

Economic Development Commission

July 7, 2014

Windham Town Hall

979 Main St., Willimantic, CT

Call to Order: the Chairman called the meeting to order at approximately 7:35 PM. Those present were Bill Hettinger, Bob Horrocks, Ryan Jacobs, John McCommas and Victor Funderburk. Also Janet Laukaitis, and James Finger were present as staff.

Citizens& delegations comments/questions - None

Review/approval of Minutes -Commissioner Horrocks made a motion to approve the minutes of June 3, 2014, and Commissioner McCommas seconded the motion; all voted in favor.

Downtown Business Council – Startup Funding

New Business - The Chairman noted that nothing was listed for this item - but James Finger reported that he submitted the documentation on the request to expand the Enterprise Zone to the State (DECD), and they said the Commissioner will sign it.

Old Business

Commissioner Horrocks reported on meeting with a local business and with Thread City, and said that no one was interested in moving forward with this idea.

- **Business Signage – Implementation Steps** - The Chairman referred to several forms that were in the packet. Commission members discussed the steps for getting the program underway, and James Finger reported that the Traffic Authority will also need to approve the final form, and requests for signage. Commissioner Horrocks said that it was his hope that if we had a few businesses agreed to have signs up, then other businesses would see them and want them too. Commissioner Horrocks asked if we are offering this to all Businesses in Town - or just the Downtown Businesses. After brief discussion, it was agreed to test out the program in the Downtown area first - and to revise the form; James will review with Commissioner Horrocks on the final details before the letter is sent out.

- Community Vision - 'Arts & Eats District' - Chairman Hettinger said that he saw an article in the newspaper about this. Commissioner Funderburk apprised the Commission of his efforts to enlist businesses in promoting the Downtown area as an 'Arts & Eats District', and that the group is very active, and will have their fifth meeting in the next week. He explained that the plan is to have artists display their artwork in some of the storefronts downtown - such as the Nathan Hale, Liberty Tax service, Jamaica-me-Crazy, the Music Store at 746 Main, and the Savings Institute. Commissioner Horrocks added that they have six businesses, and twelve artists. It's up to the artists to contact the businesses about allowing them to display their artwork - as well as any equipment they may need to display their artwork. The artwork can stay up as long as the Business is willing. Commissioner Funderburk said we have several artists in Town, and their artwork is scattered all over Town in different places. He added that they want people to be able to walk downtown and enjoy the art; and they discovered that there are eleven murals in Town - and they'd like to get more murals in Town. He said they are working with Thread City on doing promotional advertising to let people know calendar events and where to see the art on display. Also - in conferring with people in other areas, he said he's learned that in order to promote the arts, we have to have information on social media.
- Next discussion turned to the blighting effect of deteriorating or vacant buildings and that the Town should not tolerate this - the Town should not be passive about this. The Chairman commented that the complaint - why doesn't the Town do something about the problem - begs the question of what can the Town do about it. The Town doesn't own the buildings; we can cite them and fine them, but he asked - what incentives do we have to encourage owners - or investors to fix up the buildings (our tax system seems to reward neglect). We have to walk a fine line between - 'we don't like this (condition of poorly maintained or vacant buildings), and - (attitude of property owners) - it's my building - leave me alone. The only solutions we have are fines and liens that will take about five years to actually get. How do we approach the owners with some sugar to get them to agree to do something. More discussion ensued, and Ryan

Jacobs offered to meet with property owners and talk with them. The Chairman mentioned that in Europe - they place a mural across the face of the building. Maybe we should approach the owners and tell them we have someone who would like to paint a mural on their building or display artwork that may make the building more attractive to tenants.

- Next conversation turned to having outdoor concerts and how to promote this as a place-making function. Mention was made of an old vaudeville theater that its in an upper floor of a downtown building - which may not meet the fire code; also possibly putting a band-shell on Jillson square. Commissioner Funderburk commented that any successful concert needs to have food and drink - but not necessarily at a bar; and the main concern is noise for neighbors. Much discussion ensued.
- Walk-ability and bike tour - James Finger reported that a handful of Town Officials (two PZC members, two EDC members, and Health Director) met with Mark Fenton - tour leader for the windshield survey of the Town's assets. Those in attendance looked at the RR Museum site where we hope to build out the Hop River - Willimantic to Airline Greenway Trail. In addition, the group looked at the Lebanon entryway to the trail - the Ash St area - and ultimately the North Windham portion of the Trail. Mr. Fenton had commented that this greenway should be used as an active walking trail for everyone near it, as it could be an important asset for those who live and walk along this trail. The group also toured Windham Center area, the new Magnet School site on Tuckie, and the North Windham Shopping areas. Mr. Fenton commented that the Town needs to think about incorporating sidewalks into our infrastructure, and promote biking by dedicating part of the roadway specifically for bicycles. Commissioners expressed disappointment that there was no written report with recommendations on what we should do. The Chairman commented that one of the main points was to promote usage of the Trail for everyday use, and that more people using the trail will increase safety because of the increase in activity; - more discussion ensued.
- Downtown Business Council - the Chairman asked if anything came of this. Commissioner Horrocks - said he had presented the idea to Thread City Development, but no one went along with getting a meeting together.

James Finger said he had a check cut as requested, but the Finance Department needed the documentation that the event was held in June before the end of the Fiscal Year.

- Zoning changes for manufacturing districts - James Finger explained that the EDC looked at the proposal in March and made recommendations, and he also made recommendations to the Planning & Zoning Commission. After considering the recommendations, the PZC modified its proposal for changing the regulations and had a few meetings with property owners who were going to be affected by the changes to hear their concerns - and further revisions were made to accommodate them. He mentioned the area in Windham Center that is currently used for gravel excavation and that the long term plan is to allow - and promote an industrial park to be built between Plains Road and Route 203 along the RR line. Mr. Finger explained that he sent out over 100 letters to property owners, and contacted several by e-mail to make sure that they knew what was proposed. In all, the PZC only heard from a handful of property owners, and most of their concerns were addressed. The Chairman asked if the changes improve anything for the business owners. Mr. Finger said that the changes generally clarify what is permitted, and streamline the process to allow more things to happen through staff review and approval which could result in a savings in time and money. One big change was changing the Golf Course from largely residential and some commercial classification - to a Manufacturing Zone and made the Golf Course a permitted use. Ryan Jacobs asked if there was a way to see the properties on-line. James - explained that one can see most properties on the WINCOG Geographic information site at: <http://www.wincog-gis.org/> until the end of the year, and then we will be on the Southeastern CT Council of Governments GIS: <http://www.mapgeo.com/SCCOGCT/>
- 2013 Annual Report - Mr. Finger handed out a copy of the EDC's annual report that is supposed to be presented to the Town Council. Commissioner Funderburk made a motion to accept the annual report, and Commissioner Horrocks seconded the motion; all voted in favor.
- Business calling program - see Arts & Eats report.

- Chairman's report - The Chairman commented on the request to the Town Council to establish a 'Tent City'. He said he had heard about another Town that had a shower on a bus to allow the homeless to take a shower. He added that this may be too costly for the Town, but maybe it could be part of a regional homeless solution strategy. Some discussion ensued, and all agreed that having a facility where people could take a shower is an important human services need, and could help them get cleaned up to go for a job interview.
- Grants - Commissioner Funderburk asked about the two Arts related grants. Mr. Finger replied that ECSU got their grant, and the Town is participating in that one. The ACCESS Agency did not get funding for their proposal for the CIRD Grant. But, he added that we participated in a grant application with Windham Regional Community Council for a Farmer's Market Grant application to the USDA to look at improving marketing of our existing Farmer's Market, and planning for its future.
- **Adjournment** - MOVED by Commissioner McCommas and SECONDED by Commissioner Horrocks to adjourn the meeting at 9:50 p.m. Motion Carried.

Respectfully submitted by James Finger, Planner/Business Liaison