



**Ridgefield
Economic &
Community
Development
Commission**

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Geoffrey Morris, Chair
Glori Norwitt, Secretary
Dee Dee Colabella
Sean Dowd
Susan Gessner
Bob Knight
Steve Spivak

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman
ridgefieldct.com

**Economic & Community Development Commission
Approved Minutes
June 7, 2021, 6:30 pm, via ZOOM Video Conference**

In Attendance: Chairman Geoffrey Morris; Secretary Glori Norwitt; Commissioners Dee Dee Colabella, Sean Dowd, Susan Gessner, Bob Knight, and Steve Spivak.

Guest: Christa Carone

Geoffrey Morris called the meeting to order at 6:33 p.m.

Announcements

Next meeting: July 12, 2021

Minutes

With no modifications, Bob Knight made a motion to approve the April 2021 meeting minutes; seconded by Susan Gessner. Motion carries 7-0.

General Discussion

1. Recruitment (Morris)

Cameron Carcelen has stepped down from the ECDC upon her term ending this month. Dee Dee Colabella is stepping down from the ECDC when her term ends in June 2021. The process to fill Dee Dee's seat is for the ECDC to recommend a candidate to the Board of Selectmen. Subsequently the BOS votes to approve a new Commissioner. Christa Carone is interested in becoming a Commissioner and discussed her background and ideas. As a recent boomerang family moving back from Hingham Massachusetts, she can bring concepts of what other areas are doing. She would like to see more development in the Branchville corridor. She suggests that we could reach out to businesses directly to drive them to town.

2. Cultural District Update (Norwitt)

On Friday May 21, 2021 the ECDC held an event at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum to celebrate the Cultural District designation that Ridgefield received, as the first in the state. Speakers were Glori Norwitt as MC, First Selectman Rudy Marconi, Elizabeth Shapiro of the CT Office of the Arts, Allison Stockel of the Ridgefield Playhouse, Hilde Grob of the Keeler Tavern Museum, Christine Carnicelli of the West Lane Inn, Governor Lamont and Geoffrey Morris. As planned, the speeches focused on the economic effects of Ridgefield receiving the first Cultural District designation.

The event was invitation-only due to ongoing Covid restrictions, but approximately 70 people attended including the Cultural District subcommittee, members of the Board of Selectmen, and some arts and culture organizations in town. Some press also attended including NPR, Fox 12 News, Hamlet Hub, the Ridgefield Press, and the Danbury News-Times. Geoffrey unveiled the new Cultural District logo, which is an acorn shape that was designed by Jonathan Winn of Thrown Stone Theatre, and was approved by the State. Press kits were distributed with materials from for profit and nonprofit arts and culture organizations around town, and a local map. Everyone seemed to enjoy the event and spoke highly of the new designation and what it will mean for the town. There was press coverage in all the local papers and online.

The map in the press kits was a spinoff of the original illustrated map, commissioned by Ellen Burns several years ago; the map was modified by Susan Gessner to focus on the Cultural District. Commissioners discussed that this map will be very useful for future use. Susan noted that the modified map was a rush job due to this event, and perhaps we could add more to it such as a listing of businesses and organizations on the back of it, and redistribute it around town. Christa Carone pointed out that perhaps we could approach local artist Roz Chast to design something that could work with this map to attract more interest.

Per State requirements, two Cultural District signs must be placed within the new Cultural District. Currently Geoffrey is working on the various approvals and permits necessary. We hope to place more than two signs in town, to cover the various driving entry points into the Cultural District.

Bob noted that the Cultural District information is on the chooseridgefield.com website. Also, Facebook ads were run as far as NYC, Hudson Valley and New Haven.

3. Make Music Day (Spivak)

Make Music Day is an international movement which brings free, community-wide outdoor music, and will be held on June 21, 2021.

This event will be a kickoff to a summer of arts & culture in our town, promoted also by Ridgefield Arts Council. There will be a push to promote arts & culture throughout the region through database emails, newsletters, and banners in town. Steve noted that Jennifer DiLaura, head of the Arts Council, has been instrumental to driving this event.

Dee Dee noted that the “Art Dogs” statues will be displayed around town starting the weekend of Make Music Day, and will remain on display throughout the summer. This is being coordinated by “Artful” which is a local visual arts initiative. Supporters have funded these Art Dogs, and then will be available to purchase via auction in September at The Aldrich. Proceeds will be split between ROAR, the Ridgefield Guild of Artists and Artful visual arts initiative.

Steve will send ECDC commissioners a further Make Music Day update via email soon.

4. Branding Initiative (Gessner, Colabella, and Spivak)

Susan presented a powerpoint detailing the Branding initiative. At this stage, a positioning statement has been finalized. Steve noted that during the tagline and wordmark development the group suggested using “The Ridge” as a novel way to brand the town. The phrase brings a renewed vigor to the town and is already part of the town vernacular since many people already refer to Ridgefield as “The Ridge. The group developed over 25 different taglines and finalized several that can be customized to promote businesses and arts/culture entities. The design has been well received thus far, and will be shown to focus groups along with two more that are currently being created. The Commissioners viewed the “The Ridge” concept again and were all very supportive. The group will create additional taglines that will be reviewed during the focus group process.

Dee Dee noted that with the visual identity, we seek to have a parallel effort with the private sector, to work with Town websites (both government and nonprofit private ventures), and to make a joint effort for a common calendar and marketing. Steve Wooters joined a meeting to review this brand initiative on May 19. The “g” in “The Ridge” provides a visual reference to the historic fountain.

Susan reported that Kate Guillory, owner of Goldmine Research and Ridgefield resident will assist with the discussion guide and focus groups on a pro bono basis. Susan noted Kate’s research experience and familiarity with the town will greatly help this effort.

Geoffrey noted that promoting the Town is a major function of the ECDC, and this Branding Initiative is very helpful in that job. Geoffrey thanked all the Commissioners working on this initiative, including Cameron who has now stepped down from the ECDC. Dee Dee noted that she will continue to work on this initiative after she steps down from the ECDC in July.

5. ARA Funds for the Arts (Morris)

The Town of Ridgefield will receive approximately \$2.5 million from the federal government in the next few weeks through the American Rescue Plan, which is monies separate from what the

school system will receive. Additionally, the Town will receive another approximately \$7 million stimulus from the federal government in approximately one year.

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 and Geoffrey have had discussions with First Selectman Marconi 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.

Glori and Geoffrey are collecting information from local nonprofit arts and culture organizations, regarding Covid-19 costs incurred such as for PPE, extra staff and special equipment, and also regarding lost revenue.

Bob noted that as part of the Town's Long Term Recovery Committee efforts, a Finance Subcommittee has been formed and led by Frank Rowella, from a local accounting firm Reynolds & Rowella. Frank is assembling a team of financial persons to serve as impartial vetters, which would advise the Board of Selectmen regarding the criteria for distribution of the American Rescue Plan monies, should any be issued to Ridgefield, and if the Board of Selectmen require the assistance. This group could evaluate requests and review the businesses coming forward, in order to ensure the monies go towards long-term investments.

Geoffrey pointed out that the ECDC's job is to advocate for some local sectors, such as arts and culture. Sean noted that it may be helpful to create some sort of public/private partnership in order to get a bigger bang for the buck.

Bob noted that there have been some federal clawbacks in certain areas regarding federal stimulus funds. Sean suggested that the ECDC could look for some consensus before the BOS has to make determinations, and look to eliminate a certain amount of confrontation that may happen.

6. Parking (Dowd)

Geoffrey welcomed Sean as our new Commissioner, and noted that Sean is looking to resolve some downtown parking issues to assist economic development.

Sean questioned if the parking permit system currently organized by the town is working well. Many cars with permits are parking all day in critical spots right in the center of town. Due to the change at the post office whereby many employees now work out of Danbury, many of the post office parking spots can be developed for use by town stores, employees and patrons. Further, Benison Funding currently owns the vacant lot besides the post office, the post office space, 22 Catoonah Street, and the space near the fire station. Negotiating this with the landlord could greatly aid the town.

Sean noted that ease of movement greatly aids the economy. He seeks to review the different entry points to town, and develop a grand plan. The 35 new spots on Governor Street near RVNA and the Boys and Girls Club will help. The goal is to have store employees not park in the prime locations thus providing more parking spaces for people coming to town to shop, enjoy the restaurants, galleries, Ballard Park etc. Dee Dee noted that with her business lease, she is allocated 4 spots based on her rental size. Also, she has the option to buy-in to get more

parking spots. Sean noted that we may need to create a public relations plan to convince business owners to have employees to not park in customer spots.

7. Planning & Zoning Subcommittee (Morris)

Geoffrey spoke to Joe Fossi from the Planning & Zoning Commission regarding the potential issue of reduced demand for open retail space in the downtown area due to increased online shopping a decade from now. In anticipation of this trend and in an effort to preserve retail and maintain fuller retail spaces on Main Street, they discussed that perhaps non-Main Street landlords could be permitted to change their space from retail to residential. This modification would pertain to specific locations, such as the bottom of Bailey Ave and would not include any Main Street retail.

A subcommittee was formed to consider this issue consisting of ECDC Commissioners Bob Knight, Cameron Carcelen, Geoffrey Morris, a shop owner, 2 commercial landlords, a commercial realtor, and P&Z members. A public hearing was announced for June 2021.

On Facebook, some people were asking questions about this subcommittee on the “Ridgefield CT” page. Geoffrey made a statement in response, to attempt to answer these questions. He noted that the Subcommittee has not finalized anything and would serve to make recommendations to the Planning & Zoning Commission, and is in the discussion stages. Some Facebook users pushed back regarding possible conflicts of interest for some Subcommittee members. As a result, Bob met with one of the commenters, Sean McEvoy, a Board of Education member, to hear some of the concerns being raised. Bob listed the concerns in a letter to the Town Attorney to consider whether there is a conflict of interest. Bob reported the initial feedback from the Town Attorney was that there is no conflict of interest, but there may be procedural issues of having a P&Z subcommittee formed with P&Z and non-P&Z members. The Town Attorney will be researching the matter further and speaking with P&Z’s counsel. As a result, Geoffrey suggested that the subcommittee should pause its efforts until a clear legal opinion had been provided. While subcommittee recommendations procedurally would go to a public hearing for public comment, Geoffrey and Bob have been advocating for a community town hall (virtual or otherwise) to help clear up any misperceptions of the subcommittee’s work and provide ample opportunity to engage with the public and obtain feedback and other ideas. Bob provided further context that for over a decade, many in the community had been critical of P&Z for practicing “spot zoning” and being reactionary. Bob noted that the subcommittee was formed by P&Z to anticipate changing retail market needs (online retail and the busy Danbury Mall) and applauded P&Z for listening to the criticism and taking a proactive approach to looking at Downtown zoning. Bob noted that he thought the work was really important, particularly to the economic health of downtown.

Sean noted that there appears to be a certain perception in town that the Planning & Zoning Commission is secretive, and that some are making money based on decisions.

8. Initiating Business Growth (Dowd)

Given Sean’s experience with creating two new businesses in Ridgefield and helping six other entrepreneurs start businesses in neighboring towns, Sean suggested that the ECDC could help potential business owners get their start by sharing resources. He noted that both CT Innovation and CTNext are working to assist startups throughout the state, to create an incubator hub of economic development.

A discussion ensued of possible ideas to promote startups and entrepreneurship in town. Sean suggested perhaps a “Shark Tank” night at the Playhouse with some public and private funding. Steve noted that a topic for an ECDC webinar seminar could be “how to start a business in town.” Sean noted that he has experience in this area. Many startups need help with coaching.

Bob noted that perhaps the ideas presented during the meeting would best be compiled in a 10-year strategic economic development plan and recommended that an ECDC subcommittee should be formed to drive the plan’s development, including what types of businesses are needed in town. We could advocate directly with nearby businesses to come to Ridgefield. He suggested that we hold community conversations to gather ideas and input to some of the initial work ECDC has done to start the planning process last fall.

Based on the previously-noted Facebook commentary, the commissioners discussed ways to directly engage the public for promotion, but also to answer questions and distribute information, other than on Facebook. Geoffrey suggested looking into holding the July 12 ECDC meeting in a COVID-safe public place like Ballard Park or in the tented area outside the Ridgefield Playhouse so the public could attend in-person and more easily participate in ECDC discussions and Commission business.

Commissioners Steve Spivak and Dee Dee Colabella left the meeting at this time.

9. Arts, Culture, Tourism & Recreation Subcommittee Update (Norwitt)

On May 19, the ACTR subcommittee met and focused entirely on the lifting of many state and local government Covid-19 restrictions, which happened on that day. The subcommittee members shared what their organization/business was requiring of customers/visitors, and how to communicate that effectively. The members noted that the discussion was very helpful overall, to learn what others were doing, and how decisions were being made.

All noted that it would be very helpful to get a message to the public, asking that customers/visitors please be patient as restrictions are changing quickly, and please be respectful of every businesses’ and organizations’ needs/restrictions. It was agreed that Glori would create a Press Release to get this message out broadly.

Glori will work on this Press Release. Further, she will encourage businesses to clearly post their business/org requirements on their entrance, so customers/visitors know and understand what is expected of them when entering a location.

Knight motioned to adjourn the public portion of the meeting followed by an Executive Session to discuss an HR matter. Seconded by Geoffrey. Motion carries 6-0. The public meeting concluded at 8:29 p.m.

Amend: to return to vote

The executive session ended at 8:34pm, and the public meeting began again. Motion by Knight to recommend Christa Carone to the Board of Selectmen as a new Commissioner on the ECDC, following the absence created by the departure of Dee Dee Colabella. Motion seconded by Norwitt. Spivak and Colabella abstained due to their absence. Motion carries 5-0.

Motion to adjourn by Knight; seconded by Gessner. Motion carries 5-0. The meeting concluded at 8:37pm.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Glori Norwitt, ECDC Secretary