

Economic Development Commission

February 4, 2013

Windham Town Hall

Meeting Room

979 Main St., Willimantic, CT

Call to Order: the Chairman called the meeting to order at approximately 7:37 PM. Those present were Bill Hettinger-Chairman, Bob Horrocks, John McCommas, and Victor Funderburk. James Finger was present as staff.

Citizens & Delegation: No one was present in the audience to speak.

Minutes: The Chairman referred to meeting minutes of December 3, 2012, and explained that there wasn't a quorum for the January meeting. John McCommas moved to approve the December meeting minutes, and Bob Horrocks seconded – all approved.

New Business: Chamber promotional material on Tourism – Roger Adams of the Windham Region Chamber of Commerce apprised the Commission of the various efforts of the Chamber to encourage tourism in the Windham Region. He explained that the Chamber has been involved in this since the 1980's, and it's changed a lot over the years. Originally, it was through volunteers with the Northeast Visitor's District, but then went away for awhile when the Governor's budget dropped funding to a dollar a year. However, over the past few years, the State has begun to realize that there is a lot of money that comes into the State from visitors – whether it's a weekend fishing or camping trip; or if they are going to spend a week at the shore, or Casino – or take a few side trips, the economy is dependent on tourism.

In our part of the State – here in Willimantic, we recognize that the Mill museum or Railroad Museum is not going to attract people for a week's vacation. But if they come to Mystic, they may come from Europe or California – and they may stay for five days or stay in New England for a week or two. So our job is to get them up here for a day or two during the week, or a weekend if they can find places that are open. So now over the past four or five years, we have been working with the Eastern CT Tourism District – or 'Mystic Country' tourism District <http://mystic.org> - which covers all of eastern Connecticut.

We view tourism a little differently than Disney Land – or Orlando, we view tourism to attract any visitor for a day or a weekend – or any amount of time. This includes parents of university students while visiting the area identifying restaurants, orchards, or auto repair facilities - as well as the local museums and other attractions. We include a resident from Coventry coming to the Museum here or going to Eastern, getting a pizza or getting their car lubed – a visitor; they'll spend a little bit of time and money here.

He explained that the Chamber produces a couple of different brochures each year; the most obvious one is the Visitor's Guide that comes out in May or June. This is a 34 page vest pocket guide. The two Universities use it, as well as the Hospital, and General Cable when they are trying to recruit students, faculty, doctors, or professional staff. They have three glossy publications, and they have the Chronicle do the publication. They send out or deliver approximately 15,000 packets throughout the region, and exchange with forty visitor's centers in neighboring areas such as the Blackstone Valley in Rhode Island, and various locations in Massachusetts, and the shoreline down to Westerly and Pawcatuck.

Mr. Adams explained that there are a surprising number of jobs that are seasonal, and these may involve fishing, and camping facilities, or where summer employment opportunities exist for High School and College kids. Most visitors have very limited amount of money, so they are focused on short trips to affordable destinations. He added that Diane Nadeau of his office could answer the more detailed questions if needed.

Chairman Hettinger asked what drives this, and what can the Economic Development Commission could do to help.

Mr. Adams explained that nationally, we are lagging everyone. But part of what drives the short visits – such as the long weekends, is from people who can't afford to travel a longer distance and spend a week – so they are looking to go some place within 200 miles for a long weekend or a few days during the week.

Commissioner McCommas asserted that he felt that Governor Rell was justified in reducing the Tourism budget – although a dollar was probably extreme. He felt that we don't have a tourism economy. There may be places to go; but if we did, he didn't see the need to have the government promoting it.

Mr. Adams answered that a lot of small businesses – like farms, and non-profit museums – don't have a budget – or the skills for marketing their business/attraction. For most, they can just barely keep their doors open two or three days a week – or just a weekend. He explained that the Chamber has tried to work out an advertising schedule so that the small operators can afford to pay \$50 or something to get their information out. He added that the Chamber too has a small staff and doesn't have the ability to raise funds from other sources; but in order to attract the visitors, we need to have these small operators – such as the farms, and orchards or the really small gift shops to bring people in to see other things.

Commissioner Horrocks commented that for the Willimantic Victorian Neighborhood tour they had up to a thousand visitors; of which a quarter were from out of area. About fifty may be from out of State, and they may be visiting family, but they come to see things too; so we do attract some tourists.

Commissioner Funderburk commented that one of the problems is – how do you measure it? Who collects the information? He said that in his own experience working with the Theater Guild, he sometimes talks to people who come to see the play, and is frequently amazed that some people travel from other parts of the State to see the play or may be visiting family or other events. He mentioned one example of a man from New York who goes around to see small productions, and he loves to see the plays here. Sometimes people will come to visit a Bread & Breakfast Inn, and will stop by the theater; but for the most part they are not following any itinerary.

Mr. Adams replied that the Eastern CT Tourism District had hired a consultant a few years ago to go around and try to document visitor trips for anything like ice cream parlors to theater trips – and they did a random sampling of people to find out where they were going, how long they were staying, and an estimate of how much they were spending. So the Chamber has these statistics, and said the Diane Nadeau has them.

Commissioner Funderburk commented that one time they had four tour buses bring people to the Theater to see a play, but they didn't report this visit to anyone else. So maybe we should try to coordinate visitor trip information with the Chamber. Mr. Adams agreed that this would be a good thing to do, and added that Diane has been working with Windham Arts, and artisans at Swift-water to identify other visitors.

Chairman Hettinger asked if there was an opportunity to help with coordinating the collection of information. He also asked if there was a way to track on-line searches – like typing in a Google search for anything about Willimantic. Mr. Adams replied that you would likely come up with all of the Chamber’s promotional material that way.

The Chairman then asked about having a map with all of the local attractions – similar to what one could find in traveling to other places like Vermont. Mr. Adams was familiar with these, and said that the Last Green Valley <http://www.tlgv.org> puts them together. They share and collaborate with them covering about forty Towns in Eastern CT. They also cover the Blackstone Valley in R.I. and Mass. He said they try to collect information that has the widest appeal to the most people. They can’t take brochures from every little gift shop, because many of the general stores in the region don’t have enough space to display this information.

Commissioner Horrocks asked if there was a regional tourism bureau that meets periodically – and how often do they meet? Mr. Adams responded that it is the Eastern CT Tourism District, and they get together monthly; and they have a Northeastern committee that meets also. They have quarterly meetings where they do brochure swaps with other Agencies. Commissioner Horrocks asked who sits on this committee. Mr. Adams said that each Town (Mayor or First Selectman) appoints a representative, but he wasn’t sure who represented Windham (Bev York).

Chairman Hettinger asked if the lack of a Hotel is a factor. Mr. Adams responded that it’s difficult to tell, but it was definitely a factor before the Nathan Hale Inn came to Mansfield as the Best Western had a tough time filling the need. Mr. Adams explained that he was not the best one to advise on the marketing analysis that’s necessary to determine the need for a Hotel, but added that the Chamber thinks of it by region – not Town by Town.

The Chairman then asked about the Broker program. Mr. Adams explained that he received the information from Broker Savant. He said they charge \$40 a month, and they had explored it. But, the closest customer they had as an example was in Illinois. So the Chamber decided that they are not big enough to test out the market here. He mentioned that he had learned of Loop-Net from the Town Staff, and their service has similar information, and apparently is free. He continued, saying that some time ago where there were these Site selection magazines - none of the realtors wanted to give up their information because they were all afraid that someone would go around them and take the sale away from them; so they are reluctant to share information on a site they have worked on for a couple of years - to lose it. Also, he said that the Chamber used to get lots of calls from people looking for sites, but now he said they rarely get any calls because of the internet search capability.

The Chairman asked if he had heard that Amazon is planning on locating a distribution facility in the State of Connecticut – so where would he imagine they would go. Mr. Adams said the Governor probably already knows where they are going.

House of Dust – The Chairman explained that when the people involved first came to us, they were looking for money, but now they no longer need help. They are trying to have a private screening and are now planning to have it at the Capital Theater. He added that he hoped that whoever is doing this production could make a video clip similar to the one done for Thread City so that it could be put on the Town’s web site and could be viewed five years from now. Some discussion ensued. Commissioner Funderburk agreed that there may some opportunities in getting the word out for small production companies about the Town as a place to produce films, but cautioned that it’s important to get someone who is skilled at piecing it together. We have interesting buildings, and there are a lot of acting schools – and actors who could find work as extras; because

in a lot of films they need a lot of people quickly who have some experience in acting. The Chairman concurred that it would be good experience for someone working on sets, or writing and production; and then everyone needs to eat – so they could go to the local restaurants.

Rogers' Corporation – Environmental Solutions The Chairman informed the Commission that he received a notice of an informational meeting from the CT DEEP inviting comment on the proposed environmental solutions proposed and asked Mr. Finger the Business Liaison to elaborate. Mr. Finger explained that CT Law requires that for any commercial or industrial site, the owners must do an environmental assessment of their property and report any environmental hazards before it is sold. The Roger's site has some contamination, and they had to do some clean-up; but there is still some contamination remaining on site. In this case they have to record an Environmental Land Use restriction on the land records along with a map of the site identifying where contamination remains on-site, and that future owners are not to disturb the soil, or dig below a certain depth – or else they will need to perform another environmental assessment to address the risk of exposure to the public or employees at that time.

Commissioner Funderburk asked if there was a superfund site. Mr. Finger said he was not aware of that, but they are not going to remove all the contamination. The State and Federal EPA have begun to realize that allowing the owners of Brownfield sites to develop a management plan to leave material on-site is a way to deal with Brownfield sites, as they are scattered across the country, and it would be too costly to clean them all up – free of contamination. However if the contamination was moving towards a public water source or water body, or if it was an imminent threat to the public – the owner would be required to remove it. Some discussion ensued asking for clarification on the contamination, and Mr. Finger said he did not have the information, but that it would be presented later in the week at the DEEP hearing.

C-PACE PROGRAM – Mr. Finger gave an overview of the program provided by the Clean Energy finance Investment Fund (CEFIA). This not a grant but a new financing tool for Commercial and Industrial owners to pay for energy conservation measures as a benefit assessment along with their property taxes. Qualifying property owners can use the program to pay for upgrading their boilers or heating systems, ventilation, and air conditioning equipment, leaky windows doors, and insulation work. If they choose to sell the property, the benefit is transferable to the next owner.

The Chairman asked what the Commission needs to do, or is this just another tool in our tool chest.

Mr. Finger said that the Town is still working out the agreement with CEFIA, but he has been contacting property owners about the program to alert them to the advantages; and some have expressed interest. Once the agreement is signed, then we can actively market the program to our property owners who qualify.

Commissioner McCommas asked if the money was coming from the Town. Mr. Finger replied that it is not. The funding comes through private financial institutions working with CEFIA. The Town is only involved in collecting the benefit assessment and forwarding the money to CEFIA, and we are reimbursed for our administrative costs and expenses in collecting the money. Chairman Hettinger asked if the owners are required to do any analysis to prove that they are saving money as a result of the program. Mr. Finger explained that the property owners will meet with CEFIA to discuss their needs for energy upgrades, and these improvements will have to be evaluated in terms of the energy savings overall, and the life of the loan.

SOLARIZE CT - Mr. Finger apprised the Commission that the Town was informed that it was selected to participate in the pilot program for promoting the installation of solar panels on owner occupied homes. He added that Windham is partnering with Mansfield in this effort, and the goal is to market the program to interested property owners who qualify for solar panels and financing. Our hope is to get solar panels on at least twenty homes, and the more that participate, the lower the overall cost will be for all participants in the program. Participants are eligible for a State rebate of about one third of the cost, and a federal tax credit of 30%, thus bringing down the cost of the solar panel installation. The advantage to our society is that overall we could reduce our energy demand on the existing infrastructure, and the possibility of generating jobs.

Marketing / data efforts

The Chairman referred to a handout that Mr. Finger distributed to the Commission in the packets from CERC (CT Economic Resource Center) which provides demographic information, largest employers, etc. He then asked Mr. Finger what can get for free. Mr. Finger that he has been busy trying to respond to CERC to update them with current information about the Town. He said that he hasn't had the time to explore advantages with Loop-Net, but they may provide an opportunity to list sites; but he knew that some of our private property owners already take advantage of this service – both Lyman Realty and the Mills.

The Chairman agreed that we should check with the Realtors to see what they need us to do. Mr. Finger agreed that they probably know what the market is like – before we try to market any Town owned land for development as it may result in a surplus of property that will over-saturate the market. The Chairman also asked about free services from CERC. Mr. Finger agreed that this has been an on-going request and he hasn't had time to pursue it lately with all of the other work assigned from the various boards.

Commissioner Horrocks commented that some of the things he has read relate to nurturing existing businesses and the idea of providing an incubator for businesses that are trying to get started. Supposedly, the incubator provides secretarial support and copy services and a variety of other services to help the businesses succeed.

Commissioner Funderburk spoke about a recent conference he attended where he learned about a program in Waterbury through their Development Authority, but we don't have that here. He felt that we need to take this step to acquire a property where we take it over and get people to pitch in to promote the economic development that we've been talking about.

Mr. Finger offered a history of efforts in the past referring to the Windham/Willimantic Community Redevelopment Authority, as they had acquired quite a lot of property in the early to mid 1970's, to assemble them to promote a better tax base. They demolished a number of buildings like the flat iron building at Main and Union St. and that became Jillson Square, and they provided financing for other buildings – like the new WILI building, Potpouri and the Cinema. They also spent about \$16 million on putting all the utilities underground along Main St., and installed the brick pavers. This was when Willimantic was an entitlement community and received regular funding from the federal government. Since then, we were downgraded to the State's – Small Cities program, and the funding has steadily been cut over the years. The Redevelopment program was disbanded in 1998, and there were efforts to establish a private corporation to perform the same tasks, but for whatever reason they have not wanted to pursue this.

The Chairman suggested that we have this on the agenda for the next meeting.

Other reports/correspondence/announcements/activities

Chairman's Report – The Chairman reported that he had attended a meeting 'U-CONN – Tech Park - Informational where they explained its planned location at the north end of campus. Its about ten minutes from the highway (I-84); its about twenty minutes from here (Willimantic), and 30 minutes from the UTC Research center in Hartford. Their first building will be about 110,000 sq. ft. to be an incubator space and laboratory space – for short term uses. Then they have plans for six or seven other buildings around there for businesses to move to as they grow. The interesting thing is that the first building is a little bit smaller than the space that's available at the (Windham) Mills. They don't have any prospective leases yet, but in order to use the space, the business will need to have some affiliation with U-CONN. He asserted that this is a lot of industrial space not too far away from us – which could either be an advantage or disadvantage. It's not in Windham, but it has the potential to supply jobs to Windham residents. The second item of concern is the plan in Tolland along the Highway, and also for the area along route six in Mansfield; neither site is served by rail. In other news, the Chairman said he spoke with the Mansfield Town Manager about regional economic development and the desirability of having meetings with everyone to talk about what each Town is doing. Matt Hart loves our Downtown, and is interested in having these meetings, and liked the idea of touring each other's Towns so we will know what each other is doing and marketing our assets. There isn't any name for it yet, but maybe it could be a symposium – called the Eastern CT Economic Collaborative. Mr. Finger suggested having it at ECSU, or at the Mills. The Chairman concurred that we want to show off our Downtown.

Business calling program: the Chairman asked if any of the Commission members had been out to visit. Commissioner Horrocks said he has a business moving into his building downtown at 869 Main St.

Citizens & Delegation: No one was present in the audience to speak.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:27 PM

Respectfully submitted

James Finger

Planner/Business Liaison