

MINUTES
Neighborhood Revitalization Zone Steering Committee
Special Meeting
4-5 p.m. Thursday, July 26, 2012
Windham Mills Complex

1. Call to Order: 4:20 p.m.

Present: NRZ Steering Committee Chair Brenda Sullivan, Secretary John LaTour, Treasurer Roger Morin and Steering Committee members Heather Meehan, Andrew Seeling, Pam Viens and Jeff Viens.

Absent: NRZ Steering Committee members Bonnie Caulkins, Kathy Dubay, Kerry Foust, Jack Fulton, Ron Haddad, Joel Meyers, Ed Rivera, Nancy Rivera, Laura Smith, Rosita Vining, John Walker.

2. Opportunity for public to speak:

Windham Town Planner James Finger addressed members B. Sullivan, J. LaTour, R. Morin and P. Viens before the NRZ meeting was officially called to order, because we were waiting for additional members and he had to leave.

He gave a brief update on the Main Street Investment Fund grant application process – the grants apply to downtown properties, preferably on Main Street – and recent information sessions.

He said there is an extremely tight deadline to meet the requirements of the application, including having a project already in progress, with architectural designs, proof of the ability to fulfill the fund-match required by the grant, and receipts for funds already expended.

The deadline for the town to submit an application for qualifying projects is the end of September.

He said he's been approached by about a dozen property owners, but isn't sure if all are eligible. One unanswered question is whether a project is eligible if no funds have been expended at the time of application.

He noted two scheduled upcoming presentations on the Main Street Investment Fund: Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2012 at ECSU – he wasn't sure of the location, suggested it may be the Tipton Room; and the Economic Development Commission meeting on Monday, Aug. 6 (check meeting time). He said a third meeting may be held on Saturday, Aug. 18.

3. New Business:

a. There was further discussion, with members J. Viens and H. Meehan present, about the July 25, 2012 Main Street Investment Fund informational meeting.

J. Viens said towns can apply for up to \$500,000. He said the town wants to spend approximately \$349,000 on a sidewalk project. That leaves about \$151,000 for downtown/Main Street property owners. Other projects that have been discussed included rehab'ing the fountain at Memorial Park.

There was discussion about the NRZ Steering Committee submitting a letter of support for the grant application, including the proposed sidewalk project because improvements to the area – including repairing windows and doors and creating landscaping – enhance economic development efforts and help support property values. J. Viens noted that some of the properties that might be eligible are at the “gateway” (at the north end of Willimantic, and within the NRZ) so improvements also would enhance Willimantic’s image.

J. LaTour noted that he knew of at least four towns that were also asking for funds for a sidewalk project, indicating that Windham might have a better chance at the grant if the town’s projects are different.

Because the NRZ doesn’t meeting again until Aug. 23, and the town likely would need a letter of support by mid-August, a motion was made by J. Viens, seconded by R. Morin, to authorize the NRZ Chair to draft a letter after conferring with Town Planner J. Finger about the deadline. The motion passed unanimously.

Discussion followed about the short timeline between being presented with information about a project/grant and requesting for a letter of support, without a lot of information and/or time for the committee to review it. B. Sullivan suggested that if the committee has concerns, it could decline to write a letter of support, and explain that there was insufficient information and/or time for discussion. J. Viens suggested that in the case of the Main Street Investment Fund, the NRZ Steering Committee has enough information to decide whether it fits within the scope of the NRZ Strategic Plan. B. Sullivan suggested that in future, however, the NRZ can decline to write a letter of support if not comfortable with the information provided with the request.

b. Criteria for awarding mini-grants and related topics, added to agenda under Old Business.

4. Old Business:

a. Report on Third Thursday – H. Meehan said the table has been moved to a new location, next to Habitat for Humanity, and that it’s actually a better location. J. Viens said several people stopped at the table to ask about both WALA (the rental property association) and the NRZ.

b. Acceptance of Minutes – J. Viens moved, and H. Meehan seconded a motion to approve the minutes for the May 24, 2012 NRZ Steering Committee Meeting minutes. The motion passed unanimously. A vote on the June 28, 2012 minutes was tabled until the Aug. 23 meeting.

c. Update on Taylor Court Community Garden – B. Sullivan said a new volunteer, who is recovering from a traumatic brain injury and who was told he wouldn’t be able to function normally again, has in fact proved that diagnosis wrong and is volunteering at the garden as part of his own rehab plans – and has proved to be a huge help. She said he has worked at least two days a week and has helped keep the garden’s exterior tidy, as well as weeding the garden beds, and more.

d. (added item) Criteria for awarding “mini-grants” and loans from the NRZ’s funds.

There was discussion about establishing a formalized list of criteria for determining whether a project/request for funds fits within the NRZ Strategic Plan and the committee’s objectives.

The committee also discussed the need for legal advice on how to document a no-interest loan, or a loan to a nonprofit that would allow for forgiving 50 percent of the loan, and other ways of distributing the NRZ's funds to appropriate projects. One suggestion was to contact George Hernandez from WRCC for guidance.

J. Viens also suggested that the NRZ should consider writing its own grant applications to fund particular projects.

This led to continued discussion about the need to get the process going to apply for legal nonprofit status and possible expenditure of funds for that process, as well as the need to move funds from the town to a different situation and to ensure that it is done legally and with accountability.

The NRZ Chair was asked to contact other NRZ Committee's, such as Hartford's and Norwich's, to ask who writes their grants and how successful have they been.

There was discussion about having a list of projects and associated details/documentation ready for when grants become available, considering how often these grants have very tight application deadlines.

J. Viens and H. Meehan volunteered to act as a subcommittee of the NRZ Housing Subcommittee (headed by P. Viens) and create a list of properties/sites within the NRZ that could be considered for projects initiated by the NRZ. J. LaTour said he has technical information about housing grants and the application process that he could share with the Viens/Meehan subcommittee.

5. Report of the NRZ Chair, re: setting a deadline for updating the NRZ Strategic Plan and submitting to OPM:

Tabled in light of the number of members absent because of summer vacations.

6. Treasurer's report:

R. Morin reported no funds have been expended since the last meeting and that the balance is \$3,427.69.

B. Sullivan also reported that Karen Williams in the Finance Department now has a copy of the May 24, 2012 minutes which documents the NRZ vote to award St. Paul's Episcopal Church a \$200 mini-grant for its outreach programs. She said K. Williams said the next "check cutting" date is Aug. 9. At that time, the check, made out to the church, will be mailed to a church vestry member (A. Seeling).

B. Sullivan also reported that she submitted her receipt to be reimbursed for the NRZ banner – ordered via Vistaprint (online) – and showed the banner to the committee. The cost was \$26.40.

Willimantic Neighborhood Revitalization Zone



What can the NRZ do for your neighborhood, your business, your school, your community program? Let's talk!

NRZWillimantic@yahoo.com and on Facebook at NRZ

She also reported that she wrote a memo to K. Williams authorizing her to reimburse Joel Meyers for the NRZ half of the Third Thursday Street Fest fee (half of \$90), for the table shared with WALA, but also directed R. Morin to obtain a receipt from J. Meyers to give to K. Williams so a check can be issued.

H. Meehan also reminded B. Sullivan that Wal-Mart Manager Roger Noll needs a letter from the NRZ and/or Natchaug School Principal Mr. Jeff Wihbey asking for funds (discussed at previous NRZ meetings) for recess sports equipment. H. Meehan said when Mr. Noll receives this letter, he will give the school a Wal-Mart gift card so the school can buy what's needed.

7. Opportunity to bring up new business or agenda items for the Aug. 23, 2012 meeting.

To be added:

1. Report from J. Viens and H. Meehan about potential projects, with list of properties within the NRZ (see discussion, above).
2. Discussion about NRZ possibly writing letter of protest addressed to appropriate individuals/agencies (i.e. Gov. Malloy, State Legislators, the Windham Town Council, etc.) concerning the extension(s) of deadline granted to Windham for conducting a mandated revaluation and the resulting impact to property owners who are being taxed at a rate from when real estate values were much higher (2005).

3. An opportunity to talk with Windham Superintendent of Schools Ortiz (and possibly Special Master Steven Adamowski) about new initiatives in the schools, and changes related to opening the new magnet school. To be added to the top of the agenda.

8. Second opportunity for public comments. (None.)

9. Adjournment : H. Meehan voted to adjourn, seconded by R. Morin – passed unanimously – at 4:51 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Brenda Sullivan, Willimantic-Natchaug NRZ Steering Committee Chair