

MINUTES
Neighborhood Revitalization Zone Steering Committee
4-5 p.m. Thursday, May 24, 2012
ACCESS Agency 1315 Main St, Willimantic CT

Present: NRZ Steering Committee Chair Brenda Sullivan, Secretary John LaTour, Treasurer Roger Morin and Steering Committee members Kathy Dubay, Joel Meyers, Andrew Seeling, Pam Viens and Jeff Viens, Heather Meehan and John Walker; Windham Mills owner Tom Briggs, Windham Mills Property Manager Margaret Gledhill; Windham Director of Code Enforcement Matt Vertefeuille.

Absent: NRZ Steering Committee members Nancy Rivera, Ed Rivera, Rosita Vining, Bonnie Caulkins, Kerry Foust, Ron Haddad, Laura Smith.

1. Call to Order: 4:12 p.m.
2. Opportunity for the public to speak: (no members of the public not on the agenda spoke)
3. (Item moved up on agenda under Old Business, per vote of committee) Request for mini-grant of \$200.

Andrew Seeling presented a letter from Rev. Jaclyn S. Sheldon, the Priest for St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 220 Valley St., Willimantic, CT requesting a "mini-grant" of \$200 to support their Ministry in Motion programs. The church is located within the geographic boundaries of the NRZ.

The letter states:

"Our activities are designed to promote the well-being of individuals within the NRZ. A chart outlining the structure of this ministry is attached.

More specifically, we are requesting a \$200 general purpose mini-grant that will be used to support the various communities that are part of our "beacon of light." A typical use of the funds would be to buy food and supplies for our hospitality ministry, as well as materials for the new soup kitchen herb garden [a church project separate from the soup kitchen's programs]. As part of this request, we offer to report on the program's activities and progress at the end of the year. We would be very grateful for your support."

A motion was made by B. Sullivan and seconded by P. Viens to approve the request for a \$200 mini-grant.

Discussion followed, in which it was agreed that the committee needs to research and develop criteria for awarding mini-grants and loans. The NRZ is self-supporting and does not receive town funds. One model for criteria that was suggested is the Willimantic Rotary; the criteria are listed on its web site.

The motion to award the \$200 mini-grant was put to a vote and passed unanimously.

Treasurer R. Morin was directed to work with A. Seeling to get a check for \$200 from the NRZ account currently managed by the town. R. Morin also is to work with J. Meyers to reimburse

him for the NRZ's share of the fee for our Third Thursday Street Fest table shared with WALA (landlords association).

4. New Business:

Windham Mills owner Tom Briggs, who was invited to address the NRZ, made a presentation on development at the mills and the current request before the PZC to amend allowed uses to include rental housing.

His company TWB Properties (<http://www.twbpm.co>) bought the mill complex in December 2008 from the bank (the property was in bankruptcy) and spent more than \$2 million for renovations. While TWB did bring in new tenants, they also lost tenants because of the recession. However, the property remains a desirable site because of its beautiful granite buildings, its location near the Willimantic River, plenty of parking, and other amenities, T. Briggs said.

It is difficult to market the mills as a tech park or for office space or for light industrial because there isn't enough demand in the area – most requests for space have come from nonprofits, he said.

Their most recent success is leasing 13,000 square feet to Hampton Industries, but this is a company that was already in town and all of their manufacturing was sent elsewhere, he said.

T. Briggs said his company exhausted a lot of possible uses before considering residential use. He said he tried to interest UConn in leasing "incubator" (company start-up) space but UConn didn't follow through.

He said the Windham Town Council has expressed support for his proposal. He said "the world of planning is abuzz with mixed-use" development (i.e. Storrs Center in adjoining town of Mansfield); it creates a vital hub in the community, "it puts feet on the street."

He referred to a 2010 study by AKRF that recommended 400 units of high-end rental housing (i.e. targeted to empty-nesters, students and faculty, those who want to live closer to their jobs).

He said the mill complex is about 64 percent vacant and without the residential component, he doesn't see enough demand to lease the remaining space.

He said he will be presenting his proposal to the P&Z. He said there is about 130,000-150,000 square feet available. Given 15 percent for common areas, the average size unit would be 900 to 1,000 square feet – a mix of one-bedroom, two-bedroom and studio apartments.

J. Meyer noted that 350 Main Street and ArtSpace are not fully rented. He also asked T. Briggs what would stop him from selling the property to someone else to "cash in" and why should Windham Mills get a break?

T. Briggs responded, "Is it my goal to sell it? No. My goal is to see it through." He added that he bought the property at the height of the decline in property values.

M. Vertefeuille commented that T. Briggs paid all the back taxes on the property.

T. Briggs said the problem with rentals at 560 Main Street might be related to the shape of the building. He said they had to lower the rents, and that they had targeted some of the units for students but there wasn't enough demand. On the other hand, he said, they renovated that building with their own money and it is no longer an eyesore.

J. Meyer asked if T. Briggs will try to get tax credits. He replied that his company didn't get a tax abatement; the town gave the company fixed taxes. The property was assessed at 70 percent and the taxes probably would have gone down as a result of the revaluation, but will not because of the fixed taxes (for seven years). He added that the town also wanted certain parcels.

T. Briggs invited the NRZ Steering Committee to hold its June meeting at the mills and take a tour of the property.

J. Viens made a motion for the NRZ Chair to write a letter of support for the proposal to residential use at the mills; the motion was seconded by P. Viens. It was agreed that the proposal is compatible with the NRZ's strategic plan in terms of supporting economic development, upgrading properties, and providing housing within the zone. The motion passed unanimously.

5. Old Business: none

6. Approval of April 2012 minutes – tabled.

7. Report of NRZ Chair – tabled in order to adjourn by 5 p.m.

8. Future agenda items – J. Meyer asked for the NRZ Committee to discuss at the next meeting forming a subcommittee that includes himself and John Walker and Roger Morin to work on a means for the NRZ to transfer its funds to an independent account and develop an accounting system that meets legal requirements.

Members also suggested scheduling a discussion of how the NRZ could receive one or two percent of funds from any grant that requires NRZ support.

9. Treasurer's Report: Roger Morin reported no funds have been expended.

10. Additional opportunity for public comments – none.

11. Adjournment: 5 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by NRZ Steering Committee Chair Brenda Sullivan