



**Ridgefield  
Economic &  
Community  
Development  
Commission**

**400 Main Street • Ridgefield, CT 06877 • 203.546.2547**

Glori Norwitt - Chair  
Geoffrey Morris – Secretary  
Sean Dowd  
Kay Gelfman  
Jennifer Gioffre  
Brittney Howell  
Bob Knight  
Mark Riser  
Jonathan Winn

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman

[ridgefieldct.com](http://ridgefieldct.com)

**Economic & Community Development Committee  
Approved Minutes  
May 8, 2023, at 6:30 pm  
in-person in Town Hall Large Conference Room**

**In attendance:** Chair Glori Norwitt, Secretary Geoffrey Morris, Commissioners Jonathan Winn, Mark Riser, Kay Gelfman, Brittney Howell, and Bob Knight

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 pm

**Announcements**

Next meeting: June 5, 2023

Approval of April 2023 Minutes

Commissioner Morris motions that we approve the April minutes without changes, Chair Norwitt seconds, all in favor, 7-0.

**General Discussion**

Public Comment: no comments

**Recap of Recent Events/Info**

Abby Walker of Michael Chekhov Theatre Festival noted that they will have an international acting conference on the property on North Salem Road in August. Looking for Grant to help defray cost of accommodations. May apply for CT Humanities Grant and seek ECDC support.

Three Chambers of Commerce (Ridgefield, New Canaan, and Wilton) are holding a joint Networking Event “Cocktails and Conversation” at Grace Farms in New Canaan on Thursday, June 8, from 5:30 – 7:30 pm.

On Thursday, June 22 at 5:30 pm at the Rec Center, the Chamber Business Management Council is hosting "Speed Networking."

Governor Ned Lamont has convened a Blue Ribbon Panel on childcare, seeking to find solutions to many childcare issues in the State. Chair Norwitt is on two working groups for this project—"Systems" and "Funding/Costs." At the opening Panel meeting in Hartford, she connected with Boehringer-Ingelheim head of HR Jamie Eden.

#### **Cultural District Award** (Morris, Gelfman)

Promotional articles by Jenn Gioffre. Prep for this Thursday, May 11 event at Keeler Tavern Museum at 6:00 pm. All Commissioners are invited as we celebrate our first 4 Awardees: Ellen Burns and John Frey for the 2021 Award, Richard Klein for the 2022 Award, and Allison Stockel for the 2023 Award. Discussed event assignments for tasks, food, and drinks. Commissioners split up responsibilities for party goods and setup.

#### **Possible Cultural District Sculpture** (Morris, Gelfman)

Gelfman and Morris spoke with Richard Klein and sculptor Charles Johnson, and have a concept for a possible acorn sculpture mimicking the Cultural District acorn logo. The sculpture would include a space for listing all current and future Cultural District Award recipients. The sculpture would cost \$1,500 for a maquette and \$25,000 to \$51,000 for the final sculpture. Discussion of funding for these costs and possible match to contribute to food insecurity in the area. Discussion of a possible location for the sculpture—near the exit to the CVS parking lot on Main Street. We also plan to reach out to two other sculptors for additional bids.

#### **Cultural District** (Norwitt, Morris)

The Cultural District Subcommittee met via Zoom with Guest Lisa Scails, Executive Director of the Cultural Alliance of Western Connecticut. The group began initial steps toward creating a Strategic Plan, discussing where the Cultural District is now, where do we want it to go, and how do we get there. The discussions will continue.

#### **Business Connections** (Gioffre)

With Gioffre absent, Chair Norwitt mentioned that Gioffre had created a Google Form that was sent to many businesses gauging interest in being part of ECDC-led discussions on various topics. About 15 people have completed the forms to date.

#### **Business Programs** (Riser)

Discussion of programs organized by the Ridgefield Library, which we could promote. Riser will meet with the Library this week. Also, ideas for future Programs could arise from the Business Connections meetings. Riser suggests compiling a packet of steps for starting a business. And in the research Riser did on town tax lists, he discovered that commercial development is the most lucrative for the tax revenue side, manufacturing next, and apartments next.

#### **Broadband Feasibility Study** (Knight, Morris)

EntryPoint completed its Feasibility Study, but the Ridgefield team raised some questions and sought additional information. The Ridgefield team is meeting with EntryPoint again this week. More information after May 9 meeting with EntryPoint.

#### **Downtown Beautification** (Norwitt, Gelfman)

The group met recently and reviewed a draft concept. Some members will discuss the concept with the owner of the alley soon. Talking to Wing Biddle about gaining access—Biddle heads up the real estate company Urstadt Biddle which owns the properties on either side of the alleyway.

**Opinion re P&Z Application RZ-23-1, SP-23-7 and SP-23-8** (Gelfman)

Gelfman prepared a draft Opinion, which was forwarded to Commissioners for their review and consideration. The Commissioners discussed the draft.

***DRAFT Statement regarding Applications #RZ-23-1, SP-23-7 and SP-23-8 located at 901 Ethan Allen Highway and 0 Ethan Allen Highway for a zone change from B-2 to MFDD and construction of multi-family residential buildings, meeting house, outdoor pool amenity space and associated work***

The mission of Ridgefield's Economic & Community Development Commission is to support orderly and planned economic development in keeping with the character of the town. A productive and prosperous community stems from creating a viable economic foundation. Planned residential development can enhance the economic framework of commercial neighborhoods.

To this end, the ECDC believes that a zone change from B-2 (light industrial zone) to MFDD (multi-family development district) on Ethan Allen Highway could provide a valuable opportunity for planned development, adding to the existing townscape without negatively impacting the current residential and commercial opportunities. The ECDC supports residential communities with pedestrian access to the commerce around them. A multi-family development of the empty acreage adjacent to the north end of Route 7 could knit together the current patchwork of commercial and residential buildings into an appealing village. With a pre-existing gas line in the southern area of the site and sewer, water, and electricity on the east side, the parcel is already set up for multi-family development.

The planned residential buildings, meeting house, and outdoor pool amenity space are appealing, using early 20th-century Arts & Crafts, Bungalow, and Craftsmen styles as jumping-off points. To propose 15% affordable units is appealing as well. The question arises: can we do better? Is it possible to create a multi-family development available to an economically diverse swath of people that satisfies the needs of the developer as well as the needs of our townspeople? Can we have an eye toward opening a gate rather than closing it?

In reviewing the information surrounding the requests for (1) a zone change from B-2 to MFDD, (2) access into the back properties from the Medical Center parcel entry on Route 7, and (3) the construction of 92 units of housing—of which 15% will be deemed affordable—we conclude as a Commission that a residential development under the rezoned MFDD designation could provide the glue for a thriving commercial and residential hub with these laudits and caveats:

1. **Knit Together Existing Pieces:** Starting past the blinking light at Buck Hill Road we find condos at 570 Danbury Road, stores at 590 Danbury Road, Patio.com at the end of the "block", and turning the corner restaurants at 967 Ethan Allen Highway and 955 Ethan Allen Highway. A combination gas station/convenience store is across the intersection of Route 35 and Route 7, with further multi-family dwellings, 599 and 619 Danbury Road, and assisted living facilities, 640 and 642 Danbury Road, heading north. While these buildings are at present tenuously connected to one another, they offer a variety of residential and commercial choices. With a proximus, larger residential

development, sidewalks, land bridges, and green buffers could be created to bring an inviting walkability to all.

2. **Affordable Housing Opportunity:** Rather than face imminent state mandates regarding affordable housing, Ridgefield has an opportunity in this rezone to discuss what a mixed-income, multi-family development would look like. The current plan limits the affordable portion of the development to 15%. As a town, we have the opportunity to come together and request more. Is it possible for the town to offer the developer incentives toward a greater number of affordable units? Inviting housing for young families just starting out, older members of the community who are downsizing, or workers with fixed or flat profit wages would benefit us all. Ridgefield is a town of plenty lacking in one thing: moderately priced dwelling units.
3. **Environmental Sustainability, Wetlands, Watershed, and Wildlife Corridor:** Little Pond sits on 15.394 of the 29 acres belonging to the developer. This allows him to cluster the housing units on the balance of the acreage and leave the land around Little Pond as open space. Ridgefield Brook winds its way through the back piece of the parcels under consideration for the rezone. Thoughtful development around wetlands and watershed leave more intact open space and wildlife corridors.
4. **Enhanced Public Spaces:** The acreage considered in the rezone backs up on existing residential neighborhoods. Rather than denude them of the adjacent undeveloped land, here is an opportunity to provide a park for both the residents in the new development and the long-time residents of the existing neighborhoods. We discourage the developer from pursuing the overall feel of a gated community with a recreation center. We believe the community should reach outward rather than inward, with a walkable and tree-filled park space to act as an inviting buffer between new and old development. A park that benefits new and existing residents would be a wonderful addition to the whole town and could include the two-plus acres being sold to the developer by the town. (In comparison, Ballard Park is five acres; similar acreage could be set aside here.)
5. **Nearby B-2 Zones** The Town benefits from a mix of commercial zones, industrial zones, multifamily buildings, and residential spaces. If the zoning change is granted here, the owner and residents of this property agree to not contest any business from building a facility in a zone nearby labeled B-2.

The Ridgefield ECDC looks forward to continued discussion of the proposed changes at 901 and 0 Ethan Allen Highway. We encourage thoughtful planning that fosters new and burnishes existing economic development and provides our community with inviting living and commercial space.

Morris moves that we send this Opinion of the development to P&Z with changes: not asking if there can be more affordable housing but suggesting that there be. Winn 2nd the motion, 7-0 vote in favor of submitting the opinion to P&Z with the above slight modification.

#### **Marketing** (Gioffre, Morris, Winn, Norwitt)

- (1) The **Map** of the Downtown Ridgefield area was finalized, printed, and posted in Deborah Ann's kiosk. An article highlighted this with a photo and was put on social media. A digital map was emailed to all downtown businesses for which we have an email address and sent to other area organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the

Downtown Association, the Arts Council, inRidgefield, WCYO, and Weir Farm. The ECDC has received much praise for this project. We are receiving some suggested revisions, which we can make when the map is modified in the future. Thanks to Commissioner Morris for his work on this great project!

- (2) The **Western CT Tourism** District receives funds annually from the State DECD to promote 63 municipalities in the State, from Route 8 to the NY State line. (There is also a “Central” and “Eastern” Tourism District.) Ridgefield’s previous appointee to this group was Steve Spivak; we can seek to have First Selectman Marconi appoint a new Commissioner. The group meets quarterly over Zoom at 10:00 am.

The group has 26,000 Facebook and 3,700 Instagram followers. It posts six days a week. On July 2, 2022, it posted a “Day in Ridgefield.” It boosts a post if it gets traction. They do billboards and pre-rolls. It has the capability to post directly to the CTVisit website. Norwitt sent the group the new Downtown Ridgefield map digitally. It suggested that we post events on the Ridgefield Cultural District page of CTVisit.com.

Commissioner Howell volunteered to be the coordinator between Ridgefield and the group. Morris motioned, Norwitt seconded, and all in favor. Norwitt will speak with the First Selectman to request that Howell is appointed as the Town representative to the Western CT Tourism District.

- (3) The Town will create an **e-Newsletter** to highlight projects, events, important dates, and other news. Initially, the Newsletter will be monthly, but may move to weekly. Gillian Lewis at the Info Desk will assist Commissions and Boards with creating a final product. The ECDC can provide info to Gillian as desired. Subscriptions to this e-Newsletter are open to anyone; it is not restricted to Town residents.

Discussion of the needs for a Commissioner to post on Facebook, Instagram, and feed into the Town’s upcoming e-Newsletter (with the assistance of other Commissioners). It was agreed that Commissioner Howell would take on this duty as well.

#### **Updates to Website** (Norwitt, Winn)

Discussion of simplifying, refreshing and revising certain sections of the ECDC website. Norwitt received an estimate from Lisa Berte of Lab Media Designs for \$3,500. Winn received an estimate from Sarah Ford for \$650—though both scopes of work were different. Jonathan Winn moved that we allocate \$2,000 for work by Sarah Ford for website updates, maintenance, and ongoing changes through the 2023 calendar year. Morris seconded and all were in favor, 7-0.

#### **Film Commission** (Morris)

Former Ridgefield Playhouse executive director Allison Stockel has stepped down from the position and moved from town so she needs to vacate the position of Film Commissioner, tasked with coordinating with film crews who want to film in Ridgefield. Stockel suggested the ECDC take it on and First Selectman Rudy Marconi agreed. Commissioners Knight and Gelfman agreed to lead the effort.

#### **CHIRP ad and Rotary event** (Morris, Norwitt)

CHIRP is preparing its annual program. A full-page black-and-white ad costs \$425. Morris showed a draft ECDC ad. Motion by Winn to purchase ad, 2nd by Riser. All in favor, 7-0.

Rotary is honoring John Frey as its Citizen of the Year on June 28 at Silver Spring Country Club. They would like to know if we'd like to support by purchasing a Business Card Ad (\$250) or purchasing a ticket (\$125). Morris moved for Rotary ad for \$250, Knight 2nd. All in favor, 7-0

**Jobs Board on Facebook** (Norwitt)

We decided to move this topic to the June meeting.

**WestCOG's Request for Letter of Support**

Betsy Paynter seeks a Letter of Support from the ECDC for WestCOG's application to the CT Department of Agriculture's Farm Viability Grant, to produce an Agriculture Viability Study of the WestCOG Region. This study would outline opportunities and obstacles within the region to advance farming and support existing farmers. A draft LOS was provided by WestCOG, and forwarded to Commissioners for their review and consideration.

*Dear CT Department of Agriculture,*

*I am writing to provide a Letter of Support on behalf of Western Connecticut Council of Government's 2023 Farm Viability Grant application. As outlined in their application, western CT's farming and agriculture sector has been declining over recent decades. With farm processes evolving with new, innovative growing practices and perhaps existing obstacles deterring the advancement of farming, an Agriculture Viability Study would be beneficial to the agriculture sector and help expand the industry and increase farming locally grown products within western CT.*

*As an Economic development professional in the region, removing obstacles and opening doors to attract farmers to the region and assist existing farmers would be advantageous to our communities. Producing local products creates more sustainable communities and would strengthen farmers currently in the region and attract new innovative agriculture operations. Please consider supporting WestCOG's Agriculture Viability Study through CT Department of Agriculture's 2023 Farm Viability Grant to help provide strengths, opportunities, threats, and weaknesses in the region and best practices moving forward, supporting farmers in the region and attracting new farming operations in western CT.*

Motion by Knight to approve the Letter of Support, 2nd by Riser. All in favor, 7-0.

Knight strenuously motioned that we adjourn, Riser seconded, and all in favor, 7-0.

The meeting adjourned at 8:48 pm.