

Windham Economic Development Commission
Special Meeting

November 17, 2015

Town Hall, 979 Main St., Willimantic, CT

1st Floor Conference Room

(Former Code Enforcement Office)

7:00 PM

Minutes

1. **Call to Order.** @ 7:05 p.m. by Chairman Hettinger. **In attendance:**
Commission Members: Bill Hettinger, Chairman; Robert N. Horrocks;
Victor Funderburk; John McCommas, Pamela DeVivo. **Town Staff:**
James Bellano, Director of Economic Development.

2. **Citizens & delegations comments/questions.** None.

3. **Discussion and Action on Town Council's request for a recommendation on George Hernandez's proposal for the Tin Tsin RFP.**

Chairman Hettinger asked that the Commission Members review and discuss the written comments for Mr. Hernandez's proposal that were submitted by four of the five Commission members. This prompted a back and forth among the Commission members over the strengths and weaknesses of Mr. Hernandez's proposal. The substance of each member's discussion is contained in the comments that are attached to the minutes (see Attachment below).

V. Funderburk, who had not submitted written comments, added that Mr. Hernandez should have an opportunity to develop the site, and suggested that the 24-month timeline that was mentioned in the original RFP could be the timeframe that Mr. Hernandez must meet in order to retain the development rights. However, he added that within that (or another timeframe), Mr. Hernandez must produce a result with regard to development of the site.

Citing the proposed motion submitted by Chairman Hettinger in his comments, J. McCommas moved as follows:

“The EDC recommends the town give George Hernandez a 6-month option on the property (providing site control for the nonprofit predevelopment funding grant process) in order to give Mr. Hernandez time to develop the necessary plans, sketches, cost estimates and identify funding sources for the nonprofit development of the property. The town could then evaluate progress at the end of the 6-month period and either move to a longer term purchase option (allowing time for the development of the property without transferring title) or pursue alternative uses.”

The motion was seconded by V. Funderburk. A discussion ensued regarding the specific terms of the motion, i.e., calling for a different timeline along with more concrete terms with regard to costs, a business plan and funding sources.

The original motion was withdrawn and, as a result of the discussion, V. Funderburk moved an amended motion as follows (changes from original in **bold**):

*“The EDC recommends the town give George Hernandez a **9**-month option on the property (providing site control for the nonprofit predevelopment funding grant process) in order to give Mr. Hernandez time to develop the necessary **development, design and business** plans, sketches, **detailed** cost estimates and identify **committed** funding sources for the nonprofit development of the property. The town could then evaluate progress at the end of the **9**-month period and either move to a longer term purchase option (allowing time for the development of the property without transferring title) or pursue alternative uses.”*

The motion was seconded by J. McCommas. **Yeas: Hettinger, Funderburk, Horrocks, McCommas. Nays: DeVivo. Motion passes.**

4. **Citizens & delegations comments/questions.** None.

5. **Adjourn @ 7:59 p.m. Motion by P. DeVivo, Seconded by R. Horrocks. Unanimous.**

Bill Hettinger, Chairman

The Economic Development Commission serves to support and promote existing businesses and to market and promote the town for the purpose of attracting new businesses. The Commission works with town officials, committees and commissions, and other agencies within the town by engaging in activities to enhance the image of the town as a place to live, work, and conduct business.

ATTACHMENT

EDC Notes on G. Hernandez Proposal

B. Hettinger:

Background

George Hernandez has submitted a very interesting idea for the development of Tin Tsin lot property.

The property developed in the way presented (pad space for small vendors; 6-8 parking spaces; trail access connection from Main St. to Riverside Drive) could be an improvement to the existing site; an asset to the town; a source of economic development as successful vendors move from pad space to storefronts; and would continue to provide needed parking for nearby merchants.

However as presented to the EDC, the proposal is simply an idea for the use of the property. The proposal does not include any specifics such as sketches of the property, cost estimates, identification of project funding, business plan, or development plan.

George Hernandez was the only respondent to the RFP on the property. No commercial developers responded and it's unlikely that a developer will purchase the property and construct a large new building given the costs of construction and number of existing vacant properties.

Recommendation

The proposal provides an interesting idea for the development of the property, this development could have positive economic development results for the town, and the EDC would like to see Mr. Hernandez given the time to develop this idea into a development plan.

Suggested Motion

"The EDC recommends the town give George Hernandez a 6-month option on the property (providing site control for the nonprofit predevelopment funding grant process) in order to give Mr. Hernandez time to develop the necessary plans, sketches, cost estimates and identify funding sources for the nonprofit development of the property. The town could then evaluate progress at the end of the 6-month period and either move to a longer term purchase option (allowing time for the development of the property without transferring title) or pursue alternative uses."

J McCommas:

My thoughts

I started out the last meeting intent on voting the proposal down. However I come to the conclusion that whatever reservations I had about the feasibility of the proposed project, now is not the time to pull the plug. I think we should give George Hernandez the opportunity to pull this together. There are no other hot prospects for the property right now.

As Mr. Hernandez said repeatedly at the meeting, what was requested by the town was a concept idea and that is what he has right now. I wanted to know his exact funding sources etc. but realize now that is premature.

I wonder how easily once started we can pull the plug due to lack of activity? What if by August the only new development on the property is a portable hotdog stand? If significant progress is not accomplished soon, I want the property back in the town's hands.

How easily can we revert control back to the town?

Would that decision be up to the Town Council, Town Manager or the Economic Development Director? I personally am good with giving the Town Manager with consultation with his staff this authority. They are the experts in these things.

I don't want to wait the full 24 months if the project does not get off the ground within the first year.

I can't come up with a reason why the Town Council would want an opinion by the Planning and Zoning Commission. Does the property need to be rezoned or something? I don't see them as having a role with this decision.

One thing I don't like with the proposal is the seasonal nature of it.

P. DeVivo

I am sharing my input on George's idea. I felt at the last meeting we all agreed George's idea is something we like. Collaboration was a word used throughout our meeting. Collaboration is very important for the larger picture of Willimantic. His park idea mimics the Whitewater Partnership which has been going on for 11 years and is very close to completion. We have a new group in town who would like to work on the Jillson square. Creating a seasonal venue in town with a fenced in area to include an amphitheater, farmers market, food trucks etc...

I feel that George's idea is more suited for the Jillson parcel, especially because it is seasonal.

Economic Development voted against a park on that lot per the thought that once it becomes a park it is no longer a viable piece of commercial property that could be developed. Creating a sure tax revenue for the town.

If we are considering donated this property to George I feel we are not doing our Historic downtown any favors. If the town is going to donate him a parcel of land lets help him acquire a pad site more suitable for his idea down in Jillson square. Especially because his idea is seasonal. This would be working in collaboration with other groups in town who are either well on their way or in process of in improving Willimantic.

George's idea is a good one, just not there.

R. Horrocks

Reasons why we should not support this proposal:

- It is not reasonable to plan a park/parking lot on an area in need of extensive excavation to make it level and usable.
- Cost of excavation was not part of the proposal
- The elevation drop-off to the road behind is approximately 15 feet; not 5 as reported
- As proposed the lot will be used seasonally only
- It appears the lot will be used as a location for food trucks only.
- Cost of storage containers (original proposal) was quoted as \$4,000 each; NY storage container company sets cost as \$1,6000. (\$685 delivery) Background information provided the commission was therefore not accurate.
- Cost of retrofitting the storage containers as shops was not provided. (business plan?)
- Combination park and parking lot is not workable. (cars circling people sitting in park benches?)
- Lack of a detailed budget and business plan.
- The town engineer and Planning and Zoning Commission will probably not approve the proposal if the lot is not level.
- Leveling the lot will increase the elevation drop-off to the road behind to approximately 25 feet.
- Suggesting that the joining this park proposal with the Whitewater Park project is not reasonable. (distance and lack of accessibility is not reasonable)
- Giving the lot to a non-profit for development eliminates the potential of selling the lot for a downtown building (residence/retail) and therefore tax revenue. We should offer this lot to the highest bidder/developer (for \$1.00)

There is the potential for developing the Tin-Sin lot as retail/residence and therefore as an economic engine.

Regarding this proposal; given the lack of detail and specificity particularly a budget, business plan, and a proposed funding source,

I cannot at this time recommend the town pursue this proposal as it was presented.