

APPROVED / REVISED  
MINUTES  
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION

March 4, 2010\*

Present: Peter Chipouras  
Nelson Gelfman  
John Katz  
James McChesney  
Rebecca Mucchetti, Chairman  
Patrick Walsh, Vice Chair

Absent: Michael Autuori  
Joseph Fossi  
Phil Mische

\* The meeting was originally scheduled for 2/23/10 and was postponed and re-scheduled to 3/4/10 because of inclement weather.

Also Present: Betty Brosius, Director of Planning  
Heidi Samokar, Consultant Planner, Planimetrics

At 7:30 p.m. Chairman Mucchetti called the meeting to order.

**PENDING ITEMS**

**Chairman Mucchetti** welcomed the crowd of about 30 people and introduced Heidi Samokar, the Commission's consultant planner from Planimetrics, Avon, Connecticut. Ms. Samokar gave a 20-minute overview of the Plan and its development to date, highlighting focus points. She emphasized that the main purpose of the meeting was to learn the public's view on the draft Plan of Conservation and Development as it has been developed so far. The meeting is not meant to be a defense of a dissertation, but it to receive comment, so that the Commission can make further revisions as needed.

[Note: It should be noted for the record that at least the following town boards and commissions and community organizations were represented at the meeting: Historical Society, Economic Development Commission, Commission for the Disabled, Affordable Housing Commission, Conservation Commission, the Land Conservancy, the Ridgefield Action Committee for the Environment (RACE), Ridgefield Housing Authority, and the Chamber of Commerce.]

**Ms. Samokar** then went into a brief overview of the Plan, using a PowerPoint presentation and the Executive Summary as a guide. The POCD "is a tool to guide growth and change." It looks at where we are now, where are we going, and where we want to be. It looks primarily at the physical development of the community, but economic and social issues are also important.

The Plan is a “strategic plan.” There are strategies to make the Plan work, but it is not meant to delve into fine detail. It should be visionary, with both short-term and long-term actions. Ridgefield has a history of actively using the POCD as it implements recommended strategies. But the Plan is advisory; it is not a mandate.

The current draft is based on two public meetings where information was gathered from the public, and also uses information and comments received from boards, commissions and various town officials. There has been much community input.

Certain themes emerged; Ridgefield’s Community Character, Natural Resources and Open Space are very important concerns. The center of town needs to be protected and enhanced, and it is important to maintain and encourage economic development in appropriate business areas. There is a need for affordable housing for workers and for seniors. Traffic and safety is a concern, especially on the major highways. Pedestrian and biking facilities are important.

The Plan deals primarily with Conservation, Development and Infrastructure. Conservation is the protection of those things that need to be preserved. Development will occur, and there is a need to guide development in the areas where we want it to occur, and with appropriate intensity. Lastly, we need to have the proper infrastructure in place to accommodate development.

Conservation deals with community character, natural resources, open space and historic resources. Scenic features and the rural, physical features of the town need to be preserved. The Conservation Commission is working on a Natural Resources Inventory that can be used by many others in planning changes that may occur. Ridgefield center needs to be preserved with its strong character (i.e., Village District regulations were adopted to accomplish this.) Water protection is important, for drinking, flood control, and recreation. Trees and vegetation should be protected where appropriate, during development. Open space and greenways should be encouraged and enhanced. Historic resources should be preserved, and efforts to encourage this should be maintained.

Development chapters cover community structure, addressing housing needs while carefully controlling the intensity of multi-family housing, and promoting appropriate business development. An example of “community structure” would be the identity of the downtown; everyone knows what is meant by the “village” of Ridgefield. The gateways into town and business “nodes” are shown on the map (showing areas of business development). The area north of the center is also important – some of the positive elements in the downtown area (sidewalks, lighting) might be extended there. Branchville is another important “node.” There is a feeling that the train station should be capitalized on, and that business and residential development within the transportation center should be encouraged. Housing should be maintained throughout town as lower density, single-family homes, but there are certain areas where higher density may be appropriate. There is a need to serve the aging population. Business development should occur in already established business zones, and those zones should not be converted to solely residential

areas. Route 7 is a focus area in the Plan. Although there is a strong feeling that big-box and strip development is not desirable there, it is agreed that the zoning should be studied and that limited changes to existing regulations may be appropriate, working within the need to control traffic, and to observe environmental constraints such as the Norwalk River.

Infrastructure includes community facilities (schools, town offices, fire, police, etc.), roads and highways, and public utilities. There is a general feeling that short-term reconfiguration of existing spaces may serve immediate needs, but over the long term it may be appropriate to combine town offices and some services into one location in the downtown area. Police and Fire may want to be combined in a central location, to share some services and facilities. The Plan does not take a position on how schools should be organized, but it recognizes that school buildings should be retained in town ownership to meet cyclical fluctuations in school population. The library should remain in the town center area. Roads and transit are important, and the Plan supports safety improvements to local roads, and improvements in public transportation. Walking and bicycling are also important, and should be designed into some areas where space is available. Sidewalks should continue to be expanded into areas around the town center.

Water service is shown on maps, and it was noted that the Aquarion Water Company has the rights to expand public water service when it is needed. Sewers are a larger concern; there are areas where increased sewer service may be appropriate, such as Branchville, if the development of Branchville as more of a “village” is desired. But controlling the amount of sewer availability will be important in order to limit inappropriate high-density development.

The Future Land Use Plan shows the plan’s recommendations in summary. Various boards and commissions and town agencies and town officials will be responsible for implementing the strategies that are ultimately desired.

**Ms. Samokar** noted that the Commission would review and consider the comments from the public meeting, and would refine the final draft accordingly. The 65-day formal notification requirements are spelled out in State statutes, stating the time period when the Plan needs to be forwarded to the Board of Selectmen for comment, prior to the public hearing on adoption. There will be another opportunity for public comment at that time.

Following are comments from the public and representatives of the groups listed below:

Dwayne Escola, 52 Catoonah Street (RACE). Mr. Escola asked what plans were being made to accommodate electric cars in the downtown area in the 10-year plan? Power sources may include solar panels, and infrastructure would need to be in place to provide charging stations. Parking spaces should be designated with the power sources.

Robert Ingraham, 28 Bruschi Lane (Commission for the Disabled). How does the Plan look at ADA accessibility in the downtown area and in public facilities? Ms. Samokar

notes that the Plan mentions ADA compliance in several areas, especially in regard to transportation and accessibility to town buildings, sidewalks, etc.

Michelle Brewster, 182 Bennetts Farm Road. There is a need to locate senior housing within walking distance of the downtown village and Branchville. Bus service should be established and maintained in a circuitous route, so that seniors can get around the shopping areas and downtown. The community as a whole will be more vibrant if seniors can get around and be more connected.

Emma Lou Benedict, 21 Sky Top Road (Chmn., Commission for the Disabled). Ms. Benedict has read the Plan from cover to cover and recommends that everyone should have to read it! She had favorable comments and is grateful about the number of times that improving accommodations for the disabled is mentioned in the Plan. She points out that comments have been made about the aging population, and notes that with aging come disabilities. There needs to be a clear statement that the disabled are a part of the community, because they are often “invisible.” They are a population that should not be forgotten. The Plan addresses access, but the disabled are involved in all aspects of the community. There are universal design principles for aging in place, including building design and provisions for “visitability.” Future housing stock, including single family, affordable and high-density housing, should be designed for the disabled. Ms. Benedict offered a one-page list of comments, a marked up copy of the draft Plan, and publications on the federal ADA Act, including a “Guide for Small Towns,” and common problems for communities and ADA compliance. She emphasized that merchants need to be aware of providing access to businesses and restaurants, because many establishments in Ridgefield are not accessible to persons in wheelchairs.

Katherine Kehoe, 37 South Olmstead Lane. There is a need to repair and maintain sidewalks in the High Ridge area near Parley Lane and Golf Lane. Existing walkways consist of deteriorating concrete and asphalt, or non-existing.

Robert Ingraham, 28 Bruschi Lane (Commission for the Disabled). Mr. Ingraham comments about the elderly and the disabled. Accommodating the elderly and the disabled helps everyone – think of mothers with strollers.

Dave Goldenberg, 79 Seth Low Mountain Road (Chair, Affordable Housing Committee). He has reviewed the Plan with respect to housing. He feels that affordable housing is not really in the Plan; there are general statements that are similar to the 1999 Plan, and these are generally favored, but no specific goals are set and no specific strategies laid out. The affordable housing committee’s presentation in June included specific recommendations, but the Plan does not include these goals. The Plan points out that Ridgefield has the second lowest number of affordable housing units in the region, but the Plan offers nothing to help us remedy that problem. The Plan refers to the HVCEO study, but notes that the stated goals are unrealistic and achievable. The comments are too negative. Mr. Goldenberg provided some written comments and suggestions.

Magdalena Fincham, 125 Florida Hill Road (Economic Development Commission). The EDC is encouraged that many of the recommendations in its Action Plan have been included in similar language in the POCD. The EDC has a similar mindset to the PZC regarding development on Route 7; the area will not support big-box development, but zoning may be modified to make better and more intelligent use of existing business-zoned properties. From a personal perspective, she notes her own concern with accessibility. She has had difficulty trying to shop in some of the downtown businesses because of poor access and crowded interior layouts in the stores and some of the restaurants. She also supports the idea of supporting electric cars in the downtown area by providing charging stations. Lastly, she notes that special venues for children (activities and facilities such as the Norwalk Aquarium, museums, etc.) are not available in town. It is necessary to drive elsewhere. The Discovery Center and the Library may be able to provide more for children.

Kitsey Snow, 62 Canterbury Lane (Conservation Commission). The CC would like to see the sidebar on page 46 removed (re: “Buildable Land” regulation) because this actually limits the Commission’s ability to be flexible. They would also like to see the photo on the right on page 43 removed, because it shows a structure in the upland review area. Finally, she agrees with that there are limited activities available for children, including older children. There is nowhere for older children to go.

Chris Leonard, 25 Mallory Hill Road. He has lived in the Branchville area for about 17 years and he is happy that the Plan addresses that area. The Route 7 corridor from Route 102 north towards the former Walpole Fence property has tremendous potential. He is an attorney involved in land use, and he knows that developers are interested in this area. This is significant. Transient businesses such as the popular “Little Pub” restaurant are now doing well. Business there is “booming.” Locating affordable housing, including housing for the elderly, near the train station is attractive. The challenge is to stay away from big-box development. Businesses should be able to use exposure to the traffic on the road, but not increase it. Very carefully constructed zoning is important. He would be willing to be on a subcommittee to study this area, to look at appropriate businesses that should be located here, and zoning that would accomplish those goals.

Doug Martin, 480 Silver Spring Road (Land Conservancy). He notes that the chapters on natural resources and open space need to address stewardship of land that the town owns; open space lands need to be inspected to ensure preservation and protection. Collaboration between the town and organizations that want to obtain open space may be desirable, although both private and public (government) entities need to keep options open.

Dwayne Escola. Mr. Escola asks where energy conservation should be included. He understands that the Commission does not want to include a complete and separate section on it, but where should it appear? Ms. Samokar points out that comments are “blended” into various sections of the Plan, including new paragraphs that were added to both the Business and Housing chapters. It is not in a stand-alone section. Mr. Escola thinks it needs to be listed in the strategies in the Executive Summary. It is much more than a local problem. For instance, geo-thermal energy should be planned in new commercial

construction. Ms. Samokar said the Commission needs to decide what makes the most sense; should energy conservation be mentioned in many sections, or in one section? Mr. Escola thinks it needs to be more prominently mentioned, in any case.

Gretchen Bishop, 130 Fieldcrest Drive (RACE). She acknowledges that there are many sections that have to do with “sustainability,” but she would also like to see it discussed in a more prominent place. It needs to be more “front and center.” It should not be a sidebar in the Natural Resources section.

Emma Lou Benedict. Ms. Benedict mentions that there is also a need to sustain the older population, and if buildings are constructed correctly that will happen. She provided a DVD on sidewalk construction to the Commission several months ago, illustrating the need for better access on public streets.

Michelle Brewster. She points out that the New York City ADA code might be a good example for improving sidewalks and access. The planting of trees is also important when development is condensed. Europe has good examples of this, with condensed development surrounded by open fields and rural areas.

Gretchen Bishop. In regard to housing, there is a need to address younger people who can’t afford to live here. Ms. Samokar points out that the Plan addresses this in the housing chapter.

Joanne Search, 38 White Birch Road (Affordable Housing Committee). The Plan talks about maintaining the single-family character, and high-density housing is talked about in a negative manner. However, the need for affordable housing is evident, and multi-family housing is needed to economically address affordable housing needs.

John Pappa, 358 West Lane. Mr. Pappa comments on the historic resources strategies. The statements seem to be the same as comments from 10 years ago. There is a need to protect historic resources so that no more are lost, such as the “pink house” [Keeler house] in Ridgebury. This section could stand to be refreshed and updated.

Michelle Brewster. Ms. Brewster agrees with this statement, and points to Park Slope in Brooklyn as a good example. There should be more landmarks.

**Ms. Samokar** noted that there were no more hands raised for comments, and she repeated the schedule for Commission review going forward. She encouraged those present to come back for the public hearing when the Plan is ready.

**The Planner** encouraged the public to call if there are additional questions or need for additional information. The public should also call if there is difficulty in finding the Plan on the town’s website.

Hearing no further discussion, the Chairman adjourned the meeting at 8:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Betty Brosius  
Director of Planning