

APPROVED / REVISED
MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
INLAND WETLANDS BOARD

April 28, 2009

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

Also Present: Betty Brosius, Inland Wetlands Agent
Linda Caponetti, Recording Secretary

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

PENDING ITEMS

There were no pending items.

BOARD WALKS

There were no site walks to be scheduled.

REQUESTS FOR BOND RELEASES/REDUCTION

There were no requests for bond release or reduction.

CORRESPONDENCE

Chairman Mucchetti noted the following correspondence:

- Memos from IW Agents Pardee and Brosius, re activities at **20 Peaceable Street**

MINUTES

Dr. Gelfman motioned, seconded by Dr. Autuori, to approve the minutes of **April 14, 2009**. The motion passed, 6-0-3, with Commissioners Chipouras, Fossi, and Mische abstained because they had not been present at the meeting.

Hearing no further discussion, the Chairman adjourned the meeting at 7:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Caponetti
Recording Secretary

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

April 28, 2009

Present: Michael Autuori
Peter Chipouras
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John Katz
James McChesney
Phil Mische
Rebecca Mucchetti, Chairman
Patrick Walsh, Vice Chair

Also Present: Betty Brosius, Director of Planning
Linda Caponetti, Recording Secretary

At 7:32 p.m. Chairman Mucchetti called the meeting to order.

PENDING ITEMS

1. Work shop with Planimetrics for the POCD update

Chairman Mucchetti welcomed Heidi Samokar of Planimetrics, consultant for the update to the Plan of Conservation and Development.

Ms. Samokar said she intended to cover the main points of the discussion re transitioning from the issue collection phase of the project to developing visions and goals, and taking input on strategies. The booklets she'd distributed would deal with the following: Booklet #2 "Planning Issues" - the issues, as seen by the various board and commission members, department heads surveyed, and the public, and Booklet #3 "Conditions and Trends" - the issues, as seen by Planimetrics. This booklet contains several statistical charts and demographic information. Ms. Samokar asked if everyone had reviewed the booklets. They had.

Chairman Mucchetti felt that the March 31st public workshop input had been irrelevant in some cases, (because it dealt with issues beyond the limits of the Zoning Commission's purview). She felt that if the Commission had been allowed a voice, there may have been more clarity. There was a short discussion about how to handle public input. All agreed that public comment should be welcomed and supported. Mr. Katz felt a statement at the outset of the public hearing suggesting that not all comments will be relevant to the discussion at hand, (in this case, the Plan of Conservation and Development), would be helpful. Mr. Mische agreed.

Ms. Samokar suggested that the Commission allow Planimetrics to “manage expectations.” She began her discussion with “Conditions and Trends.” Mr. McChesney found the Planimetrics input therein “very valuable,” and wanted it included in the Master Plan. Ms. Samokar mentioned the American Community Survey, and the census conducted in 2005, 06, 07, which provides up-to-date data. The most recent data tends to confirm trends shown in earlier years, she said.

Growth has slowed and projections by the DEP and the State show that that trend will probably continue, she continued. The population is getting older, and households are shrinking. Ridgefield is a “mature community” without large amounts of vacant land left for developing.

Dr. Autuori discussed a Fairfield University seminar he attended, which addressed the question of prosperity without growth, stating that slowed growth may be a good thing in terms of modern scientific data.

The Chairman clarified that the Planimetrics comments were directed at population growth, not economic growth.

Ms. Samokar reported an out-migration of young adults and mature adults, (55-65 yr. olds), citing data on p. 5. This trend has been consistent over the last 25 yrs., but, should be reversing and will change in the next 10 – 25 yrs., driven by the baby boomers, who will be reaching the 65+ age group.

Mr. Katz made a strong point about the effects of the flagging economy on these trends, saying that the data presented will likely be rendered irrelevant. People now “don’t go anywhere,” he said, and their movement in the future will be “drastically affected by phenomenon that were not taken into account when the studies were done.”

Mr. Walsh felt the affect of the current economy would be more short term, (3-5yrs.), while the trends project out 15 to 20 years or more. He said that, when things “ease up,” the population will fall back into the trends, as projected

There was some continued discussion on the validity of the statistics, given the present economic climate.

Mr. Katz did not believe that the economy will ever rebound to its former levels, and that, when it recovers, there will be “a tremendous shift in how these graphs look. To one point, the jobs that used to be taken by the youngest sector of the population are now being taken by the oldest sector.

Mr. Walsh disagreed, saying that ten years from now, the graphs may prove very accurate.

Ms. Samokar said that, the economic situation and mobility aside, the age composition

of the country and the state is changing, and, to some degree, the effects will filter into Ridgefield.

The Chairman asked if the data also included the reasons for the migration. Ms. Samokar said the migration analysis was done by Planimetrics, and is purely statistical, and that the age projections are done by the state.

Ms. Samokar then addressed the issue of housing. Teardowns are not as prevalent in Ridgefield as elsewhere, (p. 9), she said, but the trend did become more prominent here in 2004, 2005, and 2006 and there was some concern.

The Town is losing rental units, she reported, giving statistical back up. The positive side, she said, is that some of the rentals may have turned into condominiums, increasing homeownership opportunities for some. On the other hand, the loss of rental units is closing out Ridgefield to another segment. While land use regulations can't dictate ownership, she said, the loss of rental units should be kept in mind in future housing initiated by the town.

Mr. Katz once again cited the economic downturn as an influence. He said, currently, there is not a shortage of rental properties in Ridgefield, and tenants are calling for reduction in rent "and getting it," he said.

Ms. Samokar suggested the growing rentals of single family homes, which have been on the market for sale (unsuccessfully) is skewing the statistic.

Mr. Walsh asked if it represents the number of rentals on the market or how a unit is being used by the owner. Ms. Samokar said it represents the number of households that are renting.

Chairman Mucchetti asked if there was a decrease in number of rental units because demand went down or because availability went down. Ms. Samokar suggested speaking with local realtors, as the HVCEO analysis did not get into that level of detail. The Planner suggested the local Board of Realtors as a good source of information.

The next issue tackled was affordable housing. In that area, Ms. Samokar said that Ridgefield is doing pretty well compared to the other towns in Fairfield County, referring to p. 12. "It's almost impossible for a community like Ridgefield to add all the units it needs," she added. She said that, rather than using the CT State requirements based on the State median income, it might be better to focus on work force housing, which might not qualify under the State's affordable housing guidelines, but might be more of a need.

Mr. Katz felt that the decreasing rents now are making many more units affordable.

On the economy, the data promises that Ridgefield will continue to see an increase in jobs. The data over a forty year span is positive.

Mr. Katz noted the increase in people working from home.

Mrs. Samokar said she was surprised to note that, in general, Ridgefield salaries fell below the Fairfield County average and were lower than the corresponding sector of the Stamford/Bridgeport labor market area. Out of the top five sectors that make up the greatest number of jobs in Ridgefield, three of those also have the lowest salary, Ms. Samokar said. This makes it difficult for someone who works here to live here, she added, citing p.16 of the booklet. A question and answer session followed regarding the particulars of the data on p. 16. Regarding the chart on p. 17, describing where people who work in Ridgefield live, Ms. Samokar summed it up by saying that Ridgefield jobs are filled by residents north of town, while Ridgefielders themselves head south to work.

Mr. Katz was concerned about the unavailability of more current data than that shown in the chart on p.17. Ms. Samokar said she anxiously awaits the Danbury Branch Trail Line Feasibility Study and some new commuter data, but asked if the commissioners felt the data in the chart should not be included. The Chairman said it makes it difficult to do a critical analysis. Dr. Autuori said that he thought 2008 data is available.

Ms. Samokar said it was not from all State agencies, and said that Planimetrics took the most recent data available. The Planner said HVCEO may have more recent population data from the Danbury Feasibility Study for the rail line. Ms. Samokar said she would look into it.

Dr. Gelfman put forth the notion that this may not be “the right time to do this study,” and said that the next few years will be “problematic,” so the projections will be off. He acknowledged that it is a requirement to do the study now, but stated that he felt it was not a realistic requirement, given the upheaval at this point in world history. Mr. Katz agreed, and asked if a brief editorial piece at the start of the POCD document might state that the most relevant available data has been used, but that it is recognized that “the economy that produced these statistics is different” from the present day economy.

The Chairman asked if more current data could be added later, if it became available. Ms. Samokar did not believe that most of the data “would be updated over the course of this plan.” It was agreed that, if this is the most current data, then it should be used. Mr. Katz wanted the acknowledgement of the unusual economic conditions mentioned.

Dr. Autuori wondered if it was appropriate to speak to the legislators to see if they might be persuaded that the plan should be deferred for two or three years, until the new census data would be available.

There was ongoing discussion on the matter.

The next issue, Fiscal Conditions, was presented with more recent data from Town Hall. Compared to the other communities in the State, Ms. Samokar said, Ridgefield is more dependent on property taxes for revenue. Land use has a big impact on the Town's fiscal health, she added. The commercial/industrial proportion of the Grand List had not shown any consistent trend. She said she did not understand the fluctuations and wondered if there was "a story" behind the numbers. There was some speculation as to what could have caused them. Motor vehicle personal property taxes are not split out, Ms. Samokar said.

Mr. Walsh noted an error on p.18 where the bulleted copy on the commercial and industrial component states that the it has increased by 39%, but the data shown does not back that up. Ms. Samokar acknowledged the error, calling it a good catch.

Some of the other information was questioned and suggestions for changes were made.

Ms. Samokar said that there needs to be a disclaimer on the Conceptual Zoning Map created by Planimetrics with the Assessor's data and his coding for zoning, stating that it is not an official zoning map. The commissioners were complimentary of the map.

Mr. Katz felt it was important to editorialize on the relevance of the data, stating that the decision was made to go with the specific data available, not just for accuracy, but also for how the document will be perceived. Ms. Samokar felt it was a good idea.

Ms. Samokar then described the method of information gathering used for the second booklet, Planning Issues. A questionnaire was distributed to department heads, boards and commissions, showing the commission the large amount of responses received. She said all board and commission members responding spoke as individuals, and not for the board or commission itself. However, generally, there was a lot of agreement. As with other towns, she said, the task becomes balancing fiscal needs with resource protection; character with housing.

Ms. Samokar said there was evidence that character and the streetscape are very important to Ridgefield. There were no indications that economic development was a good thing. Opinions on how to achieve it vary. There was widespread agreement, she said, that sprawl, strip mall retail, and big box retail are to be avoided.

What to do about Route 7 was a consistent theme in the responses. For the most part, no specific area of Route 7 was mentioned. Another strong response is that Ridgefield Center should be protected and enhanced. There is some interest in having more affordable housing for young workers and seniors, but, there is "conflict about some aspects of that." Traffic is a concern. The need to encourage public transit, walking and biking was a theme.

Dr. Gelfman said that walking and biking and character can be diametrically opposed because of the need for road widening. Ms. Samokar agreed that can be the case. This is one of the issues where careful discussions and future workshops will be needed

There is also a need to address appropriate density for affordable housing, she said. Ms. Samokar reported heavy input on the need for workforce housing, and less on housing for the elderly.

Mr. Katz said that a large part of the workforce and the elderly are becoming one and the same, again stressing the huge influence the changing economy is having. He said, “We’re 36 months from any relevancy of this document whatsoever.”

Ms. Samokar offered to eliminate the term workforce housing and substitute the terms “young residents” and “old residents.”

Mr. Katz said there would be less resistance to elderly housing if elderly started at 65.

Another issue which was raised was the need to define Open Space. Active vs. passive was discussed. The Chairman (and others) felt the proponents of “active open space” were essentially looking for more ballfields. Mr. McChesney heard it differently, saying that at workshops people seemed to be looking for places for family activities.

Ms. Samokar said that what a lot of communities are seeing is “season creep,” where the sports season is expanding. You either have to cut off the season or build more fields, she said.

Mr. Katz said that the Commission will need to think through some of the planning issues carefully, since “the town is 85 – 90% developed.” There will be grants of open space, and the town will attempt to buy some open space. But, he said we have to be prepared to make a recommendation that’s informed as to how additional open space will be used.

More importantly, Dr. Gelfman felt, was to define what the presently available open space is. “If it’s not important environmentally, you make it a ballfield,” and the reverse.

Some discussion around open space continued.

The Chairman asked Mr. Katz if he was suggesting that the recommendation of 30% be for one type of open space and to have another objective for active open space. This idea was favored by many in the Commission.

Open space numbers were discussed, and Ms. Samokar said that the numbers need to be refined. The Planner said the Assistant Engineer has been working on something for the Conservation Commission, and may be able to provide some numbers. Dr. Gelfman mentioned examples, like Eureka and Toll Bros., where the open space was not actually acquired by the Town, making it irrelevant.

Overall, **Ms. Samokar** said the heart of the report is found on p.3,4,& 5 of the booklet. She stressed the high points; conservation issues, including water resources and aquifers; streetscapes as a character defining issue; and proactive local control (e.g., taking control of Rte. 7, housing, and Branchville).

She specifically noted the sidebar on p.5 relating to the ability of the town's infrastructure to handle growth.

Ms. Samokar stressed that the information was provided to identify issues, not to solve them. The Chairman asked what the Commission is to do with the information. Ms. Samokar said the consultants want Commission input on how to plan the next workshop.

Mr. Katz said Planimetrics had done a very comprehensive job of distilling the input received, and it would be up to the Commission to familiarize themselves with each of the large components of the study and how it sees them fitting into the whole.

Mr. McChesney said the Commission may need to go through the "wish lists" provided by the public and address them, indicating where items are possible or not feasible at the time.

Dr. Autuori commented on the topic of infrastructure growth, saying that we should be careful not to assume that the economy is going to grow. Perpetual economic growth cannot be supported "on this planet, let alone the town," he said, adding that we should be striving for "quality of life, primarily, and the stability of what we have."

Mr. Katz said that the local town will become more of focal point, as expensive travel shrinks.

Ms. Samokar summarized by describing the results of the workshop exercise where participants put "money" (points) into boxes according to their preferences, and the results showed that the village center and "other transportation" were the number one issues, along with natural resources and business development. She said that Planimetrics would work to follow some of the issues raised at the next workshop, with an eye to goals and visions. She said it is important for the general public to feel they can weigh in on the issues at the outset.

The next workshop will focus on table activities as opposed to a room wide discussion, Ms. Samokar said, with people being broken into various groups to handle one particular issue. They would be charged with projecting forward their views on the issue and what they would like to see in the future. Then, the room will read the visions listed, and a brainstorming session would follow. She would explain to participants that they are providing input which will be used to help guide the planning.

Discussion continued on how to run the next workshop. Another way to go would be to have several very specific topics, such as the Rte. 7 issue, affordable housing, or open space, and have the tables work on that and present it to the room.

The Chairman asked if the workshop participants would be members of the community or people with expertise in a field. Ms. Samokar said that anyone can participate, and Planimetrics would assign them arbitrarily to one group or another, not by field of expertise. Someone from Conservation my wind up in the traffic group, she said, and this method works very well in the end.

Expected turnout was discussed, with Ms. Samokar explaining how the size of the group effects the structuring of the workshop.

The Planner discussed methods of promotion, saying that flyers had not proven particularly helpful. She suggested a mass emailing.

Dr. Autuori felt that people can come up with great ideas, but will have no idea how to implement them. It is up to planning commissions to consider the way in which to achieve the goals.

Ms. Samokar said they have found that it's useful to get attendees to start coming up with strategies toward meeting goals. If they think of something, and the Commission planning is in agreement, "you've got the buy in," she said. The role of the Commission is to balance many different considerations.

Mr. Katz said the public should be approached by saying that it is their money being spent, and it will be their input (if they give it) which will be used to decide how to spend it.

The Planner said that the email needs to be worded carefully, and needs to be inviting.

Mr. McChesney said it would be best to include the people who have already given input by saying that the input has been received and reviewed, and now it is up to everyone to help refine the results.

The venue and needs for the next workshop were discussed. The Chairman said she would assume the number of participants would be the same or smaller than at the last workshop. There was general agreement.

The next workshop with Planimetrics was scheduled for June 2, 2009. On June 30, 2009 the Board and Commission chairs will meet with the consultants and the Planning and Zoning Commission.

The Planner asked Ms. Samokar to provide her with the information which will be requested for the chair people, as they will need to plan ahead.

Methods of publicity were discussed, including The Ridgefield Press, the web, etc. Methods of input collection were also discussed. The benefits by provided an email input vehicle was favored by Mr. Katz and some, and discouraged by others.

2. **Joint meeting with VDC/AAC to discuss VDC By-Laws.**

The item was tabled because the VDC meeting was still in session in another Annex meeting room, and VDC members were not available for the discussion. The discussion will be re-scheduled.

NEW ITEMS

There were no new items.

COMMISSION WALKS

The Commission acknowledge the following previously scheduled walk for **May 3, 2009:**

- **#2009-028-SP: Special Permit 96 Danbury Road, Montessori School / Day Care, Skylands, LLC**

REQUESTS FOR BOND RELEASES/REDUCTION

There were no requests for bond release or reduction.

CORRESPONDENCE

Chairman Mucchetti noted the following correspondence:

- e-mail message from the First Selectman to the Planner, explaining that the Board of Selectmen had withdrawn their consideration of the proposed easement by Boehringer Ingelheim, for property to be used for “highway purposes”, and the 8-24 referral to the PZC was therefore “moot”. **Mr. Katz** explained that BI, a valuable corporate neighbor in the Town of Ridgefield, had been cooperative throughout the process and they did not want to pursue the easement and road improvements if the neighboring property owners were concerned.
- Memo from the Planner about a proposed use for property at **901 Ethan Allen Highway**. The item will return to the 5/5/09 agenda, for discussion.
- New York Times article about the closing of **Balducci's** in NY City and Ridgefield.
- Memo from the Fire Marshal about the proposed Montessori School/day care center at **96 Danbury Road**
- Letter from the State Historical Society about the designation of the **Old Playhouse Building at 25 Prospect Street**, for the Connecticut Register of Historical Places
- Letter from a member of the **Friends of the Ridgefield Library**, in support of the application by the library under the Village District regulations
- Flyer from William Pitt Sotheby's, re real estate housing sales in Ridgefield and surrounding communities
- AAC/VDC minutes from 4/14/09

MINUTES

Mr. Walsh motioned, seconded by Dr. Autuori, to approve the minutes of **April 14, 2009**. The motion passed, 6-0-3, with Commissioners Chipouras, Fossi and Mische abstained because they had not been present at the meeting.

Hearing no further discussion, the Chairman adjourned the meeting at 9:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Caponetti
Recording Secretary