

RIDGEFIELD AFFORDABLE HOUSING COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes

April 27, 2022 – 7:00 PM

Town Hall – 400 Main Street, Ridgefield
Large Conference Room, Lower Level

PRESENT: Dave Goldenberg (Chair), Kent Rohrer (Vice Chair), Kevin Brown, Whit Campbell, Sharon Coleman, Debra Franceschini-Gatje, Sheryl Knapp, Lori Mazzola, Krista Willett

The meeting was called to order via conference call at 7:04 PM.

1. **Current Business:**

- a) **Affordable housing plan:** The Committee is in the process of gathering feedback and input on the plan. There will be a second public informational session, in addition to the public hearing on 5/25. Rudy Marconi indicated the Selectmen will not be able to vote on the plan until they meet on 6/8, so Rudy is writing to the state to request an extension for submitting the plan. Kent and Dave have reached out to the Selectmen to capture their long-form comments, and the Committee will meet to review them. P&Z is holding a special meeting to discuss the plan on 5/4, although it is not clear whether any specific feedback will be provided on the plan. Two Committee members who were not present for the informational session asked to share their impressions after viewing the video footage. Lori stated that she felt the Committee is losing trust with residents, with accusations of a lack of transparency and dismissing residents' input. She expressed that there hasn't been full transparency regarding the Chairperson's personal views regarding affordable housing issues and legislation, and that the interview process did not proceed as planned. She indicated that she felt the Committee is divided and needs to resolve issues prior to submitting anything to the state. Kent stated that he has not detected a bias at any point in the development of the plan, and that numerous opportunities were provided to all Committee members to provide input, plus every recommendation and section was discussed by the Committee. The objective was to create a draft for which the Committee would solicit input from Planning & Zoning, the Selectmen, and the public. He stated that many of the people complaining do not appear to have read the document in full, and have made misstatements about what is in the plan – for instance, inaccurately suggesting the plan calls for 1,124 new affordable units, or indicating that it referenced racism or Desegregate CT. Kent said that the plan as presented talks about making modest changes to housing for largely people who have a connection to Ridgefield, but it is wrong to imply that the only people who deserve to live in Ridgefield are those who are currently living in Ridgefield. He feels that the plan is unbiased, balancing the varied views of committee members, and meets the objective of keeping as much as possible in Ridgefield's control. He emphasized that if we don't put proactive steps to put a plan in place to slow or stop 8-30g, we are destined to be run by state control. Lori made a motion to ask the Selectman to ask for an extension for the plan beyond 6/1; Debra seconded. Kent stated that this is a moot point as

the BOS is already requesting an extension. There was extensive discussion regarding how and when feedback would be collected from other committees and how that input will be incorporated into the plan. The motion was withdrawn.

There was extensive discussion regarding the timing and scope of interviews conducted by Committee members to solicit information for the plan. Interviews had been conducted with over 30 town leaders and stakeholders such as the Superintendent of Schools, the Head of Teachers Union, Owner of Ridgefield Supply, the Ridgefield Development and Planning Committee, and the Prospector Theater leadership. Debra asked why one resident who had requested that he be interviewed was not; Kevin and Dave indicated that he was not interviewed because he had already been to many meetings during which he had submitted written feedback. Whit indicated that gathering interviews was never a scientific process, but rather an effort to get feedback regarding the need and desires for affordable housing in Ridgefield from leaders in the community. Debra proposed that the previous interviews conducted be thrown out and new ones conducted; Kent indicated that he was confident that the views expressed would still exist, and if anything the need would be greater given the difficulties employers are currently having finding employees. He said the interviews, together with the surveys, confirmed what we believed to be true regarding the need for affordable housing in Ridgefield. Krista moved that Committee members conduct interviews using the same questions employed previously. Dave asked how the feedback from members of the public be weighed as compared to town leaders. Members of the Committee discussed compiling feedback on the plan from residents. Krista withdrew her motion and moved that we solicit public feedback on the plan by email or letter in the form of specific comments or suggestions regarding the plan; Sharon seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

- b) Kent made a motion that the next public information session be scheduled for Saturday 5/14 from 10:00-12:00 in a location to be determined, but preferably the large conference room; Krista seconded. Motion passes unanimously. Dave will write a press release, and Debra to coordinate publicity.
- c) Dave indicated that he had arranged to discuss the plan with the DTC on 5/17, and the RTC on 5/19. Lori made a motion that no one member of the committee can write a letter or do an interview making a statement on behalf of the Committee without the committee's approval; Debra seconded. Kent expressed that he does not believe that any Committee member has ever acted contrary to this. He and Sheryl proposed that this instead serve as a reminder to Committee members that no one speaks on behalf of the Committee unless the Committee agrees on it. The motion was withdrawn. The Committee agreed that if meetings are set up, for instance with the DTC and RTC, an email will be sent to the entire Committee.
- d) **Request for ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funding.** Dave requested permission to write a letter to the BOS to get ARPA money to seed the Housing Trust Fund. Kent and a Selectman in attendance expressed that it was very unlikely that the money would be awarded, and that the money must be used for COVID or infrastructure related expenses.

Kent made a motion that we allow Dave to draft a letter to request ARPA funding; Sheryl seconded. Debra stated that we should not be allocating money to something that doesn't exist, and Lori expressed concerns about the funding not going to other deserving recipients. Sharon, Kent, Kevin, Dave, Sheryl voted in favor; Krista, Whit, Lori and Deborah dissented. Motion passes 5-4.

2. Public comment was provided by numerous members of the public, both through written testimony and in person. Three residents of Ballard Green submitted a combined letter requesting that no more housing be added to Ballard Green. A member of the public thanked Committee members for their hard work, but expressed that she felt that the voices of all Committee members have not been heard and stressed the importance of getting input on the plan from residents in town. Two attendees asked why we did not utilize the WestCOG plan in lieu of doing our own, but one indicated when asked that she had never read it. Another attendee acknowledged the amount of work involved in creating the plan and the pressure put on the Committee, thanking the committee for its hard work, especially in light of the state's and county's housing crisis. An attendee stated that some of the numbers in the plan seemed outdated, but Dave indicated that these were the most current numbers available. An attendee asked why naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH) cannot count toward 8-20g, and Dave explained that with NOAH there are no income restrictions; Kent expressed that the availability of this housing should be incorporated in the plan. An attendee felt that the need for affordable housing is exaggerated, and our town should not have to deal with the problems of the state or of more urban areas.
3. **Minutes:** Kent moved to accept the minutes to the previous two meetings as submitted; Sharon seconded. The minutes were approved unanimously.
4. **Next meeting:** It was noted that 5/14 is the spring stroll and may not be suitable for a public informational session. The date was moved to 5/7 by unanimous consent. A special meeting of the Committee was scheduled for 5/12 to review input and further develop the plan.
5. **Adjourn:** Kevin moved to adjourn; Lori seconded, and the Committee voted unanimously to adjourn. The meeting was adjourned at 10:09 PM.

Prepared by Sheryl Knapp, Secretary