

APPROVED / REVISED
MINUTES
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING
WORK SESSION FOR THE RIDGEFIELD CENTER STUDY

March 3, 2008

Present: Joseph Fossi
Nelson Gelfman
John Katz
Phil Mische
Rebecca Mucchetti, Chairman
Patrick Walsh, Vice Chairman
Lillian Willis

Absent: Michael Autuori
Peter Chipouras

Also Present: Betty Brosius, MPA, AICP, Director of Planning
Vince McDermott, FASLA, AICP, Milone & MacBroom, Inc.
John (Mike) Wilson, P.E., Milone & MacBroom, Inc.
Phil Michalowski, AICP, Harrall-Michalowski Associates, Inc.

At 7:37 p.m., Chairman Mucchetti called the meeting to order.

WORK SESSION - Ridgefield Center Study

Chairman Mucchetti opened the meeting with introductions, and stated it would be important at the beginning of the process to understand the focus of the study and the timeline. There is a need to finish the work before the end of the year, because the Commission would then need to begin work on the update to the Plan of Conservation and Development.

Vince McDermott said that the timeline was clear from the proposal, and there is no reason that the schedule cannot be maintained. The consultants are willing to meet with the Commission as often as needed throughout the process. The Chairman noted that the last Tuesday of each month is set aside for working sessions. Mr. Katz suggested that days other than Tuesdays could also be considered. Mr. McDermott reviewed the schedule and timeline with the Commission and will furnish a new bar chart with the new dates. The Commission would like to keep the month of August open if possible, since that is the usual month of “hiatus” from Commission meetings.

Mr. McDermott asked about the timing and format for an initial workshop to hear the “public” comment that should include other town agents, boards, commissions, members of the business community, property owners, and residents of the community. This should be conducted early in the process, and would seek to find out what people think

needs to be fixed in the downtown area, and what ideas they might have to remedy the problems. The consultant has conducted work shops with various formats – “open mic,” design charettes, etc. The Planner cautioned that the discussion should not be diverted to the current “hot topic” of whether first floor uses on Main Street should be limited by zoning, but should focus on the Center Study issues of parking, pedestrian movement, traffic and signage.

Mr. McDermott said that they have done early work sessions in two ways: (1) to first hear the thoughts and comments of others, and (2) the consultants would digest and observe on their own first, before meeting with the public. Doing the analysis of existing conditions early, collecting data before the first work shop with the public, would educate the consultants so that they could better understand the observations and the issues. The work shop could then be conducted about 6-8 weeks from this initial meeting. Mr. McDermott suggested that the “public” work shop be conducted on its own, without other Commission business on the agenda. Another format could be a round-table discussion, where the public is dispersed to separate tables for discussion, and then re-grouped. Mr. Katz was concerned about this format and favored the open mic meeting. The Planner noted that the library had a design charette where the attendees were broken up into groups at tables.

The consensus was that, in addition to the Commission, the business owners in the downtown, the Parking Authority, the Selectmen, the Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Commission, Architectural Advisory Committee and others should be included in the work session. Mr. Katz emphasized that involving as many stakeholders as possible would make the expenditure of funds for the study more palatable to the taxpayers.

Mr. McDermott asked if there would be a difference of opinions voiced by the business owners in the downtown, and it was confirmed that there have been many differing opinions voiced in numerous meetings, in particular on the issue of parking, and whether or not there is really a problem. There is a Downtown Ridgefield (merchants) organization split off from the Chamber, because of the differences in focus and opinion. Mr. McDermott emphasized that people with differing views, when seated at the same table in a non-threatening manner, can acknowledge and accept these differing views.

The Chairman suggested that the Police and Fire Departments should be included in the sessions, as well as the Design Council, Historic District Commission, Board of Selectmen, Village District Consultants, and others mentioned earlier. Mr. Katz pointed out that the success of the study would be dependent on the amount of “buy-in” of these various entities, and they all need to be invited. Mr. McDermott agreed that a largely diverse group is essential at the initial stages of the study. The public impressions are important.

Mr. Katz asked if the format of “break-out” to individual tables would work with a large group, and how would the session be conducted. Mr. McDermott says that it works well, and the individual groups would need to have one or two issues for focus. Then you re-

group and ask, “If you were a Planner, how would you fix this?” There is a need to sort out long-term real issues from perceived problems that may be one-time occurrences. Mr. Michalowski mentioned studies for Storrs and UCONN, where a whole new plan was formed, and how that differs from Ridgefield where the buildings are fixed and the issue is using what is already there. Mr. McDermott agreed that the inter-connection of the downtown parking areas is critical, and the existing circulation in some cases is very poor. The idea of making inter-connecting parking areas work, with “cross-easements,” can be a good solution for navigating the parking areas and finding a convenient parking space. He emphasized that there seems to be plenty of parking in the downtown, but it is often not convenient to reach, or easy to find.

Mr. Katz emphasized that the format of the public session must be organized carefully so that it is meaningful and productive, and does not turn into a session of complaints. Mr. McDermott agreed, and said that it needs to be a listening session, to determine the perceived problems. Mr. Katz suggested that the Playhouse might be a more productive format than individual tables. The gathering of data is the most important issue, and dialogue at a table may not be so productive. Mr. McDermott said that it will be important for the consultant to listen to public comment and then to ask, “What do you mean by that statement? What do you see as the problem?”

Chairman Mucchetti says there is a lot of contention, and that people have been frustrated for a long time. There is a mixture of public and private spaces, one-way roads, inter-connections that are blocked. The goal is to make downtown parking and circulation to flow better for those who visit downtown. There is a perception that employees take up valuable spots too close to their places of work, and leave few spots for the public. Signage and directionals are important.

Mr. Mische said he sees four main issues: parking, signage, traffic and pedestrian movement. There is a need to focus on each of these four issues separately. It is important to diminish the “clutter” of the discussion and to sort out each of these issues separately. Mr. McDermott agreed, and stated that in his own experience, he found the circulation pattern to be confusing and illogical. Mr. Mische says that it is important for the consultant to see the problem “from the outside” before listening to the public, and Mr. McDermott agreed – that’s why he has suggested doing some research and analysis prior to setting up the open work session.

Mr. Mische pointed out that a downtown way-finding map, such as those that are found in theme parks, is needed. The Planner agreed. The shops and parking areas in the back of Main Street buildings can’t be seen and can’t be found by people who don’t already know their way around the downtown area.

Mr. McDermott asks if the property owners have been approached to join forces in a way that would benefit everyone? The Planner said that the Milone & MacBroom plan for the Bailey Avenue lot has addressed some of those issues, and the First Selectman met with several of the affected property owners. But after more than 5 years, the plan is still not complete. Mr. Walsh pointed out that downtown employees have to move their

cars and have trouble finding spots where they can park all day long. Mr. McDermott gave some other examples (Litchfield, in particular) where the parking officers chalk the tires and give tickets for cars that stay in one place too long. Chairman Mucchetti said that same thing happens in Ridgefield; Mr. McDermott noted that this is the kind of comment that will no doubt come out of the public meeting.

Mr. Katz pointed out that handing out tickets is contrary to the idea claimed by some merchants that Ridgefield should be attracting and welcoming people from out of town. He feels that Ridgefield is not as much of a “destination” shopping area for out-of-towners as some claim. Mrs. Willis disagreed and said that people from North and South Salem, New York will come to Ridgefield to shop, rather than going to other locations in Westchester County.

Mr. Katz said there has also been discussion about parking meters, and that it is controversial. He repeats that the “out-of-town shopper” is something of a myth that will be emphasized by the local merchants. Chairman Mucchetti agreed and noted that some merchants seem to stock their stores with items that would be attractive to the out-of-town shoppers like those who journey to Greenwich and New Canaan, but that people in Ridgefield may not be in the market for things like a \$200 pair of jeans. The Ridgefield Hardware store remains successful after decades because it provides merchandise that everyone needs. Mr. McDermott agrees that there is a need for stores that will provide merchandise for the local market. Mr. Michalowski agrees, and says that high-end merchandise allows the merchant to “sell less and make more,” but Ridgefield appears to be primarily a community-based shopping destination. Factors like the price of gasoline may affect the way people shop; the long-distance shopper may not be as likely to come to Ridgefield. The “green movement” promotes local shopping.

Mr. McDermott says that Ridgefield is the quintessential “life-style center.” There is a town center, and it’s a small town, with stores geared mainly to the local population. He is surprised that there is a GAP store here, because there doesn’t seem to be the draw of customers to support it. Mr. Walsh pointed out that customers are mainly women and children, from the local community, and there is a fair amount of business on a daily basis.

Planner Brosius pointed out that stores located at the back of the Main Street buildings, with store fronts on the rear parking lots and alleys, are difficult for people to find. The Chairman noted that there is little or no signage for stores and parking lots located off the Main Street, and the town lacks a good, “downtown” store-locator map. The Planner said she had asked the Chamber several times about producing such a map, starting about five years ago, but there is still none available.

Chairman Mucchetti noted that there have been changes on Main Street affecting traffic and pedestrian activity, most notably the restaurant where Bissell’s Pharmacy was located. Lacking the presence of that restaurant, there has been a significant drop in foot-traffic. The Planner said that a restaurant is being planned for the new building. Mr. Katz pointed out that the candy store/ice cream shop (Deborah Ann’s) opened on Main

Street and draws many customers in good weather to outside tables. The hardware store is also a thriving business. Chairman Mucchetti talked about the CVS drug store at the other end of the business center, and the fact that it is an anchor store in that location. The Post Office is also a draw for foot traffic, and there is other new retail and office activity on Catoonah Street.

Chairman Mucchetti notes that there is little or no vacant land left, and the Bissell's building is the only new construction on the street in years. The Planner reminded the Commission that there are eight one-bedroom apartments that will provide downtown residents. The Chairman said that store fronts rarely remain empty for long. She repeated that signage for the off-Main Street buildings remains a problem. The Planner informed the consultants that working with the CTDOT might be an area where their expertise would be useful. The State owns the sidewalk right up to the fronts of the buildings, and they have very strict rules, and they prohibit advertising in their rights-of-way. Signage to direct people to stores in the alley-ways would be useful, but it would have to comply with the requirements of the DOT.

Phil Michalowski said they would prepare a map that showed clearly where all of the parking lots are located, and directions for traffic flow. They would recommend looking at the downtown area as a whole, ignoring property lines in the initial analysis, in order to determine where improvements might be made. Mr. McDermott stated that he feels there is enough parking, but people need to know where it is and how to get to it.

Mr. McDermott asked if there was any known precedent in Connecticut where the State "leap-frogged" its State road for a segment like the downtown Main Street area, giving up its jurisdiction for that specified segment of the road to the Town, and allowing the Town to plow it and maintain it? That would allow the Town to "write its own rules" about how that section of road is treated with signage, traffic calming measures, and so forth. Mr. Wilson said it is relatively rare, and the CTDOT is "territorial," and they will work with towns for some flexibility in areas like traffic calming, to allow widening of roadways and cross-walks. Mr. Katz says the State plows the Main Street, but the town picks up the piles of snow. The State has also allowed less than code width for Prospect Street, to allow a turning lane for east-bound traffic.

Mr. McDermott says that his experience with "enhancements" is that the State will allow some, if the town is willing to maintain those improvements. Leap-frogging a segment of the State's jurisdiction would allow the town to control the Main Street better, but the town would then be responsible. For instance, the town would control signage, but would also have to pay for lighting of the street lights. He notes, however, that State control and regulations tend to be an impediment to progress. The Planner noted the six-month delay in making changes to the Commission-approved plans for Walgreens.

Planner Brosius informed the Commission that there had been a meeting at Town Hall at the end of January (to which neither she nor the Commission was invited) where there were discussions about the loading zone near the Addressi building, recommended in the Route 35 Traffic Study. She understands that enhancements proposed for parking and

traffic calming in front of that building were quashed by the CTDOT. There was some discussion about the Main Street loading zone, and the proposed barriers that would have separated the parking in front of Addressi's from the main traffic flow were part of the plan. The consultants should talk to the Town Engineer and/or the First Selectman about the Main Street discussion meeting, and conclusions that were made.

Mr. Katz also noted that the Addressi building owners installed an impediment within their own parking lot at the rear of the building that prohibits trucks from entering the rear of the stores, so they are forced to park in the front the buildings for loading and unloading. Chairman Mucchetti notes that the lack of demarcation of parking and loading means that pedestrians are crossing the street in front of and behind trucks, and it is very dangerous. [The Planner noted the recommendation on a map in the Route 35 plan, and informed the consultants that the plan can be found on-line, on the HVCEO website.] Mr. McDermott repeated that it may be worth talking to the State about the "leap-frog" idea, to see if they would relinquish their jurisdiction and allow the town to make some different plans.

Mr. Wilson said there may be reason to be a little optimistic because of the State's recent interest in Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and controlled growth. The DOT recently hired a Deputy Commissioner whose complete mission is to focus on TOD. Mr. McDermott said the acting Commissioner is also interested in this type of idea, to concentrate development and improvement in already-dense and developed areas.

Mrs. Willis asked about bus service, and the lack of funding for such services to transport people to businesses from one end of the town to the other. Mr. McDermott called this type of bus service a "circulator." Chairman Mucchetti said there had been funding for such a service some years ago, but the funding was cut. There was grant through the HART service, and the bus was used by a segment of the population, particularly the seniors in town, at Ballard Green.

Mr. McDermott noted that people usually don't walk too far, typically only about 5 minutes from parking or home to destination. The circulator might be a good enhancement, to add to the vitality of the community. Mr. Katz said that Danbury has a trolley that runs in the downtown area. The service is free, although limited. Mr. Wilson said there is a service like this in New Haven.

Chairman Mucchetti proposed that such a service could extend to Branchville, but Mr. McDermott said that typically the route for a circulator is shorter, and more local. The Planner noted the growth of business along Route 35 toward Copps Hill, and all agreed that the circulator to that area of the "downtown" would make sense. Seniors at Ballard Green would go to Stop & Shop.

Chairman Mucchetti asked to re-focus on the format for the first meeting, and noted that it has been 35 years since the last study was done. She said the downtown has remained vibrant in that time, but there is need to keep it that way, and to make it a destination point for the community and its residents. The merchants feel that they are at

a disadvantage because they perceive a parking problem. Better signage and ability to locate convenient parking is the main issue.

Mr. Walsh said that he favors the “open mic” format for the meeting. The consultants should listen to concerns from the public. The four segments of discussion noted earlier (parking, signage, traffic, and pedestrian movement) should be the focus. Chairman Mucchetti is more than capable of keeping the meeting under control. Mr. McDermott said he and his team have a lot of experience in conducting such meetings as well, and maintaining focus.

Dates and locations for the meeting were discussed. The last Tuesday in April, the 29th, was agreed upon as the best date. Mr. McDermott said that would allow them to do the preliminary analysis, and they would know a lot about the town and the downtown area, allowing them to better address the concerns that are raised. The consultants will also meet with the Commission again on the 25th of March, to note progress to date.

Mr. Katz said that the timing of turning signals on the Main Street will also be an issue that is raised, and it will no doubt be brought up in discussion. Left turn signals have improved, but there are still issues.

Chairman Mucchetti asked about the meeting for the 25th, and the consultant said the meeting would be similar to this meeting, to discuss the Commission’s ideas about the study and how it should proceed. Mr. Katz noted that the Commission should respond at that time to the “gaps” in the data that the consultant may have found as a result of its research and findings. He said that the consultant should organize the data in reference to the four discussion topics for the April meeting. The Planner will work with the consultant as needed, for the collection of data. Jacob Muller in the engineering department can provide GIS information to the consultant. Mr. Katz said the Playhouse would be a good place for the meeting, and the Planner will investigate the availability.

Mr. Michalowski asked about the Assessor’s data, and whether it is part of the GIS system. The Planner noted that tax ID numbers and property owner information is provided, but any data not included in the GIS program may have to be supplemented with research by personnel from P&Z. For instance, the square footage and uses of buildings may not be shown on the GIS program as of this date. She noted that property lines and tax ID numbers can be superimposed on the aerial maps. The library property is now within the CBD zone.

Mrs. Willis asked about the Donnelly property, the “green” area near the former Hay-Day market (now Balducci’s). The Planner noted that there had been some discussions about municipal parking, and a tiered parking structure that would fit into the slope of the land. The property owner has not shown interest in any use of that land to date. The Planner also noted that the Yankee Ridge parking lot might lend itself to an overhead parking deck, because of the grade difference between that lot and the Big Shop Lane area. Chairman Mucchetti noted that there had been discussions about a parking garage

with store fronts off Bailey Avenue, behind the Urstadt-Biddle buildings, but that there seemed to be little support for such a significant change to the downtown area. Mr. McDermott noted that parking spaces in such structures are built at a cost of about \$20,000 per space.

Chairman Mucchetti repeated that the consultant may have correctly identified the problem, that there may be enough parking in the downtown area, but there is a need to find it. Mr. Katz notes that there are many variances for parking in the downtown area, and cross easements. Mr. Michalowski noted that in West Haven there was a similar situation where adjoining properties were willing to combine the back sections of their properties as a whole, to create a common parking area that crossed property lines with access provided through the alleys. Many property owners created rear entrances and second store “fronts” to the parking lot.

Chairman Mucchetti asked if time limits on parking are a good idea. Should there be a forced turn-over? Mr. McDermott noted that employee parking is a universal problem in many towns. Employees do not want to park far from their places of business. Time limits helps to provide turn-over for customers, but the length of time must be reasonable to allow people enough time to shop. The Chairman pointed out that time limits are promoted in Greenwich and New Canaan, and significant income is obtained through meters. Mr. Wilson noted that those towns provide numerous parking spaces for commuters in their downtown areas, and income is primarily from all-day commuter lots.

Mr. McDermott said there are other methods that communities implement, such as downtown merchants associations and “special service” areas. The town provides certain services to the merchants, often through a special taxing district. There are hundreds of such situations in Connecticut. A reconfiguration of parking after an initial capital expenditure could be maintained and improved through such a district that includes the downtown property owners. It could include signage improvements and other “common” elements for the downtown. These are considerations for “implementation.”

Hearing no further discussion, the Chairman adjourned the work session at 9:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Betty Brosius
Director of Planning