



**Ridgefield
Economic &
Community
Development
Commission**

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Geoffrey Morris, Chair
Glori Norwitt, Secretary
Cameron Cole Carcelén
Dee Dee Colabella
Susan Gessner
Bob Knight
Steve Spivak

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman

ridgefieldct.com

**Economic & Community Development Commission
Unapproved Minutes
December 7, 2020, 6:30 pm, via ZOOM Video Conference**

In Attendance: Geoffrey Morris, Dee Dee Colabella, Cameron Cole Carcelen, Susan Gessner, Bob Knight, Steve Spivak

Geoffrey Morris called the meeting to order at 6:31 pm.

Announcements

Next meeting: January 4, 2020

Approval of Minutes without amendment. Motion by Bob Knight. Second by Cameron Cole Carcelen.

Unanimous approval 6-0.

General Discussion

1. Approval of 2021 Meeting Schedule (Morris for Norwitt)
 - Geoffrey listed the dates for the 2021 ECDC meetings
 - Monday Jan 4
 - Mon Feb 1
 - Mon March 1
 - Mon April 5
 - Mon May 10 (The first Monday in May is the Annual Town Meeting, when we are not allowed to schedule our meeting.)
 - Mon June 7

- Mon July 12 (The first Monday in July is the observed Federal Holiday for 4th of July.)
- Mon Aug 2
- Mon Sept 13 (The first Monday in Sept is Labor Day.)
- Mon Oct 4
- Mon Nov 1
- Mon Dec 6
- Motion by Bob Knight to approve. Second by Susan. Unanimous approval.

2. Cultural District Update (Morris for Norwitt)

- Geoffrey shared that the process is moving slowly with the state.
- Ridgefield's application was well received.
- Next step is to schedule a (most likely virtual) tour of the locations featured as cultural sites.
- Geoffrey and Glori discussed the possibility of creating the virtual tour using a drone operated from a car to capture the navigation from point to point. At each location, representatives from that organization would be outside waving.
- Ridgefield would like to be the first town to receive the cultural district designation since John Frey spearheaded the development of this program at the state level.
- Glori will reconvene the cultural district subcommittee again soon to discuss the possibility of a virtual tour.

3. Ridgefield Holiday Village summary (Spivak)

- Steve presented the overview of the event and the timeline of the event planning and development activity.
- Plan initially developed in September by ECDC to address the difficulty merchants were having and would continue to have as the holiday season approached.
- RHV was a response to the cancelation of Holiday Stroll, and was intended to support the need to increase patronage of local businesses and expand the events of the holiday season over multiple weekends to control crowds.
- Public meeting was held for all merchants, non-profits, community organizations. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive
- Committees were organized and staffed:
 - Events
 - Facilities
 - Finance
 - Vendors
 - Sponsorships and Fundraising
 - COVID Protocols
- ECDC presented the **plan and updates** at two Board of Selectmen meetings
- Public was invited to register interest in participation: 2200 sign ups
- Fund raising and sponsorships raised approximately \$30,000

- Vendor committee signed up 6 vendors
 - Activities planned: ice skating rink in Ballard Park, horse drawn carriage rides, carousel, ice sculptures, laser light show
 - Event schedule planned with performances from local music groups
 - COVID protocols submitted to Board of Selectmen
 - Steve presented the Learnings from 2020 planning process:
 - Community support for the event was significant as evidenced by sign ups and fundraising.
 - More planning time will allow for a more effectively produced event
 - Fundraising and sponsorship effort should start early and should be a priority
 - Vendor sign ups should start early and should be done in two week increments with more clarity around booth specifications and security
 - Event should encompass multiple venues and locales
 - Pushback from Downtown Ridgefield association is an obstacle
 - Volunteer staffing is a priority
 - Incorporate all existing holiday events under the umbrella of RHV for marketing and promotion
 - The COVID crisis ultimately resulted in the cancellation of the event
 - Bob said that as a public agency with public dollars, ECDC's responsibility is to include the entire town and it is disappointing that Downtown Ridgefield opted against coming to the table.
 - Geoffrey said that it was disappointing that Downtown Ridgefield was not seeing the big picture.
 - Cameron said that the team did a phenomenal job and with more time could have accomplished even more.
 - Dee Dee suggested that in the future we focus on the business owners individually and not the Downtown Ridgefield **association or organization**?. As a business owner herself she had no contact from Downtown Ridgefield regarding the RHV.
 - Generally, there was strong involvement from downtown merchants who hadn't been involved in events before.
 - All donors and sponsors were offered their money back. Of the approximately \$30,000 collected, \$12,000 was retained.
 - The retained funds were put into the gift certificate social media promotion.
4. Gift Certificate Program (Morris, Carcelen)
- \$12,000 remaining from the RHV fund has been allocated for use in the gift certificate program.
 - Geoffrey shared an overview of the program: Anyone who makes a purchase at a Ridgefield business and posts a photo of their purchase on social media with the hashtag

- #Ridgefielhholidays2020, is entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift certificate that can be redeemed at a local business.
- Each week leading up to the holidays 20 certificates will be give out.
 - Thus far, 12 have been awarded.
 - Certificates must be used in their entirety, no change can be given from the remaining balance on the certificate.
 - It was noted that residents are posting their local purchases on social media but they are not using the hashtag.
5. Shop Local initiative: how to promote in addition to Holiday Market initiative (Carcelen)
- Cameron shared that the gift certificate program is part of the shop local initiative
 - Cameron posted to social media as ECDC inviting local businesses to promote their products and services. Only one business responded.
 - Geoffrey noted that we have the email addresses for all those who signed up to attend the holiday village. We can use that as a marketable database to promote the gift certificate program.
 - Bob asked if funds remaining after the holidays can be applied to the RHV in 2021. Geoffrey responded in the affirmative.
6. Ridgefield business development initiative: regional and state (Knight)
- This initiative is being led by Bob with support from Geoffrey
 - Bob provided an overview of the initiative and the structure from the state down to the local level.
 - Office of the governor created a committee at the state level.
 - Each region has its own committee
 - Ridgefield is in Region 5 which includes Brookfield and Waterbury.
 - Ridgefield has its own committee which OEM Director Dick Aarons leads. ECDC has appointed Bob to sit on the committee and form a multi-stakeholder Business and Jobs subcommittee. Bob will also sit on the State's Region 5 Business and Jobs subcommittee.
 - The mission of the committee is to try and solve challenges facing our area at the local level. If we are unable to solve challenges at the local level then we move back u the chain to seek additional assistance from the region and then the state.
 - One example of an escalated issue is that property owners (commercial landlords) are not permitted by lenders—in some instances—to renegotiate the terms of their financing when a tenant is unable to pay rent. This makes it difficult for them to provide rent relief.
 - Tenants are therefore having a hard time working with landlords despite having asked for concessions.
 - Another issue is that some landlords are not working with their tenants (when contractually allowable) on rent abatements/forgiveness. Ridgefield is at risk of losing some of its of businesses. Club Fit is an example of one business that was lost due to this scenario.

- Our message to landlords is “we want you to work with your tenants.” ECDC believes it’s a detriment to the town and to property owners to have a rise in empty space.
- There is an issue with business owners being afraid to organize a public campaign that calls for landlords to help provide assistance due to the perception that their business could be/is in trouble or may not survive. They are concerned that they would lose customers.
- Several business owners feel voiceless.
- Our charge is to help be their voice and facilitate a workable solution locally or regionally.
- Bob voiced concern over another issue: Ridgefield school bus drivers who are part time employees of First Student Inc, are not being paid when they must quarantine for two weeks due to a student on their bus route testing positive for COVID or otherwise.
- Because of a loophole caused by federal relief sources, the driver’s union contract with First Student, and the size of First Student (over 500 employees), and the framework of First Student’s contract with the school district, drivers who already exhausted their unemployment benefits in the spring (and personal time), do not get paid during their mandatory health department quarantine (meaning they cannot work elsewhere either).
- This is a “jobs” issue for the Business and Jobs subcommittee. ECDC’s role, is that we understand that several bus drivers have quit, retired, or are not coming to work. A lack of bus drivers would mean that kids can’t get to school. If kids can’t get to school, parents can’t get to work. That would be detrimental to the town. Bob called on the School District, First Student, and the Driver’s Union to get together and address the issue.
- Bob stated that the state and local governments are scrambling to fill the gap left by federal inaction.
- Bob is in the process of forming the subcommittee now.
- Geoffrey reported that an ECDC subcommittee is preparing a ten-year economic development plan for the town. This is not just COVID- related but for the long term. Our goal is to plan 10 years ahead for what our economy should look like.
- We will review a draft plan in the new year and hopefully we will be able to get funding behind it.

7. Website development (Knight)

- Bob shared the great news that we have developed a new website due to the existing site being unusable and obsolete.
- Bob shared a demonstration of the new site and all of the various functionality.
- The site is primarily for business attraction, promotion and development
- The goal is to make the case via the website for starting, expanding or moving a business to Ridgefield.
- Glori will be working on the permitting and zoning section.
- Dee Dee asked if the site will be hosted on Wix or are we purchasing what we need from Wix and hosting elsewhere.
- Bob stated that we need to talk to Andrew, the town IT director.

- Dee Dee said that when we are ready for navigation and branding, she would like to be involved.
- Geoffrey suggested that everyone review the site.
- Dee Dee asked if we will have a page for business listings and calendars.
- The consensus is that we do not have the resources to make the site everything and that it is important to focus on the goals of business growth. There are already other sites that promote tourism and we can certainly link to those sites.
- Susan suggested that in reviewing the site, we look at it through the lens of a business person coming here to consider Ridgefield, not an existing town resident.
- Cameron asked if we have decided not to market ourselves as a commuter destination since the site focuses heavily on working remotely.
- Geoffrey said that accessibility to NYC is a key selling feature of Ridgefield.
- Bob stated that most people work remotely at least some of the time and there has been a shift in commercial space usage.

8. Branding Initiative (Gessner)

- Susan will be leading the branding initiative for ECDC with support from Dee Dee, Cameron and Steve.
- Susan shared that a cohesive, compelling and memorable brand will work to attract people to Ridgefield.
- We need to market the town: marketing and branding work together.
- We already have a great brand in Ridgefield with wonderful attributes we can leverage, therefore we are not reinventing our brand, just articulating it better.
- Susan shared:
 - The program objectives:
 - Develop a strategy that demonstrates growth potential.
 - Motivate businesses to move to Ridgefield.
 - The program goals:
 - Create a consistent message that conveys an emotional connection.
 - Paint a picture through storytelling.
 - The branding process:
 - Discovery- information gathering
 - Design- brand strategy and graphic identity
 - Delivery- implementation
- Next steps: Define the project scope and timeline with the branding team.
- Geoffrey said that there are a lot of very interesting businesses here that are part of the identity and story we have to tell.

Movement to adjourn by Geoffrey. Second by Dee Dee. Unanimous approval. Geoffrey adjourned the meeting at 7:44 pm.