

Economic Development Commission

May 6, 2013

Windham Town Hall

Meeting Room

979 Main St., Willimantic, CT

Call to Order: the Chairman called the meeting to order at approximately 7:33 PM. Those present were Bill Hettinger-Chairman, Bob Horrocks, John McCommas, Victor Funderburk. Also present was Jana Butts Roberson, Whitewater Partnership (WWP), and James Finger as staff.

Citizens & Delegations: None

Minutes: The Chairman referred to meeting minutes of March 3, 2013, and explained that there wasn't a quorum for the April meeting. Commissioner McCommas made a motion to approve the March minutes, and Commissioner Horrocks seconded the motion with a correction to the second paragraph under Old Business; change "town-owned" property to state-owned property. Motion Carried.

New Business:

4a. Jana Butts Roberson came before the board to report on the WWP's Riverfest which will take place on May 18, 2013. This very popular event includes a river float from the Eagleville Dam to Bridge Street in Willimantic. It will include a whitewater demonstration, food, entertainment, and activities for children. A giant ramp would be built down to the Willimantic River, down which kayakers would slide, and attempt to execute rolls and flips before they entered the water. The One Man Dam-a-thon - an event similar to walk-a-thon - gathered pledges for every kayak run made over the dam, by WWP's founder. Prior events have attracted visitors from New York and Massachusetts, so it has a large regional draw. This year's event has been advertised in the Northeast Paddlers Association's message board, and Thread City Development's Events Calendar. There are many sponsors from: Eastern CT State University Foundation, Willimantic Waste, Kerri's Art Gallery, Willimantic Food Co-op, East-Conn, Bagel One, True Value Home Center, and Design Center East, among others.

Commissioner Funderburk asked if this event was held last year. Ms. Roberson reported that it was not held last year. Commissioner Horrocks asked about other events that WWP holds. The Big Dam Party is a fundraising event held in the late winter or early spring. Commissioner Funderburk asked about charging for kayaking lessons as a fundraiser. Ms. Roberson replied that this was a good idea. Commissioner Funderburk suggested marketing the WWP and other recreational assets and resources. We should organize the various groups in the area and use our recreational opportunities and draw people to town.

Ms. Roberson said that WWP has been working mostly on the environmental clean-up of the site on Bridge Street. The CT Dept. of Economic & Community Development (DECD) has given many funds toward this effort, including a grant to remove the underground fuel tanks that were on the property. She added that WWP is also applying to the EPA for a grant to do environmental clean-up of old mill site and the old gas station. Another step is creating a park and WWP is working Willimantic Wildlife Habitat to eliminate invasive plants species, manage non-native species and plant native species. WWP is a group of volunteers that work with Thread City Development and Willimantic River Alliance among other groups and welcomes help and suggestions.

Commissioner Funderburk asked about the “season” for whitewater kayaking or canoeing. Ms. Roberson said there is no ‘season’; they just need water in the river. While whitewater kayakers can go out when there is a little ice on the river, the best time for kayaking is after a rain event, and early spring to late fall.

Commissioner Horrocks asked if WWP has a newsletter or membership list. Ms. Roberson explained that they do not have a newsletter but, the membership list is currently being updated.

Commissioner Hettinger asked how the Commission could help WWP make the river a destination for kayakers; for example can town funds be allocated for designation of take-outs? Ms. Roberson replied that not a lot of funds are required for that. Commissioner Hettinger asked: what does the WWP have; what does WWP need; and how can the commission help?

Commissioner Funderburk pointed out that what the WWP is creating a sense of place in town, and Ms. Roberson agreed. Commissioners Hettinger and Funderburk asked about the Riverfest and particularly the signage need for designated put-in and take-out sites. Mr. Roberson explained that a small area had been cleared out years ago that could be used as a take-out site, but the area would require some work to make it usable again.

More discussion ensued on the signage needed for the project. Ms. Roberson said the WWP is in full agreement on the need for signs.

Commissioner Funderburk asked if this could be a tourist draw. Ms. Roberson said that cost estimates are in the millions of dollars to make the Whitewater site into a Park. Ms. Roberson explained that the three things that WWP would like to accomplish are: 1.) a whitewater kayaking park; 2.) an urban waterfront park for everyone, and 3.) a trail component. Commissioner Funderburk said that this could be an economic engine - and creating a sense of place is essential.

Commissioner Hettinger describes the Whitewater Park in Missoula, Montana, and suggests that the possibility for such a destination is here in Willimantic.

Commissioner Hettinger thanked Ms. Roberson for her presentation.

Chairman Hettinger said he wanted to skip to item 4c on the agenda, as he had asked Ms. Roberson to stay for that agenda item also.

4c. Water and Economic Development discussion: Commissioner Hettinger says that issue is U-Conn’s need for water. Three proposals are up for discussion:

1. Take Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) water from the west side of Hartford or,
2. Take water from the CT Water Company (CWC) in Tolland or,
3. Take water from Willimantic Water Works (WWW) in Mansfield Hollow and pump it up the hill to U-Conn.

One of the economic advantages that the Town of Windham has - is its water; and water is essential for economic development. He asked if the commission should do something to educate the community to advise everyone of the implications of sending our water to U-Conn? Chairman Hettinger said he had discussed the issue with CT Representative Susan Johnson who suggested that maybe we could regionalize tax revenue from the property so it could be shared.

Commissioner Hettinger asked Ms. Roberson to speak of water in the area and U-Conn’s Water Supply Plan. She explained the Environmental Impact Evaluation (EIE) for U-Conn water supply -

a report that examines all the different alternatives and their capability of delivering water to the university. The executive summary was distributed to EDC members before tonight's meeting.

The report examined seven different scenarios, but only the three mentioned earlier, were determined to be viable and capable of delivering the desired quantities of water. The potential impact of the CT-Water Co. and WWW alternatives are similar and not anticipated to cause significant adverse environmental impact that could not be mitigated. The MDC plan is also not believed to cause significant adverse environmental impact but, would result in fewer land use conflicts. Commissioner Hettinger points out that if the WWW alternative is chosen the result is that we would be "selling" our water for nothing. Diversion of water from Mansfield Hollow would also divert businesses from Windham. Commissioner Funderburk pointed out that Windham has a growing population and water is a resource that is needed for the future of our population and for economic development.

Ms. Roberson said she would find out what group will make the final decision on this issue and will send an email to Mr. Finger with that information.

Commissioner McCommas suggested a public information session to raise public awareness. Mr. Finger said that in most cases, public information sessions are often not well attended. He asked - if an information session is scheduled, who would be invited; and when and where would such session be held.

The Chairman asserted that the Environmental impact of diverting water has been studied, but he asserted that the impact to our economic development also has to be considered. What can this commission do about this issue? Do we have the capacity to divert water to the university and still have enough for ourselves? There are major concerns about drought and the potential impact to economic development if water is diverted from WWW and Mansfield Hollow.

Ms. Roberson described the water basins in the state and how the options to take water from MDC or CT-WC would be the least desirable, environmentally.

After much further discussion of the impact of WWW water being diverted to the university – the impact on economic development and natural resources, Commissioner McCommas suggested that we should have a public information meeting on this issue; and he opined that there must be some people who know more about the issue. Commissioner Horrocks agreed that a public information sharing session should be held; adding that we have to heighten the awareness of this issue.

So, Commissioner McCommas made a motion that the EDC investigate the possibility of having a public informational session regarding the town's water supply and its linkage to economic development Commissioner Horrocks seconded the motion, and all voted in favor. Chairman Hettinger said he would investigate any action the Town Council has taken and report back to Mr. Finger.

4b. Tourism – Mr. Finger said tourism was discussed at the last meeting. Commissioner Hettinger mentioned the issue of creating a take-out on town property and getting the National River Corridor to list it on their map. He then reminded the board of a brochure swap scheduled to take place the next day - 5/7/13, 8:00 a.m. at East-Conn.

OLD BUSINESS: Commissioner Hettinger asked to return to the matter of the signage in town, listing businesses. Mr. Finger received an estimate of the cost of the signs that was much higher than had been expected. He also talked to people in the town of Killingly for their opinion of the signs that they have already installed; they were not encouraging. He explained that Killingly has had some problems over which businesses have signs and which do not. Also when a business that has

a sign goes out of business, the town has to remove the sign and figure out what to do with it. All in all, Killingly said it had been an expense for the town – and they do not get reimbursed. He added that the Windham Public Works department is not in favor of the project and will only do it if the town council requires them to do so. The cost of the sign was discussed further. This commission was expecting the signs to cost approximately \$75; however, the estimate that the Public Works Department prepared was approximately \$400. The design of the sign was also discussed. After more discussion of the cost and design of the signs, Chairman Hettinger said the next step is to talk with Thread City Development to see if they will contact businesses in town to determine interest in these directional signs.

Business calling program – Commissioner Horrocks reported that he has a new tenant - Lady Chatelaine's - a new chocolate and Victorian antiques business. The business owners are pleased with the chocolate business and are looking forward to the Third Thursday festivals. They have a lot of ideas on marketing, for instance, musicians on the sidewalk in the warm weather.

Chairman's Report - May 14, 2013 Chairman Hettinger reported an upcoming informational meeting that the EPA and DEEP is going to hold at the Windham Mills #4, at 6:00 p.m. providing information on what will be done at the Mill #4 site.

Also, Cedarwoods was featured in the Wall Street Journal that did not present Willimantic favorably. Chairman Hettinger said that he sent a letter to the Wall Street Journal and gave them our position. He also mentioned a Wall Street Journal article about Binghamton, NY - a town facing a lot of the same issues as Willimantic. Those similarities were discussed and Chairman Hettinger will send copies of both articles to commissioners.

Mr. Finger reported that he had uncovered some of his old files about downtown revitalization is any commissioner is interested in looking through them for information that may still be relevant – Commissioner Horrocks took them to review. Also, he explained that the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for Eastern CT was to be discussed at the last meeting in April - but, there was no quorum. Mr. Finger said he prepared a couple of recommendations to be added to the report on the commission's behalf. These were: the Northridge Drive connector between Sears and Home Depot, and secondly - the Windham Center Business Park that would require the construction of a road - east side of the railroad tracks - between Plains Road and Route 203. There was discussion of the benefits of the road in South Windham, and the need to eliminate traffic in South Windham.

February Minutes: Commissioner Horrocks made a motion to approve the minutes of the February meeting, Seconded by Commissioner Funderburk. Motion Carried.

Adjournment – As there was no other business, Chairman Hettinger adjourned the meeting at 10:03 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by:

Janet Laukaitis, and

James Finger, Planner/Business Liaison - revised