

Economic Development Commission

March 2, 2015

Regular Meeting

Windham Town Hall

979 Main St., Willimantic, CT

Call to Order: Chairman Hettinger initially called the meeting to order at 7:00 - PM, but the official posted agenda indicated that the Commission would meet at 7:30 PM. Those present were Bill Hettinger-Chairman, Pam DeVivo, Robert Horrocks, John McCommas, and Victor Funderburk arrived late. Also in attendance was Cheryl Preston of 'A Cupcake for Later', and James Finger, as staff.

Review / Approval of Minutes - January 5, 2014. Commissioner McCommas moved to approve, and Commissioner DeVivo Seconded the motion, and all voted to approve the minutes as presented. Motion Carried.

Guest Speaker – Cheryl Preston of 'A Cupcake for Later' was invited to speak about her observations of conducting business in Town. The Chairman gave a brief overview of the Commission's purpose to invite guests to speak to the Commission to advise what the Town can do to help businesses succeed in Town; especially ones that have been here for a few years as hers. Ms. Preston informed the Commission that it will be three years on St. Patrick's Day - March 17th, that she opened her business here. Commissioner Horrocks asked what are we doing right/wrong. Ms. Preston opined that in spite of what people say, there is definitely a parking problem downtown. She asked about striping the parking spaces along the street, as it could increase the number of spaces available. Some discussion ensued, and Chairman gave his reasons for not wanting to park on the street. He said - the snow is a problem; hydrants, large trucks rumbling by, and he was concerned that someone may hit his car accidentally while they are driving - but it is a problem for people who want to park on the street - as there aren't any lines to show where to park. He mentioned that near the Willi-Brew parking lot, there is enough room to park two cars on the street, but frequently people park so that only one can park. Ms. Preston commented that there should be larger spaces for the buses to park, but now people park in the area where the buses are supposed to park; so the buses just stop in the street which causes the people behind them to wait and this causes some traffic congestion. She added that she's heard from a number of customers that they won't drive down Main St. because it's always congested. She added that there aren't enough Handicapped parking places; one is located across the street, but she didn't know where one was located on her side of the street - except down by the Radio Station. (Victor Funderburk arrived)

Ms. Preston commented on the unsightly appearance of buildings entering the Town from Liberty Bank on (west bound)- the old brick building across the street

from the Bank, and then the pink building on the other side (760 Main?) which is condemned - if they could just paint some flowers on the windows. Another idea - is to put a flea-market in the Nassiff's building at 745 Main St. ; especially on a Saturday - or a weekend - to bring people downtown - similar to Coventry. Also - maybe have a bigger Farmer's Market on Jillson Sq in the summer time with a flea market; but with more local people - not just mobile vendors from out of Town. The Farmers' that are at the Pavilion need to branch out a little - they don't need to be there; they could bring a pop-up tent, and be at Jillson. Another idea is to have snow sculptures where they're dumping all the snow. We need attractions to bring people into the Town - and the publicity. People need to hear good things that are happening in Willimantic instead of all the bad news. Chairman Hettinger commented that he remembered that someone from Channel 30 came to the Chocolate Fest a couple of years ago. Ms. Preston complained that we hardly had anyone from the media come to the Festival this year - and few people came. People generally don't remember these annual events if it's not brought to their attention; even if it's about the Theater, the Arts, or galleries - something every week to bring people downtown.

Commissioner Horrocks agreed, and said some people have commented that we have a need for a Downtown Coordinator to handle all of these events and promote them. He said that he thought that the Chocolate Fest was sponsored by the Lions Club, and put on by either Thread City Development or Willimantic Renaissance; so it's up to the individuals who are putting it on - and not any single organization. He explained that the Thread City Development is focused on the Downtown, and they plan to have a breakfast meeting soon with the Downtown Businesses. Ms. Preston said that when they first got started, they went to a few meetings of the Thread City Development, but after that, they didn't hear anything from them; and their web site wasn't updated. She said that she understood it is hard to maintain all of the information with volunteers; but there are a lot of organizations - all trying to do the same thing.

Commissioner Funderburk commented that generally people have to pay to join an organization to get their information posted on a regular basis.

Chairman Hettinger added that the Commission spearheaded the Business Signage program for the Downtown to draw attention to the business on side streets - that are not on Main St., so that customers could find them. Ms. Preston - countered that this is just for businesses on the side streets, but you don't have anything for the businesses on Main St.

Chairman Hettinger commented that he saw the problem is that people don't know where to go because we don't have maps - with the businesses identified. Typically, anywhere you go for vacation, they have these colored maps of the Town showing the businesses in an artsy way that makes it look interesting; and we used to have some, but they haven't been done in awhile.

The conversation digressed to a general consensus that the Town doesn't care about the Downtown Businesses. Commissioner Funderburk opined that you have to recognize that it (Downtown) is an asset - how do you get people to care? Commissioner DeVivo countered that there are a lot people that care - by just looking at all the different organizations involved. Commissioner Funderburk argued that it's difficult to get the Town Council to care about the Downtown, as he's seen other occasions where people care about an issue, and they'll pack the room - then the Council cares. Ms. Preston answered that a lot of the Businesses don't want to complain or sign a petition, because they're afraid that the Town will take retaliation against them. This happened when they complained about the condition of the Tin Tsin parking lot; and the next day, they took down the parking sign, and didn't plow it for a month.

New Business –

Old Business

Update on Council Directive on Town owned property at 804 Main Street.

Business Calling Program–None

Downtown Arts & Eats District–Commissioner Funderburk reported on meetings and the Arts and Eats commission's efforts to raise money for maps and brochures.

Business Signage Program underway –Mr. Finger reported that the Business Signs are up, but due to the length of some of the Business names, the size of the signs had to be larger than planned and the size of text had to be smaller.

Chairman's Report–Chairman Hettinger reported that

Other reports/correspondence/announcements –

Citizens & delegations comments/questions –

Adjournment - MOVED by to adjourn the meeting at 9:30p.m. Motion Carried.

Respectfully submitted by James Finger, Planner/Business Liaison