



**Ridgefield
Economic &
Community
Development
Commission**

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Geoffrey Morris, Chair
Glori Norwitt, Secretary
Christa Carone
Sean Dowd
Susan Gessner
Bob Knight
Steve Spivak

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman
ridgefieldct.com

**Economic & Community Development Commission
Approved Minutes
July 21, 2021, 6:30 pm, in Town Hall Conference Room**

In Attendance: Chairman Geoffrey Morris; Secretary Glori Norwitt; Commissioners Christa Carone, Sean Dowd and Bob Knight

Via Phone: Susan Gessner

Geoffrey Morris called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m.

Announcements

Next meeting: August 2, 2021 (which may be cancelled)

Discussion of future meetings, and whether they should be in-person, zoom, or a hybrid.

Minutes

With no modifications, Bob Knight made a motion to approve the June 2021 meeting minutes; seconded by Christa Carone. Motion carries 6-0.

General Discussion

1. **Cultural District Update** (Norwitt)

At the June meeting of the Arts, Culture, Tourism & Recreation, several members had suggestions of ways to support the new Cultural District (CD) designation for the Town. One suggestion was to create a window cling that businesses and organizations in the CD could put in their window. Jonathan Winn, who created the CD logo for the State, offered to purchase the window clings. Subsequently he purchased 100 and provided them to the ECDC for distribution. Glori will distribute to all businesses in the CD, by walking the CD and also mailing some. Businesses outside of the specific CD will also be provided with the window clings if requested.

Another suggestion was that a uniform statement describing the CD is written and distributed to businesses and organizations in town, so that everyone describes what it is in the same way. Then businesses and organizations could put the statement and the CD logo on their website. Glori and Geoffrey worked on this statement and shared it with the Commissioners. The statement will be revised slightly and then distributed around town.

The Commissioners discussed the CD signs that will be raised in at least two locations in town: in front of Ballard Park, for those approaching downtown from the north, and one just south of the fountain, for those approaching downtown from the south. Discussion of locations for additional signs. Geoffrey and Glori currently are awaiting approval of the sign from the State.

Per the CD benefits, the State should promote the Ridgefield CD on the CTVisit.com website. Glori is awaiting response from the appropriate state persons about this process. She has been informed that currently the State Tourism and Marketing departments are understaffed and very busy.

2. **ARA Funds for the Arts** (Morris, Dowd, Norwitt)

The Town of Ridgefield will receive or has recently received approximately \$2.5 million from the federal government through the American Rescue Plan, which is monies separate from what the school system will receive. Additionally, the Town will receive another approximately \$7 million stimulus from the federal government in approximately one year.

The federal government has established certain criteria regarding how these federal monies can be spent. For example, this stimulus money cannot be used to pay down the tax rate. Glori and Geoffrey have had discussions with First Selectman Marconi about providing funding for arts and culture organizations from some of these monies to be received by the Town. There is a state-wide initiative for each town to provide 1% of monies received to arts and culture. However, based on the large effect that this sector has on the Ridgefield economy, the ECDC may argue for additional sums, perhaps up to 10%.

These federal funds are to act as stimulus, such as hiring new staff or attracting customers. In addition to assisting local arts and culture nonprofits (of which there are 22-23 in town), funding could also support specific projects. Projects which the ECDC may advocate for funding include mosaic art installations in outdoor walking areas, funding for improved parking in the downtown area including better signage (particularly in the soon to be expanded municipal parking lot off Governor Street, and the parking lot behind the post office which will become available for parking for town use soon). Sean also suggested that some funds could be saved for marketing

town events, and some funds could be directly applied to economic development. Geoffrey, Glori and Sean will meet with First Selectman Marconi next week to discuss further.

A new town committee has been formed to discuss the ARA funds, consisting of 2 BOS members, 2 BOE members, 2 BOF members, and ECDC chair Geoffrey Morris.

Bob noted that as part of the Town's Long Term Recovery Committee efforts, a Finance Subcommittee was formed several months ago, and led by Frank Rowella from local accounting firm Reynolds & Rowella. Frank assembled a team of financial persons to serve as impartial vetters, which would advise the Board of Selectmen if needed. Bob now believes there may be duplication and asked Geoffrey to check with the First Selectman to see if the subcommittee's talents are still needed?

Bob noted that there have been some federal clawbacks in certain areas regarding federal stimulus funds.

3. **Parking** (Dowd)

ECDC recognizes that parking is a friction point for people visiting the downtown area. Suggestions to improve the situation include signage (for directions to parking areas) and lot development/enhancement.

Sean will look into how parking permits are being used. It is desirable to have turnover in parking spots that are close to businesses, instead of employees parking in those spots all day long. As noted above, Sean may make suggestions to the new committee which is reviewing how to use the new ARA funds that the Town will receive. Sean will reach out to the Parking Authority with ideas, to get their feedback, and invite them to an ECDC meeting.

Christa noted that restaurant owners would like to plan long term regarding their current permits which allow outdoor dining in parking areas, and thus need to know how long these permits will continue. Bob believes that these special permits will end in October.

There was a discussion regarding the creation of outdoor seating area on the south end of Ballard Park, with picnic tables, and having the CHIRP concert Wifi available during the day.

Discussion of the need for more EV parking spots/chargers in town. Bob suggested that EV chargers be installed with ARA funding. Christa noted that location signage should be included. Geoffrey noted that he suggested to Town Hall Jake that EV chargers be added to every new parking lot. Governor Street parking lot expansion will include 4 new EV charging spots. St. Stephens may be adding EV charging spots in their reconstructed parking lot.

4. **Community Input on ECDC and Town** Matters (Morris/Knight)

ECDC is pleased to be receiving emails from members of the public with suggestions and comments.

Suggestion that downtown shops open earlier and stay open later. Sean noted that retailers seem to have a return on investment to stay open later during the holiday season, but not year round. Geoffrey noted that retailers may not have stayed open with expanded hours for a long enough time period, to let customers realize that they are open later.

Sean noted that there is not an anchor store downtown. Right now the two biggest anchors may be the Ridgefield Hardware Store and Deborah Ann's chocolates.

Several stores looked at Balducci's location when the grocery store closed, before the Thrift Store took over; the critical element is the number of cars driving by. Arts and culture can be our anchor. Idea of taking advantage of summer Concerts in the Park that begin at 7pm, but stores close at 6pm.

Geoffrey noted that there is a physical ECDC mailbox in the first room in Town Hall.

Discussion of retention and destruction requirements for emails received and sent by Commissioners. Glori reviewed and quoted the Municipal Records Retention Schedule or General Administration per the Public Records Administration of the CT State Library, and a related 2009 Memo entitled "Management and Retention of Email and other Electronic Messages." The guidance is not clear, but indicates that for electronic messages, "Retention is based on the **content** of the message, not the media type. Most electronic messages have limited value and can be deleted immediately upon receipt. However, electronic messages that document agency functions and provide evidence of agency business must be retained according to the equivalent records series." (per the 2009 Memo). Per the General Administration Records Schedule M1, for electronic mail messages, "Transitory messages (ie non-record material such as junk mail, publications, notices, reviews, announcements, employee activities, routine business activities, casual and routine communications similar to telephone conversations) there is no requirement to retain and can be deleted at will.

Discussion of the Commissioners having access to a Google drive where all relevant ECDC emails can be kept, which possibly the ECDC Chair should own and could control access based on incoming and outgoing Commissioners. Glori will speak to Town Hall about the matter.

Suggestion from one email to the ECDC: to determine desired target niche stores for downtown, and also to have "Amazon Free Days" and encourage people to shop downtown.

5. Economic Development & Recovery Plan (Knight)

In 2009, Garnet Economic Development Consulting was hired by the ECDC to create a comprehensive economic development plan which was subsequently turned over to the BOS.

At that time, right after Lehman Brothers fell, some people were taking golden parachutes to open smaller businesses, particularly in Ridgefield.

Now a workgroup is creating an updated, simpler plan to give to the BOS, for longer term pandemic recovery, entitled the Economic Development & Recovery Plan 2021. Bob shared a draft with the Commissioners in attendance.

The Vision is a modern, vibrant, innovative and diversified economy that creates a positive business climate and high quality of life for the Town of Ridgefield.

The Mission is to seek, encourage, facilitate and implement orderly and planned economic development, in keeping with the character of the town.

Goals are to (1) attract, retain and grow business in Ridgefield (2) activate entrepreneurship (3) develop and maintain 21st century infrastructure (4) advocate for supportive public policy (5)

promote business in Ridgefield (6) align workforce development with hot sector jobs and (7) develop destinations within the community.

In 1980, the proposed goal of the POCD was 10-15% of the Grand List should arise from industrial development. In 2009, the goal was 12-15% of the Grand List. In the last decade, this goal was reached in the commercial tax base. Commissioners reviewed the Ridgefield business portion of the 2008 and 2019 Grand Lists.

Concern: Real property assessment on the commercial side decreased from \$544,520 to \$532,508. Industrial decreased. Apartments increased.

The total 2008 grand list was \$5.531 billion and dropped to \$4.883 billion with the Total 2019 grand list, but the total business property increased from \$721 to \$758 million. This Increase seems to come from increased fees: DMV fees, personal prop tax on furniture and equipment. The rise in the business tax base should be considered is a warning sign and something for ECDC to address. ECDC would like to see Real Property (business) increase rather than depend on permitting fees and smaller taxes.

Currently, people in town like small town charm, education, and quality of life, the workforce, the support for arts and culture, the downtown area, and community spirit. The community is concerned about lack of diversity, Branchville's business viability, aesthetics of Route 7 gateways, need for a corporate tax base in town, taxes, not enough economic development, too much growth, and health of the downtown retail community.

Bob noted that business retention and expansion is important. Actionable steps and desirable outcomes: retain 80% of businesses after pandemic. Bob said that in a conversation with Tax Assessor Al Garzi, Mr. Garzi felt that having 10-15 home-based businesses expand and take commercial space in Ridgefield would have a significant (positive) impact on the business portion of The Grand List. Additional ideas include: attracting 10 businesses from hot sectors such as finance/insurance, healthcare, and arts/culture/entertainment; grow business end of Grand List to 18%; perhaps payroll growth; placemaking: find some spots of town to activate (Bob noted the "project for public spaces" organization, with Detroit as an example of using placemaking to stimulate economic growth in downtown areas); workforce development to ensure that college students return to town; sustainability which former Commissioner Cameron Carcelen is providing support for.

Another goal is to have youth return to town after leaving for college or jobs. Bob said that School Superintendent Dr. Susie DaSilva would be interested in partnering with ECDC on integrating high school students into Ridgefield's business community to learn a variety of important skill.

Bob noted that improvements to electrical redundancy could decrease the impact of power outages. One goal could be to increase business up time by 50%, particular during summer storm season. Further, the town could look to fund a fiber feasibility study to bring high-speed fiber internet to every premises in Ridgefield which increases productivity, property values, and opportunity. This is a particularly important issue to Boehringer-Ingelheim, the town's largest employer and taxpayer, whose HR team must navigate the "trailing spouse" scenario so that spouses of Boehringer employees can easily find remote work from their homes in Ridgefield. Further, support more commercial development projects in Branchville area, such as one or two residential projects around the Branchville train area.

The ECDC could advocate simplicity from a regulatory standpoint, at local or state level, such as the recently created P&Z flow chart to understand the permitting process.

For branding and marketing, Commissioner Susan Gessner is leading the charge. Sean noted that it appears a door is open to speak with Boehringer to market the town, and even sell it to their potential employees, to support the Travelling spouse” that Boehringer employees may have.

Christa noted that we could assist the Arts & Culture sector, which is already here but may want more support, such as video or content production.

6. **Branding the Town** (Gessner)

Kate Guillory, owner of Goldmine Research and a Ridgefield resident, is assisting on a pro bono basis to organize focus groups for the “The Ridge” concept (which was shown at last month’s ECDC meeting). In addition to that image, two additional graphic designs will be tested and discussed. The focus groups will include nonprofit leaders, residents, and business owners.

7. **New Business**

The Commissioners discussed that the state will allow cannabis sales in the near future. Sean noted that the town may decide to not allow retail sales of cannabis, but the town is not allowed to limit delivery. Discussion of the BOS having an open and honest conversation about retail stores for cannabis before deciding any zoning restrictions. Safe and legal distribution of cannabis could support the tax base, fill empty retail space, in business districts, provide for control of the issue, and may be responsive to changing town demographics.

Motion: ECDC advocates to participate in a town-wide discussion regarding Ridgefield’s stance on retail sales of cannabis and related products, with a research-based approach. Motion by Christa, seconded by Geoffrey. Passes unanimously 6-0.

Glori will reach out to State Senator Will Haskell and State Representative Aimee Berger-Girvalo to learn about what information the legislature considered in their debate/discussion, and to ask whether either of them would be interested in being part of the town-wide discussion if one is held.

One guest to the meeting noted that Ridgefield resident Rob McArthur has a cannabis-related store in Stamford, and possibly could provide input.

Motion to adjourn by Bob; seconded by Sean. Motion carries 6-0. The meeting concluded at 8:32pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Glori Norwitt, ECDC Secretary