

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

April 29, 2008

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

Absent: Peter Chipouras

Also Present: Betty Brosius, Director of Planning

*A Public Information Meeting for the **Ridgefield Center Study** was held for the benefit of the public with the Commission's consultants from Milone & MacBroom at the Ridgefield Playhouse.*

At 7:35 p.m. **Chairman Mucchetti** called the meeting to order and introduced consultant Vincent McDermott of Milone & MacBroom, Inc. She gave a brief summary of the purpose of the project, which was to study the parking availability and access to parking spaces in the downtown area, to understand traffic circulation and pedestrian patterns, and to make recommendations for improvements. It was emphasized that this was the beginning of the study process, and the informational meeting was to solicit input from the public, especially businesses and property owners in the Central Business District zone.

PRESENTATION:

Vincent McDermott, FASLA, AICP opened the discussion by introducing the principals of his team, including Phil Michalowski, planner from Harrall-Michalowski Associates, and Mike Wilson, P.E., traffic engineer of Milone & MacBroom. Mike Zuba and Jason Williams of HMA were also present for the public meeting.

Mr. McDermott began with a PowerPoint presentation, and turned the microphone over to his team members for sections of the slide show that pertained to parking and uses, and traffic. The first slide showed an aerial view of the downtown area, with familiar buildings marked for orientation, and the boundaries of the CBD zone delineated on the map. He noted that in-town parking surveys had been conducted by his staff on Friday, April 11, 2008 and Saturday, April 12, 2008.

Mr. Michalowski talked about Building Use & Parking Requirements, noting that there are approximately 456,000 s.f. of buildings on about 45 acres in the downtown area. There are 27 residences in 11 different buildings. 51% of the buildings contain retail uses (with about 357,000 s.f. of space), and 42% have offices (about 190,000 s.f.), primarily on the second floor. There is about 32,000 s.f. of restaurant space.

Parking for customers is considered short-term because there is turnover; long-term parking is needed for employees who stay for longer hours during the workdays. Based on the square footages of the various uses of the buildings in the study area, it was calculated that 1303 parking spaces would be required (using 60% of the minimum requirements for the mixed uses, as per the zoning regulations). The consultants counted 1501 spaces available in the study area.

Mr. Wilson, traffic engineer, explained how the traffic counts were conducted, the hours when traffic was observed, and how the town was divided on maps into “zones” showing parking use by percentage of capacity of individual lots. There were comparisons made on different maps between percentages that reflect use of lots contiguous to the buildings they serve, and lots in “aggregate” with other nearby lots, where people could park in a less congested lot and walk to their destination.

The Friday (weekday) calculations showed noon to 1 p.m. as the busiest hour, and lots were generally 75% full. The observations were made from 8 a.m. until 7 p.m. on Friday, April 11th. The Saturday counts were taken from 8 a.m. until 3 p.m., with noon to 1 p.m. again being the busiest hour. The lots were generally 60% full on Saturday. The Town’s lot on Governor Street was under-utilized, at about 50% full. The consultants observed vigorous enforcement by the Parking Officer, who was ticketing cars that stayed longer than the 2-hour maximum in the patrolled lots.

Traffic counts were taken at three major intersections: Governor Street/Main Street, Catoonah/Bailey/Main Street, and Prospect/Main/CVS plaza. The results were consistent with numbers shown in the Route 35 Traffic Study done a few years ago by the CTDOT and the regional planning agency (HVCEO). Mr. Wilson also noted that the Route 35 study had been analyzed carefully as part of their initial work on this current study.

Mr. McDermott briefly explained the study of pedestrian movements observed by the consultants, and traffic patterns between parking lots. There are barriers to movement between some of the major lots, and pedestrian movement mixed with vehicular traffic through some of the alleyways off Main Street. The adequacy of “how it works” for movements off the Main Street is a little confusing.

Mr. McDermott was generous in his praise of the charm and character of the Main Street, the good condition and attractiveness of the sidewalks, the lamps and flower baskets, and the inviting feeling that an outsider gets when entering town. Handicapped accessibility in the downtown area is excellent compared to many towns in Connecticut. Deficiencies in public signage make it confusing to find parking off the Main Street, and newcomers

are fortunate to have friendly Ridgefield police available on the weekends to direct them to parking areas.

Mr. McDermott opened the discussion to comments and questions from the public.

George Dinisi of 84 Governor Street criticized the consultants for conducting the survey on the day before the spring school break, because he said many people had already left town. Mr. McDermott confirmed that school was still in session on Friday the 11th, but many voices from the public added to Mr. Dinisi's comment that Ridgefielders often take their children out of school to leave for vacations on the Friday before the holidays.

Mr. McDermott acknowledged that the Planning and Zoning Commission made a similar comment about parking counts taken on pre-holiday weekends, but that the Route 35 Study numbers and the current study numbers were not extremely dissimilar. There was likely to be some effect from the vacation exodus of residents, but the differences were probably not as extreme as was being suggested.

Susanne Prial, resident and realtor with William Pitt Sotheby's, agreed with Mr. Dinisi that the data was questionable, based on her observations from her office on the study weekend. Parking lots that were normally full had many vacant spaces.

Barbara Dobbins asked why the library activity was not included in the parking lot observations. Mr. McDermott said that use of the library was primarily for the library itself, and there was little movement of pedestrian activity to and from the library and the downtown retail area. The lot at the library is geared toward the specific use of the building.

Ann Lathrop, resident of North Salem Road and owner of the Toy Chest retail store (located on Main Street, in front of the CVS plaza), said that she had 12 employees, and 7 of them had left town for vacation during the study weekend. Other Saturdays were much busier. She said she also owns a store in Wilton and has had customers say that they travel to that store location because it is difficult to park in downtown Ridgefield.

Penny Hoffman, Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, talked about the difficulty of finding adequate space in the town-owned Bailey Avenue lot. The spaces in that lot are very small and it can be impossible to get into cars when they are parked close together.

Mr. McDermott agreed, and noted that his firm has been working with the Town on a separate study for several years, to propose upgrades for the Bailey Avenue lot. Larger spaces would mean fewer spaces overall in the lot, but the number of spaces lost may not be extreme, and the benefits may be worthwhile.

Jackie Hodges questioned if the downtown lots were town-owned. Mr. McDermott explained that the town owned the lot off Bailey Avenue and one on Governor Street, but the remainder of the lots were owned privately. Private agreements would be needed to join more lots and to provide better circulation from one lot to another.

John McNicholas of the Parking Authority said the survey did not reflect the many people who visit Veteran's Park School and who park in the Balducci's lot across the street (Governor). School may have been closed on Friday, April 11th, but many people had already left town.

Wayne Addressi introduced himself as an owner of three properties on Main Street, with about 20 businesses. His family has owned properties and businesses in town for more than 20 years. He has perpetually asked the town for more parking with no results. The town has very little control over the private lots. New Canaan has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in parking, and Ridgefield could learn from their experience. He feels that there should be designated parking areas for employees, and those spots may not be in proximity to the store or office where they work, but the designated spots would free up spots closer to stores, for customers. If the town could control parking on the private lots, there could be an individual or town employee who could distribute parking permits for an annual fee (\$300 is the figure he quoted for New Canaan), and that employee could manage the spaces that are available. He also suggested a "veiled" parking structure in the downtown area, to provide more parking. He says that in September, November and December, the lots are especially full.

Mr. McDermott appreciated the numerous suggestions, and pointed out again that the municipal lot on Governor Street is under utilized. There is parking available, but it may be more difficult to get to, or it may be in the wrong place when compared to where it is needed.

Leo Falk said he didn't see why the consultants had not considered where employees park. That information would help to understand the problem. He also stated that it is difficult to deal with the trucks that are parked in the Main Street, so that others cannot find a place to park.

Wayne Addressi said he was surprised that the consultants hadn't reached out to the Chamber of Commerce, because numerous studies had been done in the past, and the information is available. Mr. McDermott said it was the intent of the consultants to meet with others as the study goes forward (this is only the beginning of the work), and that some of those studies had been made available to their team already.

Bill Craig of Craig's Jeweler's noted that people in Ridgefield don't tend to be in the downtown for retail shopping in the two weeks prior to income tax day, and the surveys were conducted just prior to April 15th.

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman, said he wanted to stress the importance of the work that has already been done, and that the town and many others had been working on trying to solve the problem for many years. This is most evident in the town's participation with the CTDOT and HVCEO in the Route 35 Traffic Study. The Police Commission has consistently asked that the problem of truck parking in front of the Addressi's building on Main Street be addressed, and that is currently under discussion. He asked if there would

be a working group to provide input for the study, to include the business people, the police, the parking authority and others?

Mr. McDermott said yes, it was the intention of the consultants to work with the Chamber and other groups, and with town staff, to understand the issues. There may not be formal committee formed, but opinions and information from these agencies would be solicited either individually or in a group meeting.

Chairman Mucchetti explained the evolutionary steps of the project, that the Commission had had two meetings with the consultants to date, and that they were still in the information-gathering stage. Much available information from prior studies had already been turned over to the consultants, and it is being utilized. There would be additional public meetings, to review on-going work and to solicit more comment.

Deborah Ann Backes (of Deborah Ann's Chocolate Shop on Main Street) asked why the zoning regulations allowed only 60% of the required parking to be considered adequate. She wondered if this was common. Mr. McDermott said that it was a typical, reasonable deduction for mixed use parking, where there are multiple buildings in proximity to parking spaces, and multiple uses in each building. The downtown Ridgefield buildings are older, and are considered to be about 80% efficient in terms of use, so the reduction is warranted. The Ridgefield Planning and Zoning Commission is on the "leading edge" in recognizing this in the zoning regulations.

George Dinisi said the Prospect Street/Grove Street intersection, on the fringe of the study area, is the busiest intersection in town and he wondered why that was not analyzed. Mr. McDermott and others noted that it was not really in the heart of the study area.

Susanne Prial spoke about the parking lot at the CVS plaza, and problems with cars exiting that lot and making a left turn on Main Street. Some are confused about going through the intersection because the light is red on Main Street and they stop in the middle of the road. [The intersection is "skewed" although it acts as a typical four-way light.] She also noted that the post office parking lot on Catoonah is always full, and the post office might operate more efficiently if it were open at the back of the building, where more parking is available.

Jackie Hodges said that the traffic flow at the Prospect Street / Main Street intersection often stops because of problems that back up from Bailey Avenue, and cars block the intersection. She was complimentary about the town's improvements to handicapped access over the past several years, and agrees with Mr. McDermott's favorable comments on that issue. She noted, however, that the driveways in the CVS lot are not angled well, and circulation is difficult.

James McChesney, resident and former P&Z Commissioner, asked if the consultants would be in a position at the end of the study to offer a potential agreement between the property owners, to allow the crossing of traffic from one lot to another. Mr. McDermott

noted that he was not a lawyer and would not draft such an agreement, but his firm has worked in other locations where such agreements are available, and he could provide some good examples. In some towns, overall Business Improvement Districts have been formed, where the owners who benefit contribute toward common expenses for snow plowing and parking lot improvements. This is a common practice, and has worked well in many communities.

Barbara Dobbin noted that plans for the new, expanded library include new entrances for pedestrians coming from Main Street, Prospect Street, and from the east side of the building off the parking lot. The current entrance is limited to the north side of the building. These new entrances should be considered when looking at pedestrian movements downtown. Mr. McDermott noted that staff provided the parking lot plan for the library, and he will ask for the new entrance information so that it can be considered.

Phil Esser, Chairman of the Historic District Commission and member of the Architectural Advisory Committee (also serving as the Village District Consultant) asked why the study didn't address aesthetics and character. Mr. McDermott noted that those issues would be dealt with in much more detail in the update to the Plan of Conservation and Development, which would be started in the fall. Mr. Esser said that the VDC and the AAC as well as other groups would be interested in how any suggested improvements would affect the downtown character.

Ashley Prial asked if there was any consideration for downtown weekday employees, who are often forced to move their cars every two hours because there are no 8-hour spaces close by. Mr. McDermott acknowledged that the under-utilized municipal lot on Governor is one of the few that provides all-day parking, and he acknowledges that employees may have to walk further to find places where there is more than the 2-hour limit allowed.

Chipp Reid, reporter for the Ridgefield Press, asked how much of the perceived problem of lack of parking spaces is caused by the fact that people are not willing to walk very far to parking spaces. Mr. McDermott said that their initial conclusions confirm that there are absolutely enough parking spaces available in the downtown, but they are not located where people would necessarily like to see them. He repeats that Wayne Addressi's idea to designate certain spaces for employee parking is a good one. Customers want convenience, and they can't park close to shops and services if employees use those spaces.

Betsy Debany, partner in the business Shoe La La on Bailey Avenue, asked how the zoning regulations were determined, to allow 60% of the minimum parking required, and if the parking calculations considered the increase in population of the town. She also wanted to know how current the regulations were, and when they had last been revised.

Mr. McDermott answered that the calculations were done based on square foot numbers of the buildings. Planner Betty Brosius commented that the regulations were updated in the past few years, and adopted by the Commission on 5/1/07. The numbers were based

on recommendations from the consultant who assisted with the update, and were based on accepted standards used in many other towns across the country.

Chairman Mucchetti thanked the public for attending and for providing valuable input. She and Mr. McDermott both noted that the consultants would be back again to the public, following the gathering of more data, meeting with various town officials, business people, and agencies, and analysis of new information.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Betty Brosius
Director of Planning