

TOWN of RIDGEFIELD – CITIZENS COMMITTEE MEETING

NOVEMBER 16, 2015

AMENDED/APPROVED MINUTES

TOWN HALL/LARGE CONFERENCE ROOM, 400 MAIN STREET
RIDGEFIELD, CT 06877 – 7:30 P.M.

Present: R. Larson, A. Behymer, D. Daughters, E. Burns, L.Hanley, M. Miller, T. O'Connor, E. Tyrrell, J. Zaracki.
Rebecca Augur of Milone and MacBroom (M&M) on the phone

Agenda

1. Call to Order
2. Public Comment
3. Discussion with Paul Roche
4. Discussion with Betty Brosius
5. Discussion with Bob Hebert
6. Discussion with Conservation Committee
7. Next Steps
8. Adjourn

1. Call to Order - R. Larson called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.
2. Public Comment - There were no comments from the public.

As a result of the survey, the Citizen's Committee is considering civic, cultural, open space, and/or residential development for the Town of Ridgefield's Schlumberger property. It was felt that the Committee needed more background and info in order to help with their decision-making. Thus, four individuals have been invited to share with the Committee their specific fields of expertise. R. Larson provided each individual with some questions to consider regarding their specific topic.

3. Discussion with Paul Roche – Paul Roche, Director of Parks & Rec came forward and brought with him David Baxter, Sub-Committee Chairman and a member of the Parks & Rec Commission.

P. Roche stated how about 4900 people are involved with the many Parks & Rec programs. What is on his department's wish list? They do not have enough all-weather playing fields which is a problem when it rains. Additional turf fields are the answer.

D. Daughters inquired as to what exactly is meant by a turf field? P. Roche explained the procedure for the building of a turf field. Use of a grass field is

dependent on the weather. They can get twice as much use out of a turf field. If lights are installed, they can get four times as much use. D. Daughters asked if they are at all concerned about the use of turf fields in light of all the current talk about their safety. P. Roche responded that the State of Connecticut conducted studies on the use of artificial turf and they feel it is safe to use. Does Park & Rec want additional fields – no, but instead they want turf put on some of their existing fields.

The conflict now is over the use of LED lighting. Adults like to have lighted fields available for baseball and softball. What about an indoor/outdoor facility? There are a large number of such facilities in the area and P. Roche does not see the need for Parks & Rec to invest in an indoor field. They are expensive to maintain and they do not have one in their master plan to build at this time.

R. Larson asked Mr. Roche to tell us about pickle ball. Local people came up the Committee while at the Parks & Rec Center for the charrette and stated how pickle ball is the “up and coming” thing. In the future, he can see the need for pickle ball courts, either at the Rec Center or at some other place in town. He hasn’t dedicated any resources at this time to pickle ball.

R. Larson inquired about the pool facilities in Ridgefield. A fifteen-year master plan study was conducted. The results were then bumped out to year 2018 or 2019. There is talk about the Barlow Pool being too small. The users all want to come at the same time – in the evening after work or in the morning before work. They have now dedicated four lanes at the Rec Center to a lap-type pool. Heavy swimming competitors want a lane pool when they want it, but they are a small number of the pool users. In the future, they might like to construct a fifty meter pool with a bubble top, but this is expensive to operate and not the number one priority for Parks & Rec at the current time. They originally had a plan for an outdoor pool at the Parks & Rec facility, but when the Boys & Girls’ Club built their pool recently, the Parks & Rec Department put their plans off. D. Baxter stated how at one time there was a ground-swell movement for Ridgefield to build a pool like the beautiful outdoor facility in New Canaan, but funding is always the issue. There are currently about 15 to 16 neighborhood pools in Ridgefield. They could look for another site for an outdoor pool other than at the Rec Center property, but it is more expensive to staff such a facility off-site.

What about an outdoor amphitheater? P. Roche responded that this would be a wonderful asset to the town, but they do not have such as part of their current Parks & Rec plans. Ballard Park is a wonderful setting, but there are regulations governing what can be done there. There is already parking available downtown and there are food facilities close by. An outdoor theatre is not really a Parks & Rec “thing”.

What about outdoor picnic areas? That is a fairly good idea. There is a need for non-organized little playing fields where a group can just get together and play

baseball or have a game of soccer, whatever. These fields could be lit at night for baseball and could use a little building holding restrooms.

What about trails? A lot of people are using the trail around the Rec Center property. This is very popular. Walking and biking trails on the Schlumberger property would be most welcome and a connection to the rail trail would be a plus.

P. Roche indicated that the Rec Center cost about \$14.2 million. A soccer field costs about \$1 million. To make a field area flat is a big job. There is room to put two turf fields behind the skating rink and if additional parking were to be put in there as well, that would make for a nice complex.

R. Larson inquired about financing. Some projects have been a combination of private and Town dollars. It is difficult to raise dollars for a project that people feel is something the Town should be paying for. Some of the existing turf fields have been funded thru a partnership with private and Town dollars. They have received a lot of public support for disability playgrounds. P. Roche feels that to raise money for a picnic area is going to be hard to do. There has not been a nagging need for additional picnic areas.

Back to Ballard Park – all concerts there have to get a permit and the concert has to be cut off at an earlier hour, such as at 9:00 p.m.

A lighted softball/pickle ball field would need about one acre of land. A softball field is cheaper to build than a soccer field. A pickle ball court is the same size as a tennis court. Costs to maintain a playing field include a blanket liability policy, mowing charges and lighting charges (if lights are available). User fees for the maintenance of playing fields is often divided into thirds – one-third for the school to pay, one-third for the Town and one-third for the sport that is involved.

Thank you to Paul Roche and David Thaxter for sharing their info with the Committee.

4. Discussion with Betty Brosius, Director of Planning

B. Brosius responded to the question as to what did she suggest as the best use for the property. She feels that Ridgefield needs to move ahead with a new municipal facility. Such a facility could house land use, highway, police and fire, etc. There are heating and air conditioning problems with some of the current buildings. It is difficult to hire new employees when their office will be a small room on the lower level without a window. Our current office facilities are sub-par compared to other towns. Such a municipal facility is a long-term need of the town. The old high school could be used for a municipal facility but it would need a lot of renovation and the Town is currently receiving income from Chef's Warehouse, our renter.

Do we want the thirty acres to generate income? A memory care facility would not make for high traffic but would bring in tax collars. There are some commercial buildings that would not generate high traffic. The property could still be available for trails with a municipal building on site. The pump station at Quail Ridge could have the sewer line used as a trail with it coming out by the Goodwill trailer. This is a part of the bike trail study that was done about ten years ago.

The greatest fear for the area is to use the property for something that will produce a lot of traffic. The traffic for an amphitheater would not be constant traffic nor at commuter time. Sunset Lane is a totally residential road. It could be used as a cut-thru and we should be concerned about this. At Boehringer Ingelheim, for example, people come and go at different hours. Many of the employees work out of their homes. Downtown merchants do not like the parking caused by the concerts at Ballard Park. Many feel that it negatively affects their business. There is not a lot of available property in town for municipal use.

Some people are suggesting that a parking garage be located at the end of the municipal lot. The garage would not be really visible when at that location. Employees will need to park there but it is too far away from Main Street shopping to park there for shopping. There is a plan for a walkway between the RVNA lot and the municipal parking. When working in town, it is difficult to move every two hours to a new parking spot

Retail use is not permitted for the Schlumberger property. It is actually not zoned for residential either. A municipal building can be allowed in a residential zone with a special permit.

E. Burns asked what municipal facility does B. Brosius envision on this property? It would be ineffective operating with Town Hall, the Town Clerk, the Assessor's Office. It is awkward to have to go from one building to another. Highway is usually what operates well at another location. Police and Fire are often put together and generally operate well together. The BOE does operate totally separate. D. Daughters stated how it would be a tremendous expense to build a new municipal building.

B. Brosius stated how she has mixed feelings about forcing landlords to do something because of zoning. You can't force the market! Real estate offices are not retail. A bank is more of a general business office.

There is no room for a downtown Main Street hotel. Also, the zoning now does not allow one.

Thank you to B. Brosius for sharing her expertise to increase the Committee's understanding.

5. Discussion with Bob Hebert – R. Hebert indicated how he is now a member of the Board of Selectmen and was previously Director of the Housing Authority. Frank Coyle, who also came forward, is now going to take his place on The Housing Authority.

R. Hebert reviewed for the Committee the various housing groups under the direction of The Housing Authority. The 152 units are made up of the following:

- Ballard Green – 58 units - age 60+ or handicapped for independent living; \$420 to \$450/month – These units are significantly subsidized
- Congregate Facility – 36 units; they get 1 hot meal/day, 1x/week housecleaning, and someone is always on the property; \$600/month plus another \$600 for services
- The Meadows – 20 family units; 4 buildings on Prospect Ridge; \$1100 to \$1400/month
- General Units – 38 units with the rent from \$700/\$1100/month

There is a waiting list now for all the properties. The Meadows now has a waiting list of over a year. There is a two-year waiting list for most of the other properties. Three years ago there were a lot of vacant units. They had not raised the rent in many years. F. Coyle stated how at that time, the units were incredibly poorly managed. There were units sitting empty even though there were waiting lists for the units. Now the units are turned over in 4 to 5 days. There is a demand for these apartments as our population is aging.

D. Daughters asked for a definition of affordable housing. R. Hebert responded that affordable housing is housing for people in need. They are often single Mom's & Dad's. D. Daughters responded that he thinks of "affordable housing for empty nesters". They want to get rid of the upkeep of their big house but want to be able to stay in town. They want to buy a house in the \$300,000 to \$450,000 range.

R. Hebert explained the 830g affordable housing concept. It is an incentive housing program developed by the State of CT.

Becky Mucchetti, Chair of Planning & Zoning stated that they are currently involved in doing an Affordable Housing Study with a Public Hearing planned for January. The goal is to put together all the info and "make a plan". The goal is to get the plan done by July 2016. There is a demand from those 55 and older for assisted living and independent living choices.

The Committee expressed a thank you to R. Hebert and F. Coyle for sharing their insight into Ridgefield's Housing Authority.

6. Discussion with Conservation Committee – Susan Baker and Jack Kuce came forward to represent the Conservation Commission.

Ridgefield has about 25% of its property in open space. The State calls for 30%. Individuals donate wetlands and other unusable space as open space. The Commission obtains parcels of land that abut open space parcels and land that connects to trails and trails in other towns. The Commission's mission is to be protectors of land resources. They acquire opens space mainly thru donations. They have very little open space near downtown. Seniors are very interested in having housing near downtown and where they can walk easily.

What does the Conservation Commission suggest for the Schlumberger property? They suggest easier trails – ones that can be used for someone in a wheelchair. They would like to see an elder care facility in the downtown area. We do not have a lot of meadows. They would suggest wild flower meadows. Ridgefield used to have many small antique shops. What about a small botanical garden – a site that people could come to visit. It would be an attraction. We do need more biking trails. They would suggest land use for recreation and conservation.

J. Zawacki commented on the property being passive inactive space encumbered forever. If the property is not deed restricted, it can be open to other uses.

S. Baker stated how a municipal use for the property would work very well. They could still develop trails for the public to use. A piece of property does not have to be deed restricted if it is under the jurisdiction of the Open Space Committee.

E. Burns commented on how a twenty ft. swath would be cleared for the sewer line. A trail could be put on top. We could work with the construction company to minimize the damage done when clearing for the sewer line. We worked previously with Aquarion to minimize the damage with their project.

7. Next Steps –

The assignments for the November 23 meeting are as follows:

M. Miller – Maurice Sendak people – what do they require to create a museum? How are they moving along with their project? They are continuing with due diligence; talking to fund raisers and people with “deep pockets”. Fund raising for this can go around the globe. M. Sendak had an incredible international network. It will take a number of years to work out all the details to create a museum. Abatement will continue for a couple of years.

J. Zawacki – WPCA – what sewer units are available? S. Zemo got his allocation of units from the WPCA – sewer units are given out on a first come, first served basis.

R. Larson – Meet with C. Fischer as to how much municipal space is needed by the various departments.

Rebecca of M&M – share the concept drawings that M&M did for Ridgefield a couple of years ago.

R. Larson will ask Barbara Manners to come to the November 23 meeting to talk about a possible outdoor amphitheater.

8. Adjourn - The meeting was adjourned at 10:35 p.m.