

Economic Development Commission

Regular Meeting minutes

August 6, 2012

Windham Town Hall

Meeting Room

979 Main St., Willimantic, CT

Call to Order- the Chairman called the meeting to order at approximately 7:30 PM. Those present were Bill Hettinger-Chairman, Bob Horrocks, and John McCommas. James Finger - Business Liaison was present as staff.

The Chairman reviewed the Statutes relating to the Main Street Investment Fund (MSIF) grant application. He added that James Finger - Business Liaison, and Andrew Gutt from Thread City attended the Information sessions that the State held – and he asked if anyone else had- a few hands rose from Jeff Viens, Roberta Dwyer, and Jean deSmet.

The Chairman provided background for the discussion referring to a request from the Town Council for the EDC to look at this Main Street Investment Fund program, and their primary push was for some sort of façade program. As many may know, we've been looking for some funding to do this for a number of years.

There's another push to use some of the money to make improvements to Town properties in some way.

The bill was approved last October, and the State had released the guidelines in early June. They had an informational session in late July and early August, and applications are due on September 28th; and the (Town) Council needs to have it for their meeting on September 18th. So we're sitting here with a five or six week time frame; so we have a limited time to work on it. One of the things the grant requires is for a Commercial Center Town Plan, so we've looked at lots of Town Center Plans; but none of them really call them a Commercial Center Plan. He said he had spoken with John Simeone of CT Main Street Center to get some ideas, and he indicated conceptually that as long as it met certain criteria as outlined in the act – which is: of Public Act 11-1, section 78 & 79. So at the last EDC meeting in June, we decided that we didn't have enough time to do a new plan, so we've decided to submit a variety of different plans in support of this project. For our plan, the lead one we should look at the Community Revitalization Strategy that the Board of Selectmen had adopted in 2009. The two main priorities it talks about are the Downtown streetscape and a façade improvement program – as well as some small business incubation programs that we'd like to do. It's also mentioned in the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD), but we've been discouraged about submitting the POCD because the reaction is that these are not always implemented. We also have some other plans, like the Thread City Development Plan in 2006. There's also a Downtown Advisory Committee Plan in 2005, and probably more in the background.

The Chairman added that as some may know the complexities of dealing with the State on these grants, this grant requires the property owners to be lined up with a commitment for at least 50% of their projects. So they will not provide a pool of money unless they know who those people are, and what they're going to do. There's five million in the grant pool this year, and we're eligible for up to \$500,000; but we're not sure what's available next year.

The Chairman then asked the Business Liaison if there was anything else we should mention. Mr. Finger mentioned that there was a community meeting of interested parties sponsored by Thread City Development, at the Spanish American Merchants Association office, and that they had discussed some possible projects that the Town should consider. Some of the people who attended that meeting were Jean deSmet (Willimantic Renaissance), Roberta Dwyer (North Eastern Economic Alliance), Representative Johnson, and Jeffrey Viens (Windham Area Landlords Association, and Neighborhood Revitalization Zone). It was a good productive session, and we came up with about five million dollars worth of projects.

The Chairman then cautioned that one of the requirements of the grant is that it must be (shovel) ready for development. He then asked if there was a report on the CT Main Street Center informational session held the previous week (July 30, 31, & Aug. 1st). He was particularly interested in how they would consider the Town's sidewalk replacement project from Bridge Street down to Friendly's along Main St. – which was about \$650,000. He mentioned that the EDC had sent some letters about this program out to Downtown building owners in May; and then sent subsequent information out by e-mail to contacts with Thread City, and the Chamber of Commerce to a variety of other building owners to see how much interest there would be, and how much money they would take. He said that he had gotten a lot of good ideas that Andrew (Gutt of Thread City Development) had set up a couple of weeks ago at SAMA's office.

Andrew Gutt of Thread City Development gave an overview of the informational session he attended in Hartford sponsored by the CT Main St. Center, and added that he spoke with John Simone to follow up on the fine points. He gave an overview of what he learned some from Dimple Desai of OPM, and some from John Simone: The Town must solicit its vision from the Community, and there has to be evidence of that, and he felt that the Windham Community Revitalization Strategy exhibited that; mention of the plan for the City Center development within the Plan of Conservation and Development in combination with Design Guidelines can qualify for a commercial as long as it shows broad input; OPM wants to be very flexible as to what constitutes a plan. These façade funds cannot be used to correct deferred maintenance. Streetscape projects – do not need to be shovel ready; in other words you don't necessarily need to have shovel ready construction documents waiting and ready to go. What they really want, is to see these turn around really quickly. Everything would need to be ready to start by the 2013 summer construction season. OPM is sensitive to time constraints – such as working with DOT, because they know that coordinating with them takes time. The award date depends on the amount of applications received, and the competitiveness of these; so it could be a few weeks or months. Ineligible expenses are design and engineering fees, and Town employees doing work is not considered – in-kind service because they are just doing their jobs.

He asserted that the Town's Plan of Conservation and Development shows a streetscape plan for the Downtown section. He argued that it doesn't need to be shovel ready now, but for the 2013 Construction season. Property owners can go back to as early as October 27, 2011 to seek reimbursement of expenses.

Jean deSmet commented next and explained that the Town doesn't need a match for a Town project. Andrew Gutt interjected, that this is correct, but at the session he attended that if the Town included an in-kind match, it may move the application forward in ranking. It's not really written into the grant, and he said he felt that OPM is kind of loose on how they're going to do this (ranking). When we asked who would be ranking the applications, the answer was: Dimple (Desai of OPM).

The Chairman asked about a question that we had sent in on scoring, and he asked if this had been addressed at the informational meeting. Jean and Andrew both said – No. Jean added that she didn't think they had anything ready yet. They have their application, and when they get those in, they'll develop a scoring sheet later.

No match is required for Municipal projects, but the State will not give any credit for Town employee in-kind match. The scoring hasn't been developed yet.

The Chairman then commented that as he saw it, he felt that the more innovative project will probably be more attractive than a run-of-the-mill project. He asked if there was a sense of what other Towns were there and what they were doing.

(someone) responded that Coventry, and Danielson is applying. There was an article in the Chronicle about Coventry's sidewalk project, and they felt that they would meet the requirements, and that they have Town Employees working on it – Danielson is also working on their Main St.

John McCommas asked what is involved with a streetscape?

Jean deSmet replied that it's more than pavement and sidewalks. A Civil Engineer can design that. But it needs to include some landscaping and bump outs, cross walks, with benches and garbage cans, and electric car generating stations – a bike path. All of this makes it more than just ...

Chairman Hettinger finished stating – more than just putting down blacktop with a sidewalk next to it – it's designed and it's attractive.

Jean deSmet continued – that the Street Fest attracts a lot of musicians who have projected art work onto buildings. So how can we incorporate infrastructure into the Willimantic Downtown that would allow those types of events to take place more easily? That would be a creative way to invite the students from Eastern (ECSU) – or for creative people from anywhere to come here. If there are speakers there and ready; (electrical) outlets available – these are elements that we could build into the streetscape; but we don't have this plan for this round.

Chairman Hettinger agreed, and added that this would be something creative, and the CRS (Community Revitalization Strategy) does talk about that all the way up with sidewalks – not

only along Main St., but up and down the hill to Main St.; it also talks about electric car charging stations, bike paths, garbage cans, and better lighting. That's kind of what we've presented as our design for what we're doing here. The next question is what can we do in the context of what we can accomplish by next spring. The Town has sidewalks ready to go; and there's probably some other stuff that is approvable that could be ready by next spring; and then there's the façade piece – which is what the Town Council and this Commission would like to do...

Jeff Viens commented that it would be good to talk about the business signage for side streets to promote businesses that you can't find. Chairman said the Commission was promoting signage for side streets.

Jeff said he thought the Main St. project was going all the way down to Stop & Shop.

Chairman Hettinger confirmed that according to the CRS it is Main St., and Valley St. all the way down to Stop & Shop or Friendly's is what we've designated.

Roberta commented that she had heard that this area down by Friendly's on up to the Downtown has the highest number of viable businesses that are open and may be interested in taking some of the façade money and matching their own to do more work down there. She then asked Mr. Finger about the property where the Royal Buffett, and Cinquo de Mayo is located, and doing their façade already. So in looking at that area, we said that we're (Town) doing sidewalks down there – it may be another area to target for façade work.

Roberta and Jeff – said that the area from the Mills to Friendly's is the most visible area for businesses that could benefit from the façade improvements - it's the gateway.

We need trees for shade

Andrew asserted that he thought that simply replacing the existing sidewalks with new concrete is just maintenance – unless it had some brickwork in it.

Chairman said he had a conversation with John Simeone of CT Main Street program, who advised that we work with what we have (like the Downtown) instead of trying to do something new.

Jeff Viens said that you need to get out of the Downtown and expand it to other parts of Main St. Jean deSmet that it would be good to include other property owners; maybe try to include Shiller's (Sewing Store); and the gateway improvements could include fencing along the cemetery.

Representative Susan Johnson advised that the Town work with the businesses. The Town needs to work on projects that will expand business opportunities and generate more property improvements. This could include energy improvements, or other incidental improvements.

Bill Hettinger- Maybe if we added lighting in the dark alleyways, and extra street lights, it would improve the sense of safety. Maybe if the Town's sidewalk project included some landscaping bump outs at Memorial park, or some pads for food vendor carts. Maybe we could fix the

fountain, or have some dedicated art space for people to display their artwork or sculpture. There's a need to have some speakers and lighting. Andrew Gutt mentioned more trash cans. Roberta Dwyer agreed with more lighting.

The Business Liaison explained that non-permanent amenities are not eligible for funding.

Jean deSmet said that we need to come up with a plan for the streetscapes and facades.

Chairman Hettinger said in looking at the CRS, it identifies priority streets and includes Valley St., and he agreed that the priority should be on façade money for the gateways – identifying the old Hurley's Men's store, and other businesses along route 32.

For Town owned property, we need to promote art-work, bus shelters, and possibly extending the field at Memorial Park.

Andrew Gutt suggested extending the field as well as:

Setting up a student HUB;

Contact Sheftel about QVCC;

Check ECSU for their revised Master Plans and mention Hospital;

Check Brand Rex – General Cable;

Check Gregs Pizza;

Check ECSU Foundation.

More discussion ensued but no further action was taken.

The meeting adjourned at 6:29 PM

Respectfully submitted

James Finger

Planner/Business Liaison