December 4, 2017 at 3:33 pm](#)

We never go to the Norwalk Public library. Westport is far more attractive, attentive, and accessible.

Adolph Neaderland [December 4, 2017 at 3:35 pm](#)

I see it quite differently.

Back in 2006, POCD specifically called out parking and expansion for the Library.

Who wasn't paying attention? P&Z primarily. Then the Mayors & library Boards

If P&Z had the city in mind instead of developers, the instant a petition for development reached their desk, the Mayor and Library should have been notified.

My assumption is that no such notification was issued.

If my assumption is correct, it's another example of improper allegiance. P&Z should have as a primary responsibility, PROTECT the CITY. and, Lack of oversight by the Mayors.

Reese [December 4, 2017 at 4:40 pm](#)

If I was on the library board I'd be checking the real estate listings ever fricking day to see if these properties came on the market. future expansion has been ultimately eliminated from the equation.

I would have each surrounding property owner on alert that the city was interested in the lot, come here first before going on the market

officially. We were asleep at the wheel.

Its pretty sad because people stay away from the library due to the parking situation... imagine a day when parking is a non-issue?

Michael McGuire [December 4, 2017 at 6:59 pm](#)

I would put Reese on the Library Board. The property at 11 Belden Ave was put on the market in November 2014 and sold in February 2015.

It was listed by Cushman and Wakefield, Al Mirin was the broker. Cushman is a savvy outfit and Al Mirin one of their top brokers. I would be surprised if he did not reach out to the City or library.

Hugh Sling [December 4, 2017 at 9:14 pm](#)

Norwalkers don't just avoid the Norwalk library. They avoid the entire area because it's hopelessly ugly and depressing. Empty storefronts, crappy bars, thousand of faceless overpriced apartments, the Duleep dungeon, the Boondoggle Playhouse aka Wall Street Theater, what a mess. The library needs to be relocated to a different part of town altogether.

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 4, 2017 at 9:38 pm](#)

@Michael McGuire, are you suggesting someone at City Hall dropped the ball when this property was listed? That's not what the Mayor's office says.

Mike Mushak [December 5, 2017 at 12:18 am](#)

If it was put on the market in November of 2014 and sold in February of 2015, as Michael McGuire states, that's less than 3 months from listing to closing.

[Rick December 5, 2017 at 10:04 am](#)

at least when I post my nose isn't brown

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 5, 2017 at 10:09 am](#)

@Mike Mushak, it's hard to imagine that the library board and the mayor's office didn't have their antenna up on this property, or that the realtor never reached out. Now Rilling has Laoise King saying things like "It shocked us when it came on the market." I have great respect for Ms. King. But she did not work for the mayor when the property came on the market, so she could not have been shocked herself. Using the pontifical plural may be a way to insulate the mayor from responsibility for having dropped the ball on this one. 17 Quintard transacted right under the Mayor's nose well after he had received a certified letter from Firetree spelling out their intentions, as was required by the Federal Bureau of Prisons RFP. Mayor Rilling may have had every intention of purchasing the library parking lot and the listing was too brief for the city to act upon. But from where I'm sitting under the cloud of Firetree and the mayor's four versions of the truth—none of them accurate—I'm inclined to believe the Mayor's office simply dropped the ball on this one. 17 Quintard seems to have transacted privately. The library lot was an active listing. Mike McGuire said above that he would be surprised if the broker did not reach out to either the city or the library.

Lisa Brinton Thomson [December 5, 2017 at 11:10 am](#)

@ Rick – now that was funny!!!

While it's not fair to blame the mayor for the current state of Wall Street, it is fair to hold him accountable for a broken planning and zoning process/structure that he's been aware of and promised to address four years ago. At that time, he blamed the previous administration. Four years on – he owns most if not ALL the appointments of the various boards and commissions that collectively and individually get us into these expensive messes that fail to grow the grand list needed to support our educators, police and fire fighters – thus requiring repeated tax increases..

At the end of the day, Norwalk's convoluted governance and decision making structure needs fixing and it is the mayor's failure to lead or his lack of political will to address these issues that drove three challengers this year. All expressed alarm at the dysfunctional P&Z process – albeit from different perspectives – collectively drawing 45% of residents still engaged enough to vote.

The Wall Street area is the poster child of Norwalk's governance failures and missed opportunities that extend beyond the library and parking debacle. Blight, the POKO LDA, the need for public easements for increase walkability and empty storefront windows, despite established businesses wanting to re-locate, ALL point to City Hall's lethargy and inability to execute plans dating back to the 2008 POCD and beyond.

At election time, mayors take credit for everything, but when the going gets tough, deny responsibility for anything. This mayor specializes in that. Having just secured two-more years with a 14-1 Democrat Common Council majority – please get on with it!

David T McCarthy [December 5, 2017 at 6:12 pm](#)

Thank you, Nancy commenters for correcting the bias of the article and the poor attempt at spin and character assassination on the part of Mike Mushak...

My letter was an opinion piece which stated that our mayor is uninvolved and doesn't do anything other than glad-hand...and it stands, 100%. Hey, it works for him. I believe it was reported (prior to that letter) that the city had turned down the opportunity to buy the property. If that was of

concern to voters, they could agree or disagree as to whether the mayor should have acted differently. This article and all the “he said she said” didn’t make anything clearer to me.

Of course the panic buying for double the price comment is accurate, as is the fact that they (or top-flight attorney Alex Knopp) bungled that deal that only needed reasonable indemnification language (again, as was reported at the time)

Of greater interest is the fact that there is a parking master plan and a “A Proposal for a Comprehensively Managed Public Parking System” on the city’s web site, which have many, many suggestions, none of which has ever been acted on, to my knowledge, yet more money is being spent...

Further, for Nancy: You comment guidelines dictate:

“Do not insult, bully, threaten or harass the writers or your fellow commenters. Continued violators will be banned” “Character assassination by innuendo will not be tolerated and will result in a loss of comment privileges.” Phrases such as “nasty, baseless attacks” “nasty letter full of lies” as well as other statements accusing me of fabricating something, and seemingly associating me with other false statements are all of these.

The fact that Mr. Mushak is somehow obsessed with me is clear. If he wished before the election, or now, to defend the mayor’s actions, he may write his opinion and submit it. Instead, he violates your policy, as he has multiple times. I suggest the time has long since passed for his commenting privileges to be revoked.

Michael McGuire [December 5, 2017 at 6:14 pm](#)  
A Christmas Carol for Wall Street – the Tiny Tim of Norwalk

Deck the Poko with tyvek wrapping, Fa la la la la, la la la la  
Tis another season passing, Fa la la la la, la la la la

Duleep is finally building out now, Fa la la la la, la la la la  
But library parking is still lacking, Fa la la la la, la la la la

Maybe now we’ll get a station Fa la la la la, la la la la  
Hopefully not just more stagnation Fa la la la la, la la la la

Here’s to a more prosperous 2018.  
Hugh Sling [December 5, 2017 at 6:57 pm](#)  
Don’t quit your day job.

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 5, 2017 at 7:56 pm](#)  
@Michael, I am thrilled that you’ve thrown down the gauntlet, but everyone else may regret letting this genie out of the bottle.

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|---|---|--|--|
| Donna Smirniotopoulos <a href="#">December 5, 2017 at 9:04 pm</a> | And a brand new P-O-C-D                             | Two Worn Out Bridges                               | On the Tenth Day of Christmas the                    |
| Twelve Days of Nonsense   | On the Fifth Day of Christmas the City gave to me   | And a brand new P-O-C-D                            | City gave to me                                      |
| On the First Day of Christmas the City Gave to me                 | Five Big Box Stores!                                | On the Eighth Day of Christmas the City gave to me | Ten parking tickets                                  |
| A brand new P-O-C-D!  | Four Taxing Districts                               | Eight Norwalk Planners                             | Nine Nights of Meetings                              |
| On the second day of Christmas the City gave to me                | Three Rilling Terms                                 | Seven Norwalk Zoners                               | Eight Norwalk Planners                               |
| Two Worn Out Bridges  | Two Worn Out Bridges                                | Six Harbor Seals                                   | Seven Norwalk Zoners                                 |
| And a brand new P-O-C-D!  | And a brand new P-O-C-D                             | Five Big Box Stores                                | Six Harbor Seals                                     |
| On the third day of Christmas the City gave to me                 | On the Sixth Day of Christmas the City gave to me   | Four Taxing Districts                              | Five Big Box Stores                                  |
| Three Terms of Rilling  | City gave to me                                     | Three Rilling Terms                                | Four Taxing Districts                                |
| Two Worn Out Bridges  | Six Harbor Seals                                    | Two Worn Out Bridges                               | Three Rilling Terms                                  |
| And a brand new P-O-C-D   | Five Big Box Stores                                 | And a Brand New P-O-C-D                            | Two Worn Out Bridges                                 |
| On the fourth day of Christmas the City gave to me                | Four Taxing Districts                               | On the Ninth Day of Christmas the City gave to me  | On the Eleventh Day of Christmas the City gave to me |
| Four Taxing Districts   | Three Rilling Terms                                 | City gave to me                                    | Eleven lanes for biking                              |
| Three Terms of Rilling  | Two Worn Out Bridges                                | Nine Nights of Meetings                            | Ten Parking Tickets                                  |
| Two Worn Out Bridges  | And a brand new P-O-C-D                             | Eight Norwalk Planners                             | Nine Nights of Meetings                              |
|   | On the Seventh Day of Christmas the City gave to me | Seven Norwalk Zoners                               | Eight Norwalk Planners                               |
|   | the City gave to me                                 | Six Harbor Seals                                   | Seven Norwalk Zoners                                 |
|   | Seven Norwalk Zoners                                | Five Big Box Stores                                | Six Harbor Seals                                     |
|   | Six Harbor Seals                                    | Four Taxing Districts                              | Five Big Box Stores                                  |
|   | Five Big Box Stores                                 | Three Rilling Terms                                | Four Taxing Districts                                |
|   | Four Taxing Districts                               | Two Worn out Bridges                               | Three Rilling Terms                                  |
|   | Three Rilling Terms                                 | And a Brand New P-O-C-D                            | Two Worn Out Bridges                                 |

[Nancy Chapman December 5, 2017 at 9:42 pm](#)

Dave, I believe you're mistaken. The article has not been attacked as being biased, the headline has. Fair enough. Headline writing is an art and many people do not understand the restrictions and challenges. Donna's suggestion is interesting but it looks too long.

As far as the nit-picking of the word "opportunity," IMO the listing was an "opportunity." A headline is intended to convey an idea of what the story is about and to entice people to read it. Looks to me like it worked.

As for Mr. Mushak's comments, I have wondered how you would know that Mayor Rilling "didn't spend any time on the library" – have you been monitoring his phone calls? I have not personally seen any news reports that he engaged in "actively turning down the opportunity to purchase the neighboring lot," so I can see where Mr. Mushak would think your letter full of "nasty baseless lies." Can you please provide us with a link of the news reports you mention?

"Panic buying" is fun. While questionable in terms of facts (we'd call it ascribing motives), you, as you say, wrote an opinion. Mr. Mushak also expresses his opinion in writing.

We'll handle the comments policy, thanks.

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 5, 2017 at 9:57 pm](#)

@Nancy, if you'll indulge me

"Rilling Asleep on Library Parking, says Milligan"

A bit tighter and closer to the spirit of Milligan's email. Of course the Mayor did not create this problem. But it's clear that someone dropped the ball when the lot was listed for sale.

Donna Smirniotopoulos [December 5, 2017 at 10:30 pm](#)

@Nancy, a poem in the spirit of the season is sitting in your spam folder. Several copies in fact.