



**Ridgefield
Economic &
Community
Development
Commission**

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

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman
ridgefieldct.com

**Economic & Community Development Commission
Approved Minutes**

October 4, 2021, 6:30 pm in Town Hall Main Conference Room and via Zoom

In Attendance in person: Chairman Geoffrey Morris; Secretary Glori Norwitt; Commissioner Sean Dowd

In Attendance over Zoom: Commissioners Christa Carone and Susan Gessner

Geoffrey Morris called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m.

Announcements

Next meeting: November 1, 2021

Minutes

Susan made a motion to approve the September 2021 meeting minutes with no modifications; seconded by Geoffrey. Motion carries 4-0.

General Discussion

1. American Rescue Plan Funds for the Arts (Morris, Norwitt)

The Town of Ridgefield will receive funds from the federal government through the American Rescue Plan. The federal government has established certain criteria regarding how these federal monies can be spent. Glori, Sean 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.

A seven person committee has been formed with 2 representatives from the BOS, 2 from the BOE, 2 from the BOF, and Geoffrey representing the ECDC. This group has not yet met, and a previously scheduled canceled meeting has not been rescheduled. There are discussions about possibly using some ARPA funds to cover some of the sewer project which is \$3+ million over budget.

Geoffrey, Sean and Glori's list of possible items to be funded is growing. The town Parks & Recreation Commission recommends improvements in the following order: Ballard Park Gazebo, Ballard Park Stage, Lighting in Ballard Park, and replacing the clock on Main Street (near Deborah Ann's Chocolates). Other possible items to fund include revamping the downtown parking situation (note that the Governor Street lot just opened) and community mosaic art installations in community parks.

2. Budget (Carone)

Christa discussed that the ECDC could allocate \$3,000 - \$4,000 towards marketing and promoting town events and businesses, for the balance of the calendar year. Next year the ECDC could consider using its budget towards supporting the ECDC branding initiative, marketing initiatives in town, and possibly grants towards local businesses in need. Currently the remaining budget until the end of June 2022 is \$14,000.

Motion by Christa, seconded by Geoffrey: Allocate \$3,500 of existing budget to promoting events that will drive traffic into and around town during the fall and holiday season 2021, targeted to both people inside and outside of Ridgefield. Motion carries 4-0.

3. Branding the Town: Focus Group Report (Gessner)

Susan has been working on the branding process since spring, with ECDC members who have since stepped down. They decided to rebrand the town as "The Ridge."

Susan and Kate Guillory of Goldmine Research held three Focus Groups with Ridgefield nonprofit leaders, business owners and residents on September 22, 23 and 24. Kate Guillory moderated the groups pro gratis.

The objective of the sessions was to test the term "The Ridge" and its creative execution. Susan reached out to 55 people, and 13 participated with 7 no shows. There were robust discussions in each of the three groups.

They showed the stimulus (ie the ridge logo) and then probed for initial thoughts and what message they got from the stimulus.

Overall observations: many were interested in the notion of branding the town and discussed previous efforts. However, a majority were unsure that “The Ridge” captured the full extent of what the town has to offer. They thought it was “trying too hard” to be cool and hip. They thought it did not necessarily feel that the approach spoke beyond promoting the town to visitors and potential new residents.

The look of “The Ridge”: Nonprofit leaders had the strongest comments and the most negative; incongruent with the town charm and vibe. Disconnect with what the town offers. Looks commercial and exclusive; need inclusivity.

The term “The Ridge”: trying to be cool. Question who the audience is. We need to preserve the downtown and curate what we want there. Want to attract new visitors but cannot alienate the base. Agree that more marketing is needed generally in the town.

Business owners were less negative about the term “The Ridge” but did not like the contemporary look. Lacks warmth. We are a warm, authentic community.

The term “The Ridge”: many have heard the term. We need to evoke pride.

Business owners note that they have had to adjust due to the pandemic, and the need to be more sophisticated in their goods and services with the increase of new homeowners in town.

Founders Hall staff were positive overall, with questions about the purpose of the new look. They have pride in the town; liked the tagline “more”.

Potential Taglines were discussed, and some favorites were “shop more” “savor more” and “explore more.”

A description of the Town was passed around, and most agreed with it.

Key takeaways: The term The Ridge is cute but sounds like a nickname and sells the town short. The creative approach is contemporary and cold, and doesn't represent the town's authentic and warm sensibility. Attracting a younger demographic will be difficult. There is a lack of affordable housing. After graduating college, they want to live in urban areas. So our target audience is 35+ young families. The business owner group suggested more research and work prior to moving forward.

The ECDC discussed that the uniformity in responses is surprising. Geoffrey wants to share this with the other ECDC members. We were trying to get the message out about the town. Susan thinks the town is a contemporary classic.

4. **P&Z / ECDC Rezoning Proposal** (Morris)

Earlier this year a Planning and Zoning subcommittee of 8 people was formed with members of P&Z, ECDC, business owners, and landlords, with the purpose of discussing the creation of a zoning overlay to modify the central business district, with focus on Prospect Street to Governor Street to Prospect Ridge. To get ahead of an apparent downturn in business, and with the goal of maintaining density of retail businesses on Main Street itself, the subcommittee discussed

allowing landlords to make first-floor spaces residential, in certain designated areas that are not on Main Street, and parts of Bailey Ave below the curve in the road and not near Main Street. This would provide flexibility to landlords, to switch business space to residential space, in a certain limited area.

The integrity/legality of the subcommittee was challenged and subsequently the subcommittee was disbanded. Opposition seems to have resulted from poor communication. Now the ECDC has a subcommittee of Geoffrey and Bob considering this issue. Planning & Zoning has its own subcommittee considering the issue. P&Z will hold a public hearing on the issue at some point in the upcoming months. Commercial realtors and business owners seem to not oppose it.

Separately, there may be a zoning change to the Route 7 area to support businesses more.

At this point, a resident commented over Zoom that her 36 year old son recently moved back to town and is surprised and happy with the multitude of things to do in town.

5. **Boys & Girls Club Ridgefield Expansion** (Dowd)

Sean recently visited the Boys & Girls Club of Ridgefield (BGCR) and learned about its Expansion Campaign to raise \$6.5 million for a shovel-ready building expansion project. At this point approximately \$4 million has been raised. Some possible additional funding may come from the State. BGCR has a matching donor of \$500,000, and has informed the BOS that they are looking for additional funds of \$500,000 to meet the match. The BGCR asked the BOS to consider using ARPA funding to allocate towards its Expansion Campaign.

BGCR never turns a child down, even if unable to pay. They work well with schools and the Barn. They are geared towards tweens and teens so they have a place to be, structured and unstructured. BGCR would love to add a mental health counselor, to assist with the many issues arising lately. The Expansion Campaign will add 10,000 square feet to the current building.

ECDC discussed the economic development impact of the BGCR, and its partnerships around town, particularly sports. The ECDC could market their Expansion Campaign. There was discussion of the review process of supporting nonprofit campaigns overall. Discussion of other nonprofit campaigns in town which may also seek support.

Sean motions that the ECDC verbally supports the BGCR Campaign for Growth, and the ECDC supports the Town supporting it financially. Glori seconds. Motion carries 4-0.

6. **Economic Development Plan** (Knight)

In Bob's absence, this discussion has been tabled.

7. **Survey: Community Data Platform** (Morris)

Geoffrey noted that the ECDC previously collaborated with the Community Data Platform to conduct a survey in relation to Vaccination Hesitation, which was received by 20,000 people with 2,600 responding. Their business model is to aggregate data for small and midsize cities, and create dashboards to assist them.

This organization is now preparing an economic development survey, which ECDC members have reviewed. When received, the ECDC will distribute it to as many people as possible. Hopefully the Town of Fairfield will participate again. The ECDC has approximately 5,000 email addresses from TownVibe. The survey can also be posted on social media via a link.

8. Other

The ECDC has one vacancy due to Steve Spivak's departure. An announcement/ad will be posted by Town Hall.

Glori is working with Susan to review the CT Office of Tourism website CTVisit.com, to eventually make suggestions to the Office of Tourism on how to add the Ridgefield Cultural District to the website, with descriptions and photos. Discussed photos of Ridgefield that we can access.

Ray Garst contacted Glori about integrating bike lanes into the downtown area. Geoffrey noted that the downtown construction scheduled for Spring 2022 is already mapped out and does not include considerations for bikes. Discussion of Fairfield County NEMBA's work to create bike paths in the area, and their need for more resources. Discussion of "Share the Road" signs for drivers to give bikers 3 feet of space. Discussion of the growth of e-bikes, and the need to plan for greater bike use throughout town.

Lori Mazzola asked about the Rezoning Proposal (discussed previously), and if landlords transformed business space into residential space, whether it would be affordable housing. Geoffrey replied that the current proposal is roughly 25% of new such residential space would be affordable. He said that Statue 8-30g would not apply.

Sean mentioned that ECDC could try to entice businesses that want small in-person presence, and then have a separate central fulfillment center for online purchases.

Discussion of grocery stores in the area; ECDC does not know of any competitor stores moving in.

The next meeting is on November 1, 2021.

Motion to adjourn by Sean; seconded by Geoffrey. Motion carries 4-0. The meeting concluded at 8:10pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Glori Norwitt, ECDC Secretary