

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

March 31, 2008

Present: Michael Autuori
Peter Chipouras
Joseph Fossi
Nelson Gelfman
John Katz
James McChesney
Phil Mische
Rebecca Mucchetti, Chairman
Patrick Walsh, Vice Chairman

Also Present: Betty Brosius, Director of Planning

AGENDA ITEM:

WORK SHOP ON THE UPDATE TO THE PLAN OF CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT – The work shop was held at the Parks and Recreation Facility at 195 Danbury Road, beginning at 7:30 p.m.

The meeting was an informal work shop conducted by the Commission’s consultant for the update to the Plan of Conservation and Development, Planimetrics of Avon, Connecticut. All residents of the town were invited to attend, with notices posted in town buildings (schools, Town Hall, Parks and Recreation Facility, Town Hall Annex, etc.) and at the Chamber of Commerce and some of the larger stores (e.g., Stop and Shop). A Press Release appeared in the Ridgefield Press on March 5th and March 26th, and a legal notice was published in the Press on March 19th and 26th.

At the meeting, Commissioners were given name tags but were asked to listen, but not to speak. Commissioners and the Planner assisted participants at the beginning of the work shop with finding locations on maps during information-gathering exercises, described below. About 50-60 members of the public attended the meeting.

Doors opened for the meeting at 7:15 and attendees began to arrive shortly after. Each attendee was handed an envelope with instructions to visit three tables where maps of the town were displayed. At the first table, they were asked to put a blue sticker (dot) on the location of their home in Ridgefield. At the second table, they were asked to put a dot or dots on locations of things for which they were “proud”, and to write these things (up to four) on a card. At the third table, they placed dots on things that they did not like within the town (“sorrys”), and to write these on the card. The fourth table had twelve boxes

labeled with categories including Open Space/Parks, Community Character, Transportation, Other Transportation (bikes, pedestrian, train), Village Center, Historic Resources, Natural Resources, Business Development, Residential Development, and Housing Needs. Participants were given “points” resembling Monopoly money, in denominations of 5, 10 and 20 points. They were asked to deposit points into boxes according to their preferences.

Heidi Samokar, Senior Planner of the firm Planimetrics introduced herself and her assistants, Senior Planner **Jason Vincent**, and Senior Community Designer **Dennis Goderre**. Ms. Samokar started her presentation by asking the audience to define a “Plan of Conservation and Development,” then offered her own explanation of the document and the need to update it every ten years (per State statute).

Ms. Samokar outlined the agenda for the remainder of the work shop, explaining that assistant Dennis and the Planner were counting the points from the “preferences” boxes, and those would be prioritized and then discussed. The participants would be asked about their choices for “prouds” and “sorrlys” (the dots on the maps), and assistant Jason would compile a list. There would be no debate or discussion, and no attempt to sort out solutions. The session would be for information-gathering only, to prioritize the concerns and interests of the public.

Identification of “sorrlys” included the partially-completed affordable housing development at the intersection of Routes 7 and 35 (“Terraces at Ridgefield”, which received many dots), and the perception by some merchants that the Commission is not friendly to business. Others felt that there is a need for more bike lanes on public roads, and more emphasis on providing safe walk-ways for pedestrians, to de-emphasize the need for the use of cars. Some did not like proposals for development that included the demolition of older buildings.

The “Prouds” was long, and included the Parks and Recreation facility, large open spaces preserved (especially in northern Ridgefield), the beautiful village center, and preservation of historic resources.

The discussion of points deposited into boxes of interest and/or concern took up the bulk of the work shop time. Ranking by points yielded the 5 following priorities of interest/concern: (1) Village Center, (2) Open Space/Parks, (3) Natural Resources, (4) Community Character, and (5) Business Development. A short summary of some the comments follows:

Village Center: Comments focused on preserving the beauty of the village, promoting first floor retail, creating better parking and traffic flow, and the need to protect the “unique character” of the downtown.

Open space / Parks: The Parks and Recreation Facility is considered an asset, but there is a need for a bigger town park with diversity. Open spaces should be connected to provide trail systems, more parks and open space should be accessible to the

handicapped, and the town should maintain the goal toward 30% preservation of open space overall.

Natural Resources: Waterways need to be protected, scenic views should be preserved. There is a concern for air, water, traffic and light pollution. Stone walls should be saved.

Community Character: This category had a long list of concerns (for preservation), including historic walls, building and architecture, rural roads, ridges and trees, and the Main Street in the Village. Arts and culture are an important part of the community and need to be expanded. Community events (July 4th, fairs and concerts, etc.) are important to character.

Business Development: More corporations are needed to improve the tax base. The Route 7/35 area is a concern with “hodge podge” development, and re-zoning may be needed. Preservation and improvement of the downtown is a primary concern; parking, pedestrian movement, and promotion of retail on Main Street are key issues. There needs to be a strategy for the type of businesses that would be desirable in Ridgefield.

Transportation: Many supported the idea of promoting better pedestrian walkways and bike lanes and trails. A shuttle service for the business areas would be a good idea. Improvement of train service and parking at the train station is needed. Improving handi-capped accessibility of businesses, restaurants, shopping areas and public spaces is a concern.

Historic Resources: “McMansion” development detracts from the historic character of town. “Historic” homes and buildings should be defined and preserved. The Historical Society building is a good example of doing the right thing.

Housing Needs & Residential Development: Affordable Housing is needed, and a Housing Trust Fund is a good idea. There is a need for more “middle” housing because there are too many condominiums and McMansions, and not enough middle-level housing. There is a need for one-level dwellings for seniors.

General comments: Cell phone service in the western part of town is non-existent. Many houses are too big for the property where they sit. Ridgefield should be a leader in compliance with ADA requirements, making sidewalks and buildings accessible. Alternate energy sources (windmills, solar panels) should be explored.

Participants were asked, “If you could be King or Queen of Ridgefield for a day, what would you do or change?” Answers:

- Require first floor retail on Main Street
- Re-time the lights on Route 7
- Make sure there is cell phone service everywhere
- Create a “safe zone” for pedestrians and bikes, discourage auto travel in the village center

- Expand the Historic District to include the Village Center
- Create a huge park in town with fields, trails, places for families and children to spend time
- Re-zone the area between Pound Street and 116 (to Citibank) as B-1

Information gathered from the work shop will be sorted by categories and compiled into a report to be discussed by the Commission at its work session at the end of April. Boards and Commissions will be invited to a meeting in June, to offer additional information, ideas and concerns from the town agency/official perspective.

The work shop ended at 9:20 p.m. The results of the discussion, to be compiled and quantified by the consultants, will be reviewed by the Commission at the end of April.

Respectfully submitted,

Betty Brosius
Director of Planning