



**Ridgefield
Economic &
Community
Development
Commission**

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Geoffrey Morris, Chair
Glori Norwitt, Secretary
Christa Carone
Sean Dowd
Susan Gessner
Bob Knight
Steve Spivak

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman
ridgefieldct.com

**Economic & Community Development Commission
Approved Minutes
September 13, 2021, 6:30 pm, in Town Hall Main Conference Room**

In Attendance: Chairman Geoffrey Morris; Secretary Glori Norwitt; Commissioners Christa Carone, Sean Dowd, Susan Gessner, and Bob Knight

Geoffrey Morris called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m.

Announcements

Next meeting: October 4, 2021

Minutes

Sean made a motion to approve the July 2021 meeting minutes with no modifications; seconded by Christa. Motion carries 5-0.

made a motion to approve the August 2021 Special Meeting minutes with no modifications; seconded by Christa. Motion carries 5-0.

General Discussion

1. **American Rescue Plan Funds for the Arts** (Morris, Dowd, Norwitt)

The Town of Ridgefield will receive funds from the federal government through the American Rescue Plan. The federal government has established certain criteria regarding how these federal monies can be spent. For example, this stimulus money cannot be used to pay down the tax rate. Glori, Sean and Geoffrey have had discussions with First Selectman Marconi (and Jennifer DiLaura of the Arts Council) about providing funding for arts and culture organizations from some of these monies to be received by the Town. There is a state-wide initiative for each town to provide 1% of monies received to arts and culture. However, based on the large effect that this sector has on the Ridgefield economy, the ECDC may argue for additional sums.

A new town committee has been formed to discuss the American Rescue Plan funds, consisting of 2 BOS members, 2 BOE members, 2 BOF members, and Geoffrey. The first meeting was planned for early August, but has not yet been held. It is unclear at this time whether this committee would allocate money as a grant or in another way. Funds provided to arts and culture groups would likely only go to nonprofits.

In addition to assisting local arts and culture nonprofits (of which there are 22-23 in town), funding could also support specific projects. Projects which the ECDC may advocate for funding include improving the Ballard Park outdoor stage, mosaic art installations in outdoor walking areas, funding for improved parking in the downtown area including better signage (particularly in the soon to be expanded municipal parking lot off Governor Street, and the parking lot behind the post office which will become available for parking for town use soon). Other possibilities include creating a Tourism Center in the downtown area (possibly in Town Hall, inside Books on the Common, or inside Deborah Ann's Sweet Shoppe new location). Weir Farm noted that some towns have a mobile visiting center. The ECDC will provide suggestions to the new town committee re the funding to arts and culture interests.

2. **Cannabis Discussion and Special Meeting Recap** (Morris)

Geoffrey recapped the August 30 Special Meeting held by the ECDC, with special guests State Senator Will Haskell, two members of the Rural County Representatives of California, and the owner of Canna Provisions in Lee, Massachusetts.

A number of questions were received from the public. The three active BOS members and two P&Z members in the meeting did not ask any questions.

The Ridgefield CT Facebook page last week had 300+ comments that were essentially civilized. The ECDC received a letter from town resident Kirk Carr that recommends that ECDC support a moratorium to have more time to look at the matter and consider the facts. Business owner Mitch Ancona spoke and said that he would like to not lose an opportunity. He understands the idea of going slow, but does not want to lose any ability for the town to receive a license from the State. He believes the townspeople should be the decision makers in relation to allowing retail cannabis or not. Some people were organizing a petition for a referendum. First Selectman Rudy Marconi suggested that a referendum may be the best route.

The Planning & Zoning Commission is holding a discussion on the matter tomorrow night (September 14, 2021) over zoom, and may suggest a moratorium. Discussion/question of

whether companies could apply for a license and receive a license but hold it during a moratorium. Discussion of other towns and what they might do. Discussion of language of referendum, if it occurs.

3. **Parking** (Dowd)

Sean met with the co-heads of the Parking Authority Jess Wilmot of the Ancient Mariner and Ellen Burns of Books on the Common. All are happy with the upcoming availability of parking behind the US Postal office. They are supportive of signage and lighting for parking, and have ideas to share, and believe it would be a great allocation of funds.

They believe parking problems in the downtown area arose from a past change in P&Z. When a downtown building is rezoned or redeveloped, the permittees are not required to follow fully the previous zoning laws that related to the building, such as having a certain number of parking spots available for the building. One example of this is the new RVNA building. Eventually this leads to a parking capacity problem.

Issue of how permits are given and who receives them is also problematic, but not as grave as the zoning change. A campaign to encourage businesses to have their employees park away from their buildings (in farther, bigger parking lots) is needed, to have spots near businesses open/available for customers. Single biggest issue is the Town does not own any of the parking; parking is owned by many different property owners. There is no single simple solution.

The Parking Authority makes suggestions but BOS makes decisions. Current suggestion is to create a public restroom, possibly in the new available US Postal office parking spots. The Parking Authority supports adding signs near the entrances to town to inform people about parking areas. Suggestion to find funding through the American Rescue Plan monies or out of the Town budget.

4. **Cultural District Update** (Norwitt)

The window clings of the new Cultural District logo were distributed around town with an explanatory letter: Glori handed out 70 in person around downtown, and 30 were mailed. The letters contained a “uniform statement” so that all businesses and organizations would explain the Cultural District in the same manner. Digital versions of the uniform statement and logo were emailed out, so that businesses and organizations could put them on their website.

Glori and Geoffrey presented in a Webinar run by the CT Main Street Center re “Establishing Municipal Cultural Districts: The Benefits and the Process” in late July, to discuss the process that Ridgefield completed in order to be recognized as the first Cultural District in the state.

Glori held a meeting of the Arts, Culture, Tourism & Recreation Subcommittee in mid August. The discussion revolved around the Ridgefield mask mandate, which had just been reimposed. The Keeler Tavern noted that in July it tripled its visitation, and 65% of its guests stated that they had never been to Ridgefield before. The Governor’s initiative called CT Free Museum Pass provided free admission for kids through Labor Day. Visitors also indicated that they were most likely to combine their museum visit with dining and shopping, establishing that our museums and cultural sites have a direct impact on the local economy, and are a powerful economic driver.

Glori spoke with the head of the CT Office of Tourism, in order to determine how Ridgefield will be promoted on the CTVisit.com website, as the first Cultural District in the State. Glori will provide suggestions to the Office re how to list the Town, which images should be shown, and various descriptions for the website.

5. **Economic Development Plan** (Knight)

In 2009, Garnet Economic Development Consulting was hired by the ECDC to create a comprehensive economic development plan which was subsequently turned over to the BOS. The document was roughly 70 pages. Bob will work with Sean to update the document and make an actionable plan. They may make one last push to ask townspeople for new ideas in relation to professional development, infrastructure, and other issues.

6. **Branding the Town** (Gessner)

Since spring, Susan has been working on the branding process, with ECDC members who have since stepped down. They decided to rebrand the town as “The Ridge.”

Focus groups will meet September 21 (residents), 22 (nonprofits), and 23 (business owners) to review “The Ridge” concept and graphic identity. Kate Guillory of Goldmine Research is moderating pro gratis. Susan shared the graphic approach of “The Ridge” with the Commissioners again.

Susan believes the business owners will have lots of questions and discussion re what this will mean for the town, and past related projects. There may be subsequent groups including Founders Hall staff, young parents, Boys & Girls Club students, and Newcomers Club.

John Frey created a FB post on “Ridgefield CT” asking why people moved to town recently; the responses may assist Susan.

Discussion of branding and marketing the town overall, possible funding, and possible public/private partnership. Glori noted that members of the ACTR subcommittee have raised concerns several times that it is difficult for small businesses and organizations in town to promote themselves and their events, because there are too many groups and websites that must be contacted in order to get information out, instead of one destination or town calendar that they could reach out to. Bob suggested that the ECDC could do a RFP for marketing services to look for partners in promoting the town. Respondents could be groups with existing websites and initiatives promoting Ridgefield.

7. **Other**

Geoffrey noted that the ECDC previously collaborated with the Community Data Platform to conduct a survey in relation to Vaccination Hesitation. This group is now preparing a survey in regards to economic development. Geoffrey is considering customizing the survey for Ridgefield or all of Fairfield County. Discussion of email distribution of this survey.

The ECDC acknowledged that Paul Levine, a longtime former ECDC Commissioner who was very devoted to the Town, recently passed away. We thank him for his service.

Christa noted that Bluebird Consignment has been very successful in its first year on Catoonah Street, but is suddenly losing its lease in November. The owner is looking for a new location which includes outdoor space. Discussion of potential lease sites in town.

Sean noted that some local restaurants are having difficulty maintaining sufficient staff, and restaurants' interest in the coordination of a bus to get employees from Norwalk or Danbury into town. HART will not do a bus stop unless there is a crosswalk (such as on Route 7); DOT is the authority to make crosswalks on Route 7. Geoffrey will reach out to the office of US Representative Jim Himes to ask about the possibility of a federal grant for busing.

The next meeting is on October 4, 2021.

Motion to adjourn by Glori; seconded by Christa. Motion carries 6-0. The meeting concluded at 8:05pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Glori Norwitt, ECDC Secretary