

Economic & Community Development Committee
Approved Minutes
November 7, 2022, at 6:30 pm
Lower Level Conference Room - Town Hall

In attendance Chair Glori Norwitt, Commissioners Geoffrey Morris, Jonathan Winn, Kay Gelfman, Sean Dowd, Mark Riser

Meeting started at 6:31 pm

Next meeting December 5, 2022

Minutes October 2022 meeting minutes approved without revision: Motion by Commissioner Geoffrey Morris, Dowd seconds. Motion passes unanimously.

Public discussion

Chair Norwitt read a statement from Commissioner Kay Gelfman about her comments at the August 2022 ECDC meeting:

During a recent ECDC discussion about the naming of a CD Award, I made a comment which some in the community may have found offensive. I sincerely apologize to anyone who may have been hurt by my comment, which was intended to emphasize the importance of diversity and inclusion in our activities.

Chair Norwitt read the statement that the Commission released on the matter:

Ridgefield's Economic & Community Development Commission (ECDC)'s mission is to promote and implement orderly and planned economic development in keeping with the character of the Town. In April 2021, based on the ECDC's application to the State, the State designated a part of Ridgefield as a Cultural District—the first such designation in Connecticut. At the ECDC's August 1, 2022, meeting, the Commissioners discussed a proposal to create a new annual Award to honor a person who has made a significant contribution to the Town's Cultural District. The ECDC ultimately voted to name the award The Cultural District Award. During this discussion, one of our Commissioners made an inartful comment for which she has apologized, and which does not reflect the position of the ECDC. We believe strongly that this should not detract from the important work that the Commission is undertaking to help accelerate Ridgefield's economic development so that our town can be a better place to live, work, and play for generations to come. Such initiatives currently include ECDC's inaugural Tiger-Shark Tank event; a request for ARPA funding for a Broadband Feasibility Study; support and marketing of the Cultural District and the entire arts community; promotion of town information and events; downtown parking issues; Covid long-term recovery support; "welcome" postcards and a survey to new residents; organizing seminars on topics relevant to local businesses; downtown beautification; and working with other organizations and Town agencies,

commissions, boards, and departments. We welcome all community members who are interested in volunteering on these or any other ECDC projects.

Nine town residents spoke in favor of commissioner Kay Gelfman, supporting her as a person and defending her comments—Joan Rodriguez, Leonel Rodriguez, Rob Kinnaid, John Katz, Peter Kent, Bert Bowler, Joe Shapiro, Jessica Mancini, Sean Connelly. Five residents spoke against Commissioner Gelfman's comments, one asking her to resign her position: Mike Randazzo, Lori Mazzola, Andrea Beebe, Collette Kabasakalian, Greg Kabasakalian. One resident Kirk Carr spoke to voice disappointment with the Commission in its handling of the issue.

Agenda

Recap of Recent Events

On October 19, the BOS officially appointed Mark Riser as a commissioner and re-appointed Bob Knight; both for two year terms. Bob provided a list to the BOS of the ECDC's current and recent projects.

Chair Norwitt provided an update on the FOIA complaint by Kirk Carr against Norwitt and Commissioner Morris. On both October 18 and November 1, Norwitt contacted the State FOI Office which stated that Mr. Carr's Complaint was still in the "mail log" so it has not yet been processed. Once it is processed, then if the office determines that the complaint should move forward, then the complaint is given a docket number. Then within a few weeks, a hearing would be scheduled in person in Harford, where a "Hearing Officer" hears both sides and determines what, if anything, should be done. So Commissioners Norwitt and Morris would need to attend the Hearing in Hartford in person, if it occurs.

Commissioner Morris organized addresses of new residents to Ridgefield for a second batch of "Welcome postcards" to be mailed out. Gillian Lewis in Town Hall assisted by putting the mailing labels on the postcards and mailed them out. We hope new residents will complete our survey.

Steve Zemo contacted Chair Norwitt about a New Milford event for a commercial-broker networking event. The event looks beneficial, but it would be very difficult for the ECDC to hold such an event due to our lack of resources on a volunteer-only basis.

On October 12, Chair Norwitt attended a Chamber of Commerce coffee at the Ridgefield Library and met Business Advisor Nelson Merchan, a professor at UConn School of Business. He is on the CT Small Business Development Council which has 15 advisors throughout the state providing free assistance to current and incoming businesses in CT. Discussion amongst the Commissioners of informing local businesses about this resource.

Resident Ian Duncan contacted First Selectman Marconi about his idea for brand marketing for CT Artisans. Chair Norwitt met with Mr. Duncan on October 12 and October 28 to discuss further, and discuss Town branding. Mr. Duncan is working on some ideas and will meet with Chair Norwitt soon.

Chair Norwitt spoke with Dave Saunders and Christine Santori (of Personal Touch Welcome) about their upcoming printed Ridgefield Town Planner Calendar, which will be delivered to every address in Town. They print separate versions for Bethel, Brookfield, 06811 zip of Danbury, and Newtown. They suggested ECDC contribute \$5,000 to support the Cultural District, or run a full page ad at the cost of \$1,500. The Commission discussed this idea, and decided to focus marketing support on inRidgefield and its online calendar.

The Commission received an email from Innerbody Research, which noted it has created an online therapy guide for LGBTQ+ Youth, to create a safe space and helpful environment for all. The Commission discussed possibly putting this information on its website, and sharing it with other groups in town such as Prevention Council, Ridgefield Pride, Compassionate Ridgefield and Project Resilience.

Interview of ECDC candidate Brittny Howell

Commissioners had a 14-minute conversation with candidate Brittny Howell, a vascular surgeon who moved to Ridgefield eight years ago with her family of three young children. She opened a medical practice in town that she has since expanded.

Interview of ECDC candidate Patrick Sciarratta

Commissioners had an 18-minute conversation with candidate Patrick Sciarratta, a community organizer who has worked on projects at and with the United Nations. He first moved to Ridgefield in 1972, before moving away and returning a few years ago.

Recap of Tiger-Shark Tank (Dowd, Riser)

Commissioner Sean Dowd reported that more than 100 people attended Tiger-Shark Tank to watch six people present their business ideas to six prominent judges: Priceline founder Jay Walker, former GE CFO Jeff Bernstein, Blue Buffalo founder Chris Bishop, Deborah Ann Sweet Shoppe owner Deborah Backes, and ECDC Commissioner and Ridgefield Bicycle Co. founder Sean Dowd. Around 40 people had asked to present; Sean chose the presenters after reviewing their ideas. Next time, he says, he would like to organize the judging process better. Judges prepared very well. Perhaps have two dedicated spots for high school or college-age kids. Dowd thinks of it as an annual event. Overall the ECDC released four Press Releases about the event (one after the event), and posted on social media. Mark and Kay donned shark costumes and walked around downtown twice, to rally support. Geoffrey organized the slideshow at the event, and Mark organized with the Library. Thank you notes were sent to all the Judges.

Request for Broadband Feasibility Study (Morris)

Commissioners Morris and Norwitt met with First Selectman Marconi, head of facilities Jake Muller, RPS IT manager Wes Desantis, and Mike Toll from WestCog to discuss having WestCog fund the development of a plan to establish the cost to build out a fiber broadband network throughout the town, using EntryPoint. Wes noted that RPS needs redundant fiber paths to bolster disaster preparedness. Mike noted that EntryPoint's study should provide enough information for the Town to apply for a Federal grant; the Town would still need to do an

Engineering study to be shovel-ready. If EntryPoint moves forward with the Town (through WestCog) successfully, the WestCog effort would replace the Town's planned RFP process that was ultimately going to be funded with Town ARPA funds. The new WestCog effort would ultimately require some ARPA funds, but later in the process, to develop engineering plans. A tri-party contract (between WestCog, EntryPoint, and the Town) will be sent to First Selectman Marconi, who will pass it to the Town attorney for review.

Request for APRA funds to the arts (Morris, Norwitt, Winn)

Commissioner Morris reported that at an October 6 public hearing, the ECDC and the Arts Council again made the case why \$636,000 in ARPA funds should be allocated to the nonprofit arts community. The BOS approved the allocation, and subsequently the Board of Finance also approved the allocation. The next and final step is a town meeting, which is scheduled for November 16 for residents to approve the allocation. Jonathan Winn proposed that we create a plan that tracks the return on the investment of the ARPA funds. Jonathan spoke with Andrew Okrongly of the BOF, and Dean Miller was present and also discussed. The plan would determine how the investment of the ARPA money into the community brings benefits to the town. More details to come, including what the cost of this plan/study would be.

2023 Budget

Mark Riser has agreed to lead the effort to formalize our request for next year's budget that we will submit to First Selectman Rudy Marconi before they begin compiling the 2023-2024 budget.

Downtown Beautification (Norwitt)

Norwitt and Gelfman attended the workgroup's meeting on October 13 and discussed the look for the front of Town Hall. After the state highway renovation of Main Street in the downtown area, ECDC is leading efforts to beautify areas where there are new sidewalks and unclaimed open space by adding seating areas and other details.

Cultural District Award (Morris)

Nominations are open for the new Cultural District Award; nominations will be received until the ECDC's December 5 meeting, when ECDC will vote on a 2022 winner and 2023 winner to be awarded at the May 11 Behind the Scene ceremony organized by the Ridgefield Arts Council. Information on the nomination will go out to the media on Tuesday, November 8. In Commissioner Gelfman's absence, Chair Norwitt read Gelfman's nomination of Richard Klein, who was devoted to and worked at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum for over three decades.

Commissioner Morris stated that he supports fellow Commissioner Gelfman regarding her statement in the August 1 meeting. At that meeting, Commissioner Morris had suggested we name the now-named Cultural District Award the Cass Gilbert Award. Gelfman, in suggesting the name should reflect more diversity, said that we should not name it after an "old white man." There was some public complaint, some asking for her to resign. First Selectman Marconi and Selectman Maureen Kozlark both said they were disappointed by the comment and that if such a comment is repeated, there should be disciplinary action. Morris says he was disappointed in

Marconi and Kozlark's stance; Morris feels that it went against a common-sense understanding of what Gelfman intended.

FOIA Seminar (Norwitt)

Commissioner Norwitt attended a Freedom of Information Act Seminar in Ridgefield lead by a State FOI lawyer. She learned that generally, if we have a quorum of commissioners, even though not a planned formal meeting, there are public notice requirements. If there is no quorum and no votes, commissioners can meet without public notice. Exceptions to public notice include a personal search committee, chance meetings, and personal meetings.

Update on Planning & Zoning Commission Topics

On October 6, Commissioner Gelfman discussed the ECDC's Pre-Submission Concept Review at a P&Z meeting requesting that the ECDC install a digital video monitor in the kiosk in front of the new Deborah Ann's Sweet Shoppe on Main Street. The monitor would post town events and would not be for commercial use.

Discussion of preparing materials (digital or not) for the Deborah Ann's kiosk, including possibly a digital map of downtown.

At 8:35pm, Commissioner Morris motioned to go into Executive Session to discuss the candidates applying to join the ECDC. Commissioner Riser seconded. All in favor.

We returned from the Executive Session at 8:49pm.

Commissioner Morris motioned that we recommend to the Board of Selectmen that it appoint both Brittny Howell and Jennifer Gioffre to fill the two open positions on the commission. Commissioner Winn seconded. All in favor—the vote was 5-0.

The meeting adjourned at 8:50 pm.