

TOWN of RIDGEFIELD – CITIZENS COMMITTEE MEETING

NOVEMBER 23, 2015

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

AMENDED/APPROVED MINUTES

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)

Absent: M. Miller

Agenda

1. Call to Order
2. Public Comment
3. Outdoor Stage Discussion
4. Affordable Housing Plan
5. Second Survey Discussion
6. Update of Schlumberger Property Costs
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.
3. Outdoor Stage Discussion – Barbara Manners came forward to discuss her opinion about a possible outdoor stage at the Schlumberger property. B. Manners has a great deal of experience with CHIRP and the summer concerts at Ballard Park. She invited Steve Zemo and Allison Stockel, Director of the Ridgefield Playhouse, to the meeting to add their input.

Ms. Manners stated how Ballard Park is a beautiful facility right in the center of town. The concerts there each week during the summer months have been very successful and the crowd has grown over the years. The one problem is the parking and that was a problem even before the Library expansion and the opening of The Prospector Theater. The Library used to be closed on Tuesday evenings (the night of the Ballard Park concerts) and the entire Library parking area was available to those who wanted to attend the concert across the street. Now, the Prospector Theatre is open every evening and the Library is open on Tuesday and Thursday evenings until 9:00 p.m. According to B. Manners, the parking situation has generated quite a bit of consternation around town.

Ms. Manners stated how it would be wonderful to have an outdoor stage as a permanent structure. They had a stage designed for CHIRP at one time but it never happened. She feels the Schlumberger space would be a very suitable location for an outdoor stage. What about parking? She feels they would need space to park 500 cars. An acre of land would accommodate 110 parking spaces, and thus five acres would be needed for parking.

Allison Stockel stated how she would love to be involved with an outdoor stage which could be used for Shakespeare performances. It would be wonderful to have such a venue and to have it managed by Parks & Rec – even management of the schedule would be an incredible asset. An outdoor stage would be a huge economic driver for the town.

R. Larson asked if a fenced venue is what B. Manners has in mind. She responded that it would be wonderful to have that open feeling with no fencing, but if there were to be ticketed performances, then a controlled entry and seating area would be necessary. Would an outdoor stage at the Schlumberger property be far enough out of the way and not disturb neighbors? B. Manners stated how they have had a few complaints about sounds from the Ballard Park concerts but not many.

D. Daughters asked how the concerts would affect the new Charter Homes which will be under construction shortly. R. Larson responded that he does not feel the noise would be a major problem, especially if those purchasing the new homes realize that the concert venue is going to be a reality. Residents would probably like to walk across the grass to attend a concert. It is difficult for seniors to walk across the grass at Ballard Park.

E. Burns expressed concern over a possible paved parking area for 500 cars. How about grass parking like at Tanglewood? B. Manners stated how the parking at Caramoor is also on the grass, but there might need to be some provisions made for the handicapped.

Andy Behymer stated how we need to determine exactly how much space is needed for seating for an outdoor stage area. Not only would a stage be needed, but also back rooms for dressing changes and bathroom facilities as well. There could be tiered seating, but people do like to sit on the lawn. B. Manners suggested that we think of the size of Ballard Park and add an additional fifty percent. She suggests five acres for the parking and three more acres for the stage area, etc. T. O'Connor stated how he and his family park at St. Mary's and walk to Ballard Park for the concerts. There is no back way to cut thru and thus one has to go out to the street and walk to the park.

D. Daughters asked B. Manners as to what does she envision a stage facility like the one they are proposing would cost. B. Manners responded - \$1 million to \$1.5

million. The stage would need to have a roof. A roof is needed for an orchestra. She heard that Westport raised \$7 million for the redo of the Levitt Pavilion. She feels that people of Ridgefield would be excited about this opportunity to raise money for an outdoor stage venue. Ridgefield is a town that people want to come to and concerts at an outdoor stage would be an attraction.

T. O'Connor inquired about the length of a season. Ms. Manners responded that CHIRP has 24 concerts/season. They start after Memorial Day and go thru August. September and October are a beautiful time of the year and there could be outdoor performances in those months as well. They could also start sometime in April and not wait until the end of May.

S. Zemo addressed the parking issue. There could be 100 spots available in the town garage. A loop road inside the Schlumberger property would provide parking along the roadside. An underground garage with grass over it could provide about 200 parking spots. A. Behymer stated how we would need to look carefully at the entrance and exit. People would be frustrated with a long line to leave a concert. Allison Stockel and S. Zemo commented on how parking, etc. were all part of the discussion prior to the creation of the Ridgefield Playhouse. The Playhouse has turned out to be a significant economic asset. An outdoor theatre like the Playhouse would create a ripple effect. Also, people would love to be able to walk to a concert amenity.

What about some type of municipal use for the property? What about a town center facility housing both the Police and Fire Departments? R. Larson stated how the Police do not want to combine with the Fire Department. This has been expressed by the Police Commission. If not these two departments together, then what else could be housed there? What about some of the Board of Education offices and what is currently housed in the Annex?

R. Larson thanked Ms. Manners and Ms. Stockel for their participation in the evening's discussion. Their input has been very helpful.

4. Affordable Housing Plan – Becky Mucchetti, Chairman of Planning & Zoning, came forward to help the Committee understand the Affordable Housing issue in Ridgefield.

R. Larson stated how the Schlumberger Committee recognizes the need for affordable housing in town. Ms. Mucchetti stated how the 830g affordable housing program provides for 30% of a housing program to be made available at "affordable prices" and 70% at market value. The State of Connecticut is eager to incentivize affordable housing. At one time recently there were four projects requesting affordable housing permits in a two block area. We are fortunate that most of the project in town have been built by people who live here. We are in the second year of our moratorium and this moratorium time has given us a

“breather” to see how we can possibly be more proactive in how we promote affordable housing.

D. Daughters asked for a clarification as to what is meant by affordable housing. What is the price point being discussed? B. Mucchetti responded that we are not talking about federally subsidized low income housing. What demographic area are we trying to reach? Is there any way to get tax credits? Do we maybe not need to build as many units?

Different housing programs get different point totals. We need to get 263 points. Housing projects like Ballard Greens, The Meadow, Congregate – all get each a certain number of points. If the Bennett’s Farm Eureka project of 340 units gets approved and does happen, that will give us 214 points, enough for a 2nd Moratorium.

T. O’Connor asked if the Schlumberger property is appropriate for affordable housing. Yes, it is.

B. Brosius is retiring July 1st. Her new Assistant Planner has come to Ridgefield from Albany where this individual was very involved with affordable housing plans. B. Mucchetti indicated that Planning & Zoning hopes to adopt an affordable housing regulation this year and will be scheduling a public hearing on this subject in January. We need to go back to why the Town of Ridgefield purchased the Schlumberger property in the first place. We did not want to open the door to the building of housing on the property that would add to the traffic situation in the center of town.

J. Zawacki stated how she does not feel that the Schlumberger property is the right place for affordable housing, but she does feel that we should look at projects that would generate some income from the property. R. Larson responded that our committee has been charged with finding the best use for the Schlumberger property. Affordable Housing is our charge only if we want it for this property.

Affordable housing property is deed restricted for **four** years. Municipal water and sewer is required and a “reasonable” walk to transportation. Ridgefield has only two sewer districts in town. There are areas of town desperate for sewer connection. If the Schlumberger property were given sewer accessibility, then the property would be eligible for affordable housing. Branchville has no sewer availability. Redding has a sewer facility that is only about ten years old and is not fully used, but they do not want to share their facility. There has been some talk about putting a sewer facility on the Branchville ballfield, but Branchville residents are not sure that they want affordable housing in their area of town. There are mixed feelings among the Branchville residents.

L. Hanley indicated that she is in favor of multi-generational affordable housing, not just for seniors, but she does not feel that affordable housing is the best use for

this property. E. Burns stated how R. Hebert indicated that 40 units are needed to make an affordable housing project economically feasible. She does not favor housing on the Schlumberger property. E. Tyrrell responded that housing would use a small portion of the Schlumberger property and would enable us to get a return on our investment. But we also need to keep in mind that the Philip Johnson Building and the Auditorium both need some open space around them. A. Behymer indicated that he would prefer a hotel or office building. (eliminated instead of affordable housing) A small portion of the property could be used for such building or buildings and they would result in less traffic impact than housing.

R. Larson stated how the Committee seems to prefer something for the site that will add economic value to the town, one more economic driver, so to speak. If there is to be any additional housing at all, then it needs to be a small number of units. T. O'Connor stated how he feels the Committee needs to investigate fully every option. What would 40 units look like? How much space would be needed?

R. Larson commented on the recent inquiry by a theater company, Act of Connecticut, a contemporary theater company, interested in buying or leasing the auditorium. They are looking for a facility in our area. They toured the facility this morning. They would do about five plays/year plus children's programs. They liked what they saw even though there is no space designated for dressing rooms. Another thought was to make the stage larger by extending the stage into the seating area. Ridgefield does have the reputation as a center for the arts. They have also already spoken with Allison Stockel at the Ridgefield Playhouse and Alison Greeley, Chairman of the Arts Council. Act of Connecticut will probably be putting together an offer. The Sendak group has expressed interest in the auditorium as well.

D. Daughters stated how he appreciated the input from Barbara Manners. He can picture a park on the property – walking trails, bike trails, etc. – a cultural park theme. We can ask about this idea in the next survey.

Rebecca reviewed what needs to be asked about in the next survey – the more ideas we can eliminate that we don't want to follow up on further, the better.

- 1) The survey can start off by determining if the individual has been following the process.
- 2) List the three top choices and the three bottom choices for the use of the property. What are the reasons behind these choices? Are there cost issues involved in these choices? We need to understand what people are thinking.
- 3) What about when Schlumberger was using the Philip Johnson Building. What was the income from the property at that time? Is it important to recoup the dollars invested in the property, or are you happy with what has been recouped already? Would income from property taxes suffice?

T. O'Connor stated how he does not feel that we are yet ready for the second survey. Instead, we as a Committee need to narrow down the choices ourselves first. We need to put the choices in order of cost. L. Hanley stated how she feels that one-half of the property should be used **to generate income. (eliminate for open space and the other half should generate income.)**

Rebecca stated how the Philip Johnson Building is to remain and have a cultural use, but then parking will be needed. Should the property be land banked? R. Larson asked if we should take out the housing option. If we want a 100% return on the Town's investment, we would have to come up with an option to sell part and open the property up for use as housing and/or professional office space. In the first survey, 57% indicated that they wanted return of the Town's investment dollars. K. Redmond has indicated that we need to get \$1.7 million back to recoup our initial investment.

Four options for the survey were narrowed down as follows:

- 1) Cultural Option, which include the museum, auditorium use and outdoor stage. Walking trails and bike access to the property from Link, and general field use for families with picnic areas.
- 2) Municipal Option – the museum, auditorium and municipal buildings would be the key components. Walking trails, bike access to the property from Link, and general field use for families with picnic areas. Working on square footage needed and costs for Police, Fire, Town Hall plus Annex.
- 3) Financial Impact Option – Commercial and residential options for recovering costs or building revenue; medium-priced housing similar to Charter Group or 8-30g could be options.
- 4) Land Bank Option – Town retains ownership of the property with no new development, other than the museum and the auditorium – there would be ongoing maintenance costs for landscaping and these two buildings.

Our next meeting is December 7th and we will focus on the second survey at that time.

Andy Behymer moved and R. Larson seconded a motion to adjourn the Citizens Committee at 10:35 pm. Motion passed by unanimous vote.

Respectfully submitted,

Janet L. Johnson