

APPROVED / REVISED
MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
INLAND WETLANDS BOARD

March 25, 2008

Present: Peter Chipouras
John Katz
Phil Mische
Rebecca Mucchetti, Chairman
Patrick Walsh, Vice Chair
Lillian Willis

Absent: Michael Autuori
Joseph Fossi
Nelson Gelfman

Also Present: Betty Brosius, Inland Wetlands Agent

A Planning and Zoning Work Session on the Ridgefield Center Study was held prior to the meeting.

At 9:14 p.m. Chairman Mucchetti called the meeting to order.

PENDING ITEMS

There were no pending items.

NEW ITEMS

1. **#2008-036-SR:** Summary Ruling application under Section 7.2 of the IWWR for disturbance in the upland review area in conjunction with construction of a 3 bedroom dwelling with a new septic system and driveway on property located at **31 Park Lane** in the RA zone. Owner/Appl.: Albert & Cynthia Blizzard. *65-day action period ends 5/29/2008. For receipt and schedule walk.*

Chairman Mucchetti asked the Board to acknowledge receipt of the application and suggested that the item be added to the site walk schedule for March 30, 2008.

Mr. Katz motioned, seconded by Mr. Chipouras, to receive the application and to schedule the walk, as suggested. The motion passed, 6-0.

BOARD WALKS

The following site walk was added to the March 30, 2008 schedule, as noted above:

- **#2008-036-SR:** Summary Ruling **31 Park Lane**, Blizzard

The following site walk was previously scheduled for March 30, 2008.

- **#2008-034-SR:** Summary Ruling **195 Danbury Road (Ridgefield Parks and Recreation)**, TOR

REQUESTS FOR BOND RELEASES/REDUCTION

There were no requests for bond release or reduction.

CORRESPONDENCE

There was no correspondence.

MINUTES

There were no minutes for approval.

Hearing no further discussion, the Chairman adjourned the meeting at 9:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Betty Brosius
Inland Wetlands Agent

APPROVED / REVISED
MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION

March 25, 2008

Present: Peter Chipouras
John Katz
Phil Mische
Rebecca Mucchetti, Chairman
Patrick Walsh, Vice Chair
Lillian Willis

Absent: Michael Autuori
Joseph Fossi
Nelson Gelfman

Also Present: Betty Brosius, Director of Planning

A Work Session for the Ridgefield Center Study was held with the Commission's consultants prior to the Inland Wetlands Board meeting and prior to the regular business noted below.

At 7:30 p.m. Chairman Mucchetti called the meeting to order, to conduct the work session for the Ridgefield Center Study. The meeting was adjourned temporarily to conduct the Inland Wetlands Board meeting at 9:14 p.m., and reconvened at 9:16 p.m. for regular business.

WORK SESSION

Ridgefield Center Study – Progress Report with consultants from Milone & MacBroom, Inc. [Vincent McDermott, FASLA, AICP and Mike Wilson, P.E. were present for the work session with the Commission. Mr. Mische joined the work session at 7:55 p.m.]

Chairman Mucchetti opened the discussion and announced that the Ridgefield Playhouse had been reserved for the public session to be held on April 29, 2008.

Mr. McDermott informed the Commission that, because of research they had done in preparation for the work session, he knew of a meeting being held by the First Selectman on Thursday, 3/27, to discuss proposed improvements to Route 35 (Main Street) with the CTDOT, and asked if Commission staff had been invited to attend. The discussion is relevant to the Ridgefield Center Study as it goes forward. Neither the staff nor the Commission was aware of the meeting, and inquiries will be made.

Mr. McDermott said that he had positive and a little negative news about progress to date. His firm had been in touch with Assistant Engineer Jake Muller regarding GIS information

for mapping, and had only just received the information on Monday, although the Assistant Engineer sent it out a week before (slow delivery by the Post Office is to blame, and day-late delivery by Federal Express). The information is not as good as expected, but they will work with it to prepare for analysis and illustration for the study. Certain property information is needed in order to do a zoning analysis for parking, and it may not be available from the Assessor in electronic form. Staff will work with the consultant as much as possible to provide the information.

On a more positive note, Mr. McDermott said he had spent several hours in town on Saturday, 3/22, and had taken photos and made observations about parking availability, traffic circulation, and pedestrian movements in town. Until the GIS information can be reviewed in more detail, he could not make his observations with knowledge of property lines, and his view was therefore “unconstrained.” He is interested in learning if his observations coincide with those of the Commission.

Mr. McDermott noted that Mike Wilson had made progress with study of traffic, accidents, and the Route 35 Traffic Study completed in 2005. He introduced Mr. Wilson to review the traffic counting, accident statistics and other information.

Mr. Wilson said there were three basic things they studied, for inventory. (1) They reviewed the Route 35 Corridor Study, and he had prepared a table for the downtown statistics and recommendations. He included notes about what exists and which of the recommendations may have already been implemented. (2) They looked at available traffic statistics from CTDOT, including traffic counts for major intersections. The data from 2007 has just become available and it was used. (3) A table had been prepared to show accident statistics from DOT data, including the nature/type of accidents.

He distributed traffic information in a table prepared according to DOT counts, which are made available every three years. The Chairman asked about the location for the counts, and Mr. Wilson pointed out the list on the table. He had numbers from the center of town, as well as points north and south. The Route 35 study said that traffic had been growing and was expected to continue. Mr. Wilson referenced his numbers on the table showing statistics from 1992 to 2007, and the fact that the totals go up and down. Percents of increase over various periods of time are shown. The 2001-2004 data (subject of the study) show an increase, but other periods show fluctuation and a very modest change overall.

Chairman Mucchetti asked for an overall analysis. Mr. Wilson says that the overall change is not that great, but he notes that the chart does not show “peak hour”; it shows 24-hour counts. Mr. McDermott says that a 1-2% annual increase in overall traffic is what is usually expected. So, for a 3-year period you would expect an increase of 3-6%. Mr. Wilson agrees, and says it is a conservative number, but supported by historic surveys. They will do actual counting surveys, and will compare the numbers obtained with the Route 35 study statistics.

Mr. Katz asked about the notation for “Route 116 north of Danbury Road.” Mr. Wilson said that the counts include numbers off of route 35, heading north on Route 116.

The numbers for accidents were reviewed. The period for '03-'06 was the focus of information received from CTDOT. The statistics agree generally with the numbers listed in the Route 35 study. By far, the greatest number of accidents are rear-end collisions, and most are in the Catoonah Street area and north on Danbury Road. They represent more than half of the accidents. He says that people tend to be not as observant in the center of town, and there are many distractions.

Chairman Mucchetti points out that there are new left-turn arrows (Prospect Street off Main Street), and that may help. Mr. Wilson notes that left-turn improvements were recommended in the Route 35 study. He has spoken with Jonathan Chew about the report, about what was recommended for additional improvements, and what will be completed in the near future. Mr. Wilson's table shows the recommendations and what has been implemented so far. The need for left-turn lanes on Main Street is a recurring theme in the report, with less desirable alternatives also recommended (assuming that left-turn lanes cannot be installed in every location). He says that funding and additional improvements are in the works, according to Mr. Chew, and discussions are on-going. CTDOT funding is generally discussed through the First Selectman's office. Mr. McDermott repeats that there is a Thursday meeting scheduled to discuss Route 35 improvements further, and he is concerned that “we are all on the same page.”

Mr. Wilson talked about the proposed loading zone and other suggested improvements listed in the Route 35 study for the Bailey/Catoonah/Main Street intersection. He knows that the DOT is not in favor of all the improvements recommended in the study, but discussions are on-going. He emphasizes to the Commission (and has said the same to the DOT) that they are not looking to re-visit the study, but to understand its recommendations and to incorporate that information into the current study. He notes that the current Center Study will be much more detailed than the Route 35 study in terms of recommendations for street-scape improvements, signage, and pedestrian access to stores and parking.

Mr. McDermott said he was interested in gaining input from the Commission based on observations he had made in the downtown area on a visit to town on Saturday, 3/22. He arrived at about 10:15 and parked at the Yankee Ridge shopping center. He illustrated his observations with photos. The parking lot was empty, but he noted that the Stop & Shop center area was busy. Commissioners pointed out that the downtown area was likely to be empty because many people left town for the holiday weekend. Mr. Walsh says that the Dimitri's Restaurant is usually busy on a non-holiday weekend.

Mr. McDermott notes the curious blockage of the ramp to the upper parking areas behind the Main Street stores. There is a large area that is “disjointed” because of the concrete blocks and the inability of traffic to move from one area to another. He also notes the dead-end parking area behind 470 Main Street, and that dead-end situations like this are generally a very bad idea. Mr. Katz agrees, and says he has seen slow-motion accidents in such areas, especially from people backing out of parking spaces.

The teller drive-up window at the bank at the end of the Yankee Ridge plaza is also a problem. There is no room for a “queue” at the ATM, drive-up window. Space for six cars is generally recommended, and a “slip” lane is needed, for people who may change their minds and want to drive around the queue. The Planner points out that the Hudson City Bank is scheduled to open at this location in the near future. Mr. McDermott notes that the Yankee Ridge parking area is large and is probably adequate in this location. Mr. Katz points out that Nature’s Temptations store is currently closed, and that will create more traffic, in addition to the bank. He agrees with Mr. Walsh that Dimitri’s generally fills up the lot. The Planner notes that people who work in the Main Street stores and offices are forced to move their cars every two hours, and some of them will park at Yankee Ridge.

Mr. McDermott observed that the library parking area and traffic circulation works very well. The Planner informed him that the bank building is now owned by the library, and will close for the library expansion. Mr. McDermott says he likes the “quintessential” look of the sidewalk, street trees and lamp posts on Prospect Street in front of the library.

The Bailey Avenue intersection off Prospect Street is a problem from a circulation standpoint. Traffic entering Bailey Avenue is immediately faced with stop signs and forced to turn right or left into private parking lots (Yankee Ridge and the medical offices on the opposite side). This is a concern. The Italian American Club parking lot allows interior traffic movements that are confusing, with one-way and two-way entrances off Prospect Street.

In the Big Shop Lane area, some of the parking works, but there are walls and dead-end lots in some spots. The steep driveway out of the east side of the Bailey Avenue lot is also a problem. It has no signage, and only people who are familiar with the lot will know where to go. There are many “ins and outs” into the Bailey Avenue lot off Main Street, and no room for cars to maneuver into these alley-ways off Main Street. He guesses that some of the accident statistics, if they were to be assigned in detail to specific locations on Main Street, might be at these alleyways, because of people turning off Main Street into the Bailey Avenue lots. These are great pedestrian-ways, and should not be used for vehicular traffic. There is currently a conflict between cars and pedestrians off Main Street. It was pointed out that the Route 35 traffic study recommended these alleys as pedestrian pass-ways.

Mr. Wilson says the Route 35 plan talks about “access management,” and that many of the recommendations are for closing and moving certain inappropriate access points. He understands that the access plan was adopted by the Commission. The Planner notes that it is referred to frequently in the review of plans in front of the Commission, but the CTDOT does not always agree with its recommendations. Mr. McDermott says there is a definite “disconnect” between DOT officials who may have been part of the study, and those who are charged with the review and permitting for the plans.

Mr. McDermott shows in his photos many places where passage is obstructed behind the Main Street stores, and backing in and out of spaces is difficult and confusing. Chairman Mucchetti says that many of the spaces in the Bailey Avenue lot are compact size, and the Planner notes that the parking lot re-design is proposed to correct that. But the overall concern is loss of numbers of spots, and not improvements that are proposed.

Mr. McDermott shows the confusing cross-street movement of cars from the Balducci's lot across the street to the Bailey Avenue lot. The cross-over is contrary to the one-way movement on the street, and it is confusing. The service area behind the grocery store is unsightly, but probably can't be improved much because it is needed for the business.

He shows the Governor Street municipal lot (about 50 spaces), and the poor signage at the entrance. This is probably an underutilized lot. Mr. Katz says that the lot was intended for employees of Main Street stores, but they won't use it, partly because they say it is too far to walk, and partly because they complain that lighting and sidewalks are inadequate for access at night. Some have even said they feel unsafe walking that far, and people want to park right in front of the places where they work. Mr. McDermott agrees that lighting and pedestrian access is not ideal, and improvements are definitely needed. He also points out the many contiguous and inefficiently used driveways off Governor Street, for the buildings to the west of the municipal lot.

Mr. McDermott asks about the green, open area near Balducci's, and who owns it. It was pointed out that the owner (Donnelly) does not wish to allow the town to purchase the lot or lease it or take it by condemnation, and that it is used for piling of snow in the winter. It would be ideal for increasing parking area and improving the downtown, but it is not available. The same entity owns the Balducci's shopping center.

Mr. McDermott says the entrances and exits to the Balducci's lot are confusing and probably set up in the opposite way (in and out) from what makes sense. Generally, in the U.S., one has to pass the exit to a parking area in order to reach the entrance. This lot is set up in the opposite way. The interior movements in the lot are complicated by the Ridgefield Bank circulation for the drive-through window. The width of the aisles and back-up spaces may be larger than needed, and a re-working of the layout may actually produce more spaces. Chairman Mucchetti and others confirmed that this is one of the most-used parking lots for people using the downtown area stores, and for those who go to the Veteran's Park School, or who park to walk on Main Street.

The parking behind the Town Hall and Main Street stores, exiting on Bailey Avenue, is also confusing. The Bailey Avenue loading zones (along the sides of the street) were discussed. It is not the ideal situation, but there is nowhere else for delivery trucks to park for the Bailey Avenue stores. Mr. McDermott likes the pedestrian alleyways off Main Street, such as the sidewalk adjacent to Town Hall.

Looking at the St. Stephens Church parking area, he says there is an abundance of parking and space behind the church. The idea of shared parking and improvements to the circulation around the church is an area that is worth exploring. There is a nursery school

and play yard that is a safety concern, but a solution for that may be worked out. The lot is probably empty most of the time. The areas behind and adjacent to Ridgefield Hardware are inefficiently used and marked.

Catoonah Street business parking was discussed next. The area behind Carnall Insurance seems to be divided between two-hour and 30-minute parking, with a yellow stripe across the parking lot. It appears that there may be a “turf battle” in this area, and there is a fence that bars pedestrian passage between the stores in the Amatuzzi building and the Carnall lot.

The lot behind the Addressi building works well, but the median barrier seems to prevent trucks from entering the lot to use it as a loading zone. Traffic backing out of the Colonial Cleaners front lot is a problem, because it conflicts with traffic coming down Catoonah Street. There seems to be under-utilized parking behind the Cleaners building. The Thrift Shop parking lot seems to very well used.

The CVS parking lot was discussed next. Traffic movement is good in some areas, and in other parts it is confusing. The queue out of the lot to Main Street is somewhat inefficient for internal circulation. The lot is used as a cut-through to Catoonah Street, to avoid the Bailey Avenue traffic light on Main Street. The “ice house” near the Village Deli is dangerous and blocks views of traffic coming from the deli and Main Street. The alleyway from the deli to Main Street is marked and used for two-way, although it is essentially a single width. It is used for pedestrian traffic although it is too narrow. It is very dangerous.

The Post Office lot is too small for capacity and inefficient for the traffic that it generates. People use the private parking at the business next door. Queues of cars waiting to get into the Post Office lot create congestion.

The loading zone area in front of the Addressi building is a problem. The Route 35 plan had a reasonable solution, with a barrier to separate street traffic from parking in front of the stores. It could be effective, but the CTDOT won’t allow it. They do not support “context sensitivity,” although they claim to promote it.

Mr. McDermott says he talked to a young man who sits at the Bailey Avenue intersection and controls the light on the weekend. He says he also gives directions to people looking for parking areas. Mr. Walsh confirms that the man is out there at 6:30 in the morning, to control the traffic light. It was noted that previous persons in this position have become policemen, and this may be an “in training” position.

Mr. McDermott says that most of the cars he observed on Main Street seemed to be passing through and not stopping. Chairman Mucchetti says the Route 35 study included statistics about this movement, and that only 20% of those cars in the survey were passing through. About 80% were destined for Ridgefield business. The results were surprising to most. Mr. McDermott says that the study focused on “through” traffic in and out of the Town of Ridgefield; for the purpose of the current study, he needs to focus on people who

park downtown versus those who are “passing through” to go to Copps Hill or other Ridgefield destinations.

The bottom line is that the Ridgefield Center Study needs to understand property lines, but ultimately the solution will be an overall analysis of what works in the downtown general area, looking at the situation as if there were no property lines. Commissioners point out that there are “personality issues” and it will be a challenge to get property owners to work together toward an overall solution.

The consultants compared Ridgefield’s situation to studies they have done in Nantucket and Vineyard Haven. Agreements between property owners and shared parking areas are critical to making the parking and traffic circulation work. Mr. Wilson says there are ways to track movement of cars within an area by looking at license plates. It would be interesting to study the movements of individual cars in the Ridgefield Center area.

Chairman Mucchetti complimented the consultants on having made a good analysis of the downtown area. The challenge is to make the out-of-towner feel comfortable coming into town to find a spot to park. Mr. Katz agrees that there needs to be a “public relations spin” on the solutions that are proposed, so that business owners and especially retail merchants who wish to attract customers, will buy into the idea that cooperation and shared parking and traffic circulation across property lines is generally good for all. Chairman Mucchetti says that looking at the downtown area as a “district” as far as parking is concerned may be a solution; the owners agree to work together, and then they may be able to benefit from overall services for all, like snow plowing and maintenance.

Mr. Katz asks if there are examples of where such improvements actually generated improvements in the economy and sales. Mr. McDermott says there are comparisons that can be made with improvements in other locations they have studied, but meaningful economic statistics may be more difficult to obtain.

Mr. McDermott says that there is a need to talk to representatives from the Chamber, the downtown merchants, the Parking Authority, the Police, and others.

Mr. Mische says that the important thing will be to emphasize to the public and stakeholders in the downtown area that the parking problems are “broken into a thousand little pieces,” and cooperation and consolidation of effort and improvements, to create a more cohesive solution, is crucial. If there is not harmony between the various property owners, that sends the wrong message to people who come to town; they can see and feel the disjointedness. Mr. Katz agrees, and repeats that this needs to be “sold” to the property owners as a way to increase retail sales and customer traffic. Mrs. Willis says examples from other areas where property owners arrived at an amicable solution with resulting economic benefit might be helpful.

Chairman Mucchetti says Ridgefield is often compared to New Canaan and Greenwich, and Ridgefield has many differences from those communities. These comparisons will no doubt come up during the public meeting. She asks about the proposed format for the

meeting at the Playhouse. It is the opportunity for the public to provide meaningful input. At the zoning regulation update public meetings, the consultant conducted the discussion, which worked very well. With the Commission in charge, there may be reluctance to comment freely.

Mr. McDermott says that maps will be prepared for the meeting, and general overall observations will be stated at the outset, to show the consultants' early analysis of the situation. Then the public will be asked to comment – Why do you think there is a parking problem? and What do you think should be done to fix it?

Planner Brosius pointed out that the presentation and discussion at this work session talked about traffic circulation and shared parking, and the lack of connectivity between various parking lots. What has come up in discussions at the Chamber, the Route 35 study meetings and elsewhere in the prior five years or so has focused on the lack of parking spaces; there is definitely a perception that there is not enough parking, and lack of understanding that the layout and access the existing parking may be the greater problem. It will be important to emphasize the “global” problem to the public.

Mr. McDermott says the GIS mapping in conjunction with zoning statistics will be important to prove that there is indeed enough parking, and that the problem is finding it and gaining access to it. An examination of the various peak hours (weekdays vs. weekends) will be important.

Chairman Mucchetti says that the “outsider” view of the consultants has been enlightening; the argument of the business owners is that people coming to town cannot find a place to park. Mr. Katz states that congestion tends to be pointed out as a problem, when really it is a good thing, because it means that many people are coming to town to shop. It is a good sign. The “psychic effect” of traffic and the “economic effect” are really not the same thing.

Mr. Chipouras asks if the timing of lights on Main Street might be a problem. It was the general consensus that it is not, but all conceded that there are times when traffic moves very slowly through town and there is the appearance of congestion. Mr. McDermott agrees that there are “bursts” of traffic throughout the day, and this must be considered.

Mr. Wilson says that the proposed left-turn improvements, when implemented, will help a great deal. Traffic will flow more smoothly, and timing of lights can be adjusted more efficiently when these left-turn signals are operational. Mr. Chipouras says that decreasing the frustration level of waiting in line for traffic lights will make people more likely to come to town. Mr. Mische agrees that frustration drives people away, and people have little patience.

Mr. McDermott says that one of the issues of parking on Main Street is the area where there is an embankment in front of the CVS and Toy Store businesses. People have to walk in the street because there is nowhere to walk on the passenger side of the car.

Mr. McDermott sees that there is an opportunity for some meaningful solutions if there is cooperation among the property owners. He fears that the competition between the property owners may be the perception that one is faring better than another, and it would be a good idea to relax zoning standards so that strict interpretations of the regulations do not harm one while helping another. The Planner agrees that this is a real problem.

Mr. Wilson says that in Darien there was a movement toward promoting shared parking agreements, and that this has been codified. Shared parking agreements are used as an incentive toward allowing greater use of properties. Chairman Mucchetti says this concept was actually approved in a recent project in front of the Commission, but at the last minute one of the property owners backed out of the deal, and the whole project had to be re-worked. Mr. McDermott says that sometimes a “hammer” is needed, and property owners need to be forced to cooperate. It is not the desired solution, but sometimes it is needed if the Town feels strongly about finding a solution to a problem. Mr. Mische agrees that examples of successes elsewhere may be beneficial.

Chairman Mucchetti thanked the consultants for a “great start” on the project. It was agreed that the April 29th meeting will be important for information and idea-gathering. Mr. McDermott agrees that they will present an early analysis of what exists, and will not seek to offer solutions at that meeting.

[The work session and the Planning and Zoning Meeting was adjourned at 9:12 p.m., to deal with the Inland Wetlands Board agenda. The PZC reconvened at 9:16 p.m. to handle the items below.]

PENDING ITEMS

There were no pending items.

NEW ITEMS

1. **#2008-035-REV(SP)**: Revision to Special Permit under Section 9.2.A.7.e. as required by Section 5.3.D.1 of the zoning regulations to make additions and alterations to building located at **650 Danbury Road** in the B-2 zone. Auth. Agent/Appl.: Doyle Coffin Architecture. Owner: Matthew C. Schimenti. *65-day action period ends 05/29/2008. For receipt and schedule walk.*

Chairman Mucchetti asked the Commission to acknowledge receipt of the application and suggested a site walk for March 30, 2008.

Mrs. Willis motioned, seconded by Mr. Mische, to receive the application and to schedule the site walk as suggested. The motion passed, 6-0.

COMMISSION WALKS

The Commission added the following item to the site walk schedule for March 30, 2008, as noted above:

- **#2008-035-REV(SP)**: Revision **650 Danbury Road**, Schimenti

The following items were previously scheduled for the March 30, 2008 site walk:

- **#2008-011-REV(SP)** Revision **Lot #1, Bryon Av**, Country Club Development, LLC
- **#2008-022-REV(SP)**: Revision **107-109 Danbury Road (Southwest Café)**, Copps Hill Common LLC

REQUESTS FOR BOND RELEASE/REDUCTION

There were no requests for bond release or reduction.

CORRESPONDENCE

There was no correspondence.

MINUTES

There were no minutes for approval.

Hearing no further discussion, the Chairman adjourned the meeting at 9:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Betty Brosius
Director of Planning