Economic & Community Development Commission
Approved Minutes
November 1, 2021, 6:30 pm in Town Hall Conference Room and via Zoom

In Attendance: Chairman Geoffrey Morris; Commissioners Christa Carone, Susan Gessner, and Bob Knight. Guest: Dan O’Brien, Chair of Historic District Commission and Chair of the Ridgefield Chamber of Commerce

Geoffrey Morris called the meeting to order at 6:36 p.m.

Announcements
Next meeting: December 6, 2021

Minutes

With no modifications, Bob Knight made a motion to approve the October 2021 meeting minutes; seconded by Susan Gessner. Motion carries 4-0.

General Discussion

1. 90 Poplar Road (O’Brien)

As Chair of the Ridgefield Historic District Commission, Dan presented a request for Dave Scott’s property (90 Poplar Road) to be designated as a local historic property. Dave died in February 2020 and his son Mark is carrying out his wishes for the house to be restored and
preserved. The house was built in 1966 with a modernist architecture like a Frank Lloyd Wright house. Dave was a renowned local architect and long-time Ridgefield resident. He was active in historic preservation.

There is a State statute that requires a comprehensive study to start this process. Members of the Advisory Board of the State Economic and Community Development/ Historic District reviewed the 17-page study and approved the application on October 6, 2021. The next step in the process is to obtain approval from Planning and Zoning, ECDC, and the Board of Selectmen. Rebecca Mucchetti from Planning and Zoning sent a letter with her approval. Dan will meet with the Board of Selectmen on December 8, 2021, to obtain final approval for this historic designation.

There are three other properties that are already designated as a local historic property and this property would be the fourth. Any changes to the exterior would be subject to the Historic Commission. Geoffrey mentioned that Dave Scott was instrumental in getting approval to move the historic Scott house twenty years ago.

**Geoffrey Morris made a motion to support the historic designation by the family of the Scott House. Christa Carone seconded the motion. Motion carries 4-0.**

2. Chamber of Commerce Update (O'Brien)

Dan is the current Chair of the Ridgefield Chamber of Commerce. Now that the COVID challenges of last year are over, Dan shared that their Board recognized the need for the Chamber to be more visible and responsive to members to amplify their membership. One Board member is focused on increasing membership which has yielded positive results. Sarah Grossman, the former Executive Director moved on and is working as a part-time contractor; Dan hired Diana Spence as the Office Manager; Suzanne Brennan and Dan work together to fill the responsibilities and role of the Executive Director.

Dan stated that the Chamber would like to collaborate with partners such as ECDC, RAC, etc. with the premise that if we all collaborate we can do a better job reaching out to the business community-- together we can support ‘Shop Local’, new business development, and business education for the business community.

Christa asked Dan about the types of questions the Chamber is getting from business owners. Dan’s response: 1) Promotion of their business 2) Networking events 3) Series of business webinars.

Dan shared that the Chamber needs to remodel their website so it becomes more interactive and useful to their members, such as adding a job posting tab.

Christa asked how much the Chamber engages with other Ridgefield organizations. Dan responded that he met with Billy Craig, the new president of Downtown Ridgefield Merchants, and will meet with Jennifer DeLaura of RAC and others.

Bob asked Dan if the Chamber is also focused on areas other than downtown businesses. Dan responded that is definitely part of the plan and has recently met with Steve Zemo regarding Copps Hill.
3. Broadband Initiative (Knight)

Discussion: Bob provided the context by sharing that this past spring the Town of Ridgefield received hundreds of complaints about internet and wireless service throughout the community. As a result, Bob assisted the First Selectman’s Office to conduct a survey in May 2021. The results were compelling: 94.1% of respondents said they wanted town leaders to explore a fiber network. In the survey, residents ranked current service as a “D+” and businesses ranked current service as a “D.”

Since Xfinity/Comcast has 85.2% of the Town’s market share, there is little incentive for the provider to enhance their services. Frontier has 12.6% market share, predominantly in the Ridgebury area.

A fiber network doesn’t necessarily need to be municipality-owned. Ridgefield could explore three general models: Municipally-owned, privately-owned, and public-private models. Bob mentioned fiber is costly for service providers. The benchmark is a 20-year rate of return and since many of the ISPs are public, they need to provide their investors/shareholders with a 3 to 5 year return. A municipal bond would be a great vehicle for this type of project.

Bob mentioned most people believe that slow internet is caused by in-home WiFi routers. But, it’s typically the wired broadband service that’s connected to the home typically causing the congestion. Fiber-based broadband eliminates this congestion.

This is an important issue: 1) Access to fast, affordable, and reliable broadband service is critical for the town’s economy and future growth. 2) The Town’s POCD calls for high-speed fiber to support modern connectivity and wireless applications and 3) there is currently federal funding to improve access to broadband service ($65 billion in Infrastructure Bill funding and more with ARPA).

On a national level, property values will increase 10% with a good network. Society is changing --people are streaming--and networks are changing.

Christa asked Bob if he has an idea of how other towns are managing this issue. His response was that in the Northeast we have good service, however we are at capacity. States in the western and southwestern areas of the country are prioritizing fiber. In our local area, Wilton, Weston, Redding are all exploring fiber networks.

Susan asked if it would make sense to hire a consultant to create a plan and should we collaborate with neighboring towns to make that happen. Bob stated that a regional approach is not a good idea because each town has different needs and that the most successful plans are done municipality by municipality.

Bob mentioned that consultant services to create a plan can range from $20K - $300K. Discussion of whether a consultant is funded from the ECDC budget or a town budget, the point is 95% of respondents are asking for better internet service, so this is a mandate for our town.

Susan asked if it would be helpful if influential business people could partner with ECDC. Geoffrey agreed that building a consensus would be helpful prior to meeting with the BoS. He already reached out to several stakeholders and will continue to take the lead to create consensus among businesses, schools, and the community on this issue;
Geoffrey suggested adding anecdotes from the survey to endorse the need for better broadband service. Bob shared some of the verbatims from the survey—“we need competition, we need more reliability”—as well as the example of Wooster Hollow Cafe. The cafe’s owner, Ron Herman, loses connectivity several times a day which impacts his ability to complete transactions with customers’ credit cards.

**Geoffrey Morris made a motion that ECDC support the efforts to make the broadband initiative an ongoing effort and ultimately proposing to the town that a consultant would be hired to develop a plan. Susan Gessner seconded the motion. Motion carries 4-0.**

### 4. ECDC Budget (Carone)

Christa presented a budget plan for the remainder of 2021 (current state) and for January to June 30, 2022 (future state). Each has three pillars: Recruiting New Business, Retaining, Existing Businesses and Recognizing All Businesses to celebrate and support the vibrancy of Ridgefield’s business community.

Discussion of the current budget state: Christa recommends a spend of $4,000 to support promotional activities to increase foot traffic to the town. We have multiple sites with content, ie. InRidgefield. Rather than creating our own content, Christa recommends using our funds to boost content from the other sites. Geoffrey agreed and emphasized that ECDC does promote Town events no matter the source.

Christa questioned who manages the paid spend and allocation in an effort to understand how best to maximize our marketing spend. Geoffrey will take the lead on the boosting for now. Bob suggested recruiting a high school intern to help.

Discussion: If we agree to boost content from need to determine who manages the spend. InRidgefield is doing the best job at maintaining the calendar of events with monthly support from SandorMax, a marketing firm. Perhaps we could help fund the site and use their calendar and graphics to promote the town objectively, rather than create something new. Wayne controls the editorial content of the site. Christa suggested speaking to Sean to see if Wayne would collaborate in a way that would be mutually beneficial. Geoffrey made the point that before any discussions with Wayne, realistic funding would need to be established.

Discussion of the future state: January through June 2022: Christa suggested using the remaining $10,000 to build a more comprehensive economic development plan. The objective is to emphasize Ridgefield as a supportive hub for launching and nurturing successful businesses.

Economic development including business improvement grants and business attraction.

The goal would be to allocate funds for business improvement grants, grant applications, etc. Ideally $6,000 for freelance support to develop marketing materials, website content, create grant proposals to attract new businesses to town. Another $4,000 would be used to geo-target the promotion to launch the programs. We would need the support of a consultant to prepare the materials for grant programs, etc. to prepare for the next budget year.
Geoffrey mentioned that the objective of the Federal funds is to stimulate business, therefore these funds could be used to hire a consultant for a few months. Someone who could come in for 2 - 6 months to act on ECDC programs would be the perfect use of these funds.

Christa stated that we would also need further funds to activate and implement the programs. Geoffrey mentioned this person would implement the programs and demonstrate their value in attracting new business. A revenue model could suggest a business development director should be able to generate new tax revenue into the Town.

Christa proposed a $150,000 budget for next year. This would include healthy funding for marketing and promotion, new business grants, and grants for existing businesses to improve their operations. We could model this with projected revenue to show incremental growth at a low-cost margin.

Geoffrey explained that the budget process begins in January. Work continues in February and March and the final budget is voted on in May.

Bob spoke about all of the programs we are managing without a budget. He shared that the business portion (real property and inventory) of the Grand List has shrunk over the past 10 years. This is not healthy for the future of the Town.

We need to create a plan that will generate growth. Need to operationalize it to have a productive conversation with the BoS. The group consensus is that the existing budget doesn’t support economic development growth. Other towns have paid economic development directors to attract businesses. Geoffrey mentioned that we need a compelling case for the budget with concrete examples of potential outcomes.

What is needed to make the case that we need funds to grow the tax base? Christa mentioned it is also important to retain and support existing businesses. This would be a positive message: Ridgefield is supportive of business.

Discussion of the budget spend: Christa suggested the additional funds would promote key weekends through Facebook ads. Events such as the Holiday Stroll promote 'Visit Ridgefield' as a destination. Bob suggested that next year’s destination marketing could be two-fold and could include an economic development plan.

Bob Knight made a motion to increase the budget to $4,000 to promote key events through the end of the year. Geoffrey Morris seconded the motion. Motion carries 4 - 0.

5. Economic Development Plan (Knight)

Bob will be speaking with Sean Dowd to enlist his help in further developing the economic development plan that he created thus far. The plan will be an instrumental factor in presenting the budget to the BoS.
6. New Commissioners (Morris)

Geoffrey mentioned Susan will be ending her term as of this meeting and the vacancy will be posted by the office of the First Selectman.

7. Survey: Community Data Platform (Morris)

Tabled

Motion to adjourn by Christa Carone; seconded by Susan Gessner. Motion carries 4-0. The meeting concluded at 8:24 pm.

Respectively Submitted by,

Susan Gessner
ECDC Commissioner