



Town of Westport
Planning and Zoning Commission
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Planning and Zoning Commission's
Economic Growth Subcommittee
Wednesday, February 10, 2021 12:00pm
Meeting Minutes

Audio of the meeting can be heard by accessing the archived meeting footage posted on the Town's website [here](#):

In Attendance at the Remote Meeting

Planning and Zoning Commissioners:

Neil Cohn, Subcommittee Chair and P&Z Commission Alternate
Danielle Dobin, Subcommittee Member and P&Z Commission Chairman
Michael Cammeyer, Subcommittee Member and P&Z Commission Secretary
Paul Lebowitz, P&Z Commission Vice Chairman

Other Elected or Appointed Officials:

Melissa Kane, 3rd Selectman
Matthew Mandell, RTM District 1 Member & Westport/Weston Chamber of Commerce Executive Director
Harris Falk, RTM District 2 Member
Jimmy Izzo, RTM District 3 Member
Sal Liccione, RTM District 9 Member
Bernicestine McLeod Baily, TEAM Westport Secretary
Harold Baily, TEAM Westport Chair
Pippa Bell Ader, Sustainable Westport Advisory Team
Randy Herbertson, Re-Open Westport Advisory Team, Downtown Merchants Association President, and Trustee for the Westport Library
Jonathan Steinberg, State Representative, District 136

Public in Attendance

William Achilles, consultant to Westport businesses and property owners
David Briggs, Westport resident
Ross Burkhardt, Westport resident
Ron Corwin, Westport resident
Jennifer Johnson, Westport resident
Dick and Ellie Lowenstein, Westport residents
Lawrence Weisman, Westport resident

Town Staff Members:

Mary Young, Planning and Zoning Director
Peter Ratkiewich, Public Works Director

Meeting Start: 12:05pm

1. Introduction by Chairman Neil Cohn of the mission and goals of the subcommittee.

Neil Cohn thanked all the meeting attendees for their interest and in anticipation of their participation and then introduced himself and the subcommittee, its' members (Danielle Dobin, Michael Cammeyer, and Cathy Walsh), and summarized the subcommittee's Mission Statement (reproduced below in its' entirety):

Mission Statement:

To work in collaboration with Westport's community and commercial stakeholders in order to support a more vibrant downtown and the growth of healthy commercial activity.

Objectives:

- *To proactively engage with local businesses, commercial property owners, and the public and foster community-wide collaboration and goodwill.*
- *To advance efforts towards a more vibrant downtown that will continue to attract both local and out-of-town visitors to shop, play, dine downtown.*
- *To support positive recreational events, exciting experiential retail and diverse dining options to serve Westport's growing population and their sustainable and active lifestyles.*
- *To maintain property values and tax revenues by encouraging commercial occupancy – both retail and office space – to better serve our community's changing needs.*
- *To cooperate with the Affordable Housing Subcommittee to benefit from potential synergies.*
- *To identify and seek out available recovery aid resources and funding that may be available from government programs and philanthropic organizations.*

2. Relationship of the subcommittee to existing committees who share similar goals.

Mr. Cohn invited Danielle Dobin to describe the intended synergy between this subcommittee and other like-minded groups who share similar goals to promote economic growth. Ms. Dobin offered that this subcommittee, like the P&Z's Affordable Housing Subcommittee, is intended to provide a forum for brainstorming, sharing ideas, and planning.

3. Frequency of meetings, activities envisioned and process for introduction / prioritization.

Mr. Cohn shared no formal schedule has been created as of yet, and encouraged anyone with ideas to share them in or out of a formal subcommittee meeting by corresponding with the Commission at PandZ@westportct.gov. At the conclusion of the meeting Mr. Cohn clarified to keep the momentum that's building he envisions scheduling monthly subcommittee meetings.

4. Initiatives to be considered:

a. **Extend COVID-19 Outdoor Activity Regulations scheduled to expire on 3/31/21.**

Mr. Cohn invited Mary Young to speak on this item and offered his support to continue the existing provisions enabling restaurants to offer al fresco dining. Ms. Young described the P&Z Commission was proactive in July of 2020 and authored and adopted local zoning regulations in concert with Governor Lamont's Executive Order #7MM. The Commission, pursuant to Text Amendment #783 "Continuation of Temporary Outdoor Dining in Response to COVID-19," extended until March 31, 2021 those same flexible zoning standards granted under EO #7MM thus enabling restaurants to plan for their holiday season and manage their resources without risk of not knowing if/when EO #7MM would be extended by the Governor. As March 31, 2021 is quickly approaching P&Z staff recommends another text amendment to further extend these outdoor dining provisions.

Ms. Young described the process going forward includes:

- Work Session review by the full P&Z Commission as soon as Feb. 11, 2021; and
- Formalizing the idea into a Text Amendment to be scheduled for review at a future public hearing assuming a majority of the P&Z Commission is in support.

Danielle Dobin offered that she too supports this effort, and encouraged Matt Mandell who is on top of this and who works with the restaurants daily, and/or the First Selectman's Westport Re-Open Advisory Team should communicate to the P&Z Commission if there is any additional provisions that should be incorporated into the next text amendment to support local restaurants.

Matt Mandell confirmed an extension should be granted and suggested an extension until the end of the year should be considered. He also recommended that permanent zoning changes be considered after evaluating lessons learned.

Sal Liccione identified Main Street restaurants (upper and lower Main) should be included in any relief provided.

Mr. Cohn recognized Jimmy Izzo. Mr. Izzo highlighted the need for Westport to think forward and make Westport a destination that will result in supporting local restaurants. He cited successful music events held during 2020 that supported local businesses.

Randy Herbertson shared he agrees with the other speakers, and he confirmed the Downtown Merchants Association is working with the DPW Director to once again allow restaurants to make use of Church Lane for outdoor dining and more.

Mr. Cohn recognized Jennifer Johnson. Ms. Johnson spoke favorably for what was known Pre-COVID-19 as "Pop Up Dining," administered by the Selectman's Office under an Ordinance adopted by the RTM (that allows restaurants to temporarily make use of public parking spaces to locate dining tables and chairs). She observed it does a wonderful job of creating a "sense of place," and if offered on Main Street it would be responsive to Mr. Liccione's concerns.

Ms. Young echoed Ms. Johnson's recommendations and shared those RTM members in attendance at the meeting might consider revising the existing ordinance to expand it so more streets, and more restaurants are included, and more opportunities are available.

Ms. Dobin summarized there appears to be universal support from meeting attendees for the Planning and Zoning Commission to adopt regulations to further continue the temporary outdoor dining, and for the RTM to consider expanding the "Pop-Up" dining Ordinance. She observed that whereas the "Pop-Up" dining allows use of municipally-owned parking spaces, the temporary Outdoor Dining regulations allows use of parking spaces located on private property where the restaurant is located, and also included parking spaces located on neighboring private property subject to the property owner's consent; and this flexibility has made a significant impact to help restaurants. She recommended all stakeholders should be included in continued dialogue on this topic.

Mr. Cohn recognized Bill Achilles. Mr. Achilles offered that his restaurant clients are satisfied with the temporary outdoor dining regulations and is unaware of any additional relief needed in response to Ms. Dobin's inquiry earlier.

Mr. Cohn recognized Dick Lowenstein. Mr. Lowenstein encouraged the P&Z's subcommittee should coordinate with the RTM's P&Z Committee as well as the RTM's Long Range Planning Committee when discussing topics such as economic growth in absence of a formal economic development or director.

Mr. Cohn confirmed "yes" a collaborative planning effort is intended, the subcommittee was intentionally described as economic growth, not development, and anyone who is not present today should be invited to future meetings.

Ms. Dobin offered to follow up with a phone call to Mr. Lowenstein after the meeting.

b. Remove zoning obstacles to enable Bus Stop Structures to locate on the Post Road.

Mr. Cohn introduced the topic on how to make public transportation more effective and more hospitable. He asked Melissa Kane to expand. Ms. Kane emphasized the connection between environmental sustainability and equity and economic growth in Westport. She shared for a long time a lot of folks have discussed how to make Westport more inviting for people to work here. There should be a place and provisions made for people that are safe who travel to Westport for work by bus. She described the topic is very complex as there is involvement with the State, local funding bodies, and others. She confirmed removing zoning obstacles now is appropriate so when the Town is ready to create bus shelters, there are no unanticipated roadblocks. She described four (4) sites will be selected for bus stops, and it is not yet determined whether it will be on public or private property.

Mr. Cohn recognized Ms. Dobin who described Next Steps in the approval process for adopting a text amendment. In this case, an idea such as the one being discussed if approved by a majority of the subcommittee members (which this one is), would be scheduled for discussion at a future Work Session of the full Planning and Zoning Commission. If a majority of the full P&Z Commission sees merit, the idea is converted into a formal Text Amendment and scheduled for a future public hearing allowing a forum for all interested parties to debate.

Mr. Cohn recognized Larry Weisman. Mr. Weisman described he had drafted a text amendment to address bus shelters in the zoning regulations, but was pleasantly surprised to find after consulting with the P&Z Director there may be a more simple approach to which he concurs that if adopted would exempt bus shelters from the Structure definition in Sec. 5-2 thereby eliminating the need for bus shelters to have to adhere to setback requirements. Without this zoning change, variances would be needed to locate bus shelters on public or private property near the street where they are needed.

Mr. Cohn recognized Harold Baily. Mr. Baily confirmed the complexity and number of agencies involved is extraordinary just to put up a bus shelter. If we want to expand economic growth in the Town, we need to facilitate having more people in the equation he shared. We need a wider range of people who can work in Town. Providing bus shelters is the first step to enabling folks to use public transportation to get to work in Westport. He described the next issue to resolve is once folks get into Westport, how do they use public transportation to get around Town, to the businesses and other destinations. From a Team Westport point of view, we are very excited to support this effort.

Mr. Liccione offered on behalf of himself and his constituents he too supports this effort.

Ms. Dobin suggested Mr. Cohn get a sense from the other Commissioners in the meeting if they support this effort and recommended at the next meeting, he work with Mary Young to have a draft amendment available for discussion.

Mr. Cohn recognized Michael Cammeyer. Mr. Cammeyer identified he'd like to hear what other folks have to say.

Mr. Cohn recognized Paul Lebowitz. Mr. Lebowitz offered he doesn't see any reason why ideas like bus shelters cannot move forward and get support from the full Commission.

Mr. Lebowitz added he looks forward to focusing on efforts to bring vitality to downtown. He referenced the "For Lease" signs proliferating the downtown. He's not convinced the only problem is the high rents. He applauded Mr. Cohn for providing a listening post for ideas on increasing the downtown vitality, he concurs with other speakers who suggested Main Street be given the same consideration as Church Lane, and he acknowledged he would be remiss if he didn't extend this same attention to the Saugatuck business area.

Mr. Cohn recognized Jennifer Johnson. Ms. Johnson recommended a goal going forward would be to evaluate how other communities require private developers to provide bus shelters at their expense if/when developing or redeveloping property of a certain size.

Mr. Cohn recognized Dick Lowenstein. Mr. Lowenstein reminded meeting attendees that funding the Police Departments, Fire Departments and Transit District is integral to supporting public transportation for the workforce.

Mr. Cohn recognized David Briggs to find out what's on his mind before he must leave the meeting. Mr. Briggs shared his perspective that now is the time for change. The pandemic like the great depression, requires creativity like the New Deal, and a mindset to ask questions. Things that have been prohibited or perceived as not viable in the past, should be reconsidered. I concur with Mr. Izzo that Westport should be considered a destination; like Newport. I'd like to get teenagers to downtown Westport. I think attractions should also include revisiting how Longshore is used. Why can't there be a skating rink on Veteran's Green? Why not jet ski rentals at Compo?

On the topic of restaurants, I'm aware there are many who would like to offer alcohol sales to-go. These are examples of new ideas that could have value and should be considered. I can help create content and use traditional and social media to get the word out.

Mr. Cohn recognized Michael Cammeyer. Mr. Cammeyer offered he likes the idea of bringing sports downtown. He concurred with Mr. Briggs it's time to be creative.

Mr. Cohn confirmed at the conclusion of this agenda item discussion, before the next subcommittee meeting, he will work with Mary Young to have a draft text amendment available for discussion that will remove any zoning obstacles to enabling bus shelters.

c. Redevelopment of Parker Harding.

Mr. Cohn described the Town owns great riverfront property and it would be great to make this space more inviting.

Mr. Cohn recognized Danielle Dobin. Ms. Dobin shared the Board of Finance has improvements included in their Capital Forecast. She also shared the Downtown Plan Implementation Committee made strides and have achieved many of their goals and now might be a good time to prioritize improvements to Parker Harding. She described that since this is Town property it is up to the First Selectman to determine if/how Town property will be improved.

Mr. Cohn recognized Randy Herbertson. Mr. Herbertson described private and public investment has been invested in the downtown area. The downtown however continues to need and rely upon diners and shoppers to patronize downtown businesses. He admitted Parking Harding needs work, and he's grateful for what work has been done thus far, knowing more will follow.

Mr. Cohn recognized Peter Ratkiewich. Mr. Ratkiewich described now is the time to plan as implementation will take years to get the funding and stakeholder buy-in. To that end he shared he is working on improving surrounding Town parking lots so they are in good shape and can be used if/when Parker Harding is under redevelopment so there is adequate parking available to support local businesses, their patrons, and their employees. He referenced parking lots include both north and south of the Post Road.

Mr. Cohn recognized Jonathan Steinberg. Mr. Steinberg offered he's glad there is a forum such as what this subcommittee is providing. Some ideas may not be new, but that doesn't mean they don't have value. He emphasized now is the time for planning. He encouraged that focus should include property south of the Post Road continuing to the Senior Center.

Mr. Cohn recognized Matthew Mandell. Mr. Mandell recalled when he and former P&Z Director Laurence Bradley invited a professional planner to offer his perspective, and that planner encouraged store fronts should be facing Parker Harding, opening them up to the riverfront. The road should be pulled away from the water. Mr. Mandell thanked Mr. Ratkiewich to prepare the surrounding parking lots in anticipation of redeveloping Parker Harding.

Mr. Cohn recognized Danielle Dobin. She described she intends to share with the First Selectman all the positive energy and enthusiasm that resulted from today's meeting, as her Next Step, and encouraged Mr. Cohn to keep the momentum going, and not to get frustrated with what can feel to be a glacial pace for progress.

5. Outline future discussion to implement recommendations from the 2015 Downtown Master Plan.

Mr. Cohn recognizing the time constraints encourage meeting attendees to familiarize themselves with the Downtown Master Plan if they are unfamiliar with it. The document is available to view [here](#):

Mr. Cohn recognized Melissa Kane. Ms. Kane offered her thanks for the safety and infrastructure projects that have been completed thus far. She shared the plan focused on forging connections and looking at the spaces in between and making the downtown more inviting for both pedestrians and motorists, and once made safe how do we fill it with interesting things to do as described by Mr. Briggs. She looks forward to offering any assistance to the subcommittee's efforts.

6. Receive public comments on items to be discussed at future meetings.

Mr. Cohn recognized Bill Achilles. Mr. Achilles requested at a future meeting the subcommittee discuss how to re-purpose 2nd floor office space that has become less desirable. Current zoning regulations are restrictive and should be reconsidered as vacancies don't help anyone.

Ms. Dobin concurred with Mr. Achilles that it may be appropriate to revisit why and whether there remain valid reasons to maintain current zoning regulations that could stifle economic growth.

Mr. Mandell concurred with Ms. Dobin. He referenced as an example the changes made by the P&Z Commission under the leadership of Ron Corwin to eliminate the 1,500' separation rule between patron bars. Once eliminated, restaurants and vitality resulted particularly in Saugatuck. Alternatively, some regulations still make sense; such as the limit on building 10,000 SF in size to maintain opportunities for small business to thrive.

Mr. Cohn concluded the meeting by thanking all who made time and who offered contributions and commentary and reminded meeting attendees to send their ideas to Pandz@westportct.gov.

Meeting concluded: 1:20pm

Respectfully Submitted by Mary Young, Planning and Zoning Director, February 12, 2021