

**APPROVED
SPECIAL MEETING
September 28, 2016**

The Wethersfield Town Council held a meeting on September 28, 2016 at 5:45 p.m. in the Council Chambers of the Town Hall.

Present: Councilors Bello, Hemmann [left at 6:15] Hurley, Latina, Martino, Rell, Spinella, Deputy Mayor Barry and Mayor Montinieri.

Also present: Peter Gillespie, Town Planner; Jeff Bridges, Town Manager and Dolores Sassano, Town Clerk.

Chairperson Montinieri called the meeting to order and asked Councilor Latina to lead the Council in the pledge.

He then asked her to start the meeting she called for: “the purposes of an equity investment to assist the Town of Wethersfield and Lexington partners with the development of a 120 unit apartment project on a blighted, redevelopment parcel” on the Silas Deane Highway and related matters.

Councilor Latina stated she wanted to know the process of an item on the bond agenda the state had issued.

Chairperson Montinieri stated that the proposal for the bond money came from Capital Region Development Authority. The town is not involved at this time. There is no reason to go to Council until something is definite. The Lexington Partners wanted it confidential until they knew the outcome of the upcoming vote on Friday [September 30, 2016].

Town Planner Peter Gillespie explained that this property is 1178 Silas Deane Highway, known as the Fun Zone. The location has been vacant for over 20 years, a lot of interest in it, but nothing happened. This currently is proposed as a mixed use development so there will be a commercial aspect to it as well as an apartment multi-family component to it. We have a special set of regulations that was adopted in 2008 which we refer to our mixed use zoning regulations. Those regulations require a number of permit reviews. When the plans are developed it is called a pre-application review meeting with the Planning and Zoning Commission. The purpose of that meeting is to provide the developer and his designers with some early feedback on the general idea of what they are proposing, to identify any problem areas, to suggest design changes and to give the developer some feedback as to whether it is a project that the community would welcome. That is a mandatory requirement of this particular type of development and normally consists of a conceptual site plan and a basic series of elevation drawings as to what the building will look like. Because this specific site is located in a flood zone it is regulated by the Wetlands Commission and they have the option of requiring a public hearing or not depending upon the level of significance that the project might impact the site which is the second review. Then there a Design Review Advisory Commission and they will be looking closely at the exterior and treatments on the building, what the building will look like, landscaping and those kinds of elements. There is a required review but does not require a public hearing but will require public

meetings. The final approval will be by the Planning and Zoning Commission through what they refer to as a special use permit. The special use permit also requires a public hearing. The public hearing process requires notification to neighbors and public advertising of the project several weeks before the hearing is held. So there are at least four public reviews of a project like this one that will have to be held before the permits can be issued. After that process is done then they will have to work closely with the Building Department, Fire Marshal and Code officials to make sure it meets all the codes.

Councilor Latina asked if this project has gone through the pre-application review.

Mr. Gillespie responded that they met in early August with the developer and his site engineer to discuss what the process would be. At that point he had preliminary ideas as to how the project would be developed. We provided him with a general overview of what the permit process would be but we are not in receipt of any plans. He has not submitted any applications yet to this office. His initial and primary concern was the financing of the project and until then he wasn't in a position yet to talk about permit schedules. We did give him our meeting schedule for this year as well as for next year so that he could get an idea on which meetings he might target.

Councilor Latina asked if anybody from the State has contacted the town.

Mr. Gillespie replied no as did Mr. Bridges.

Councilor Hemmann commented off topic, that they had been waiting for drainage bond money to be leveraged so they can apply what they have sitting in an account. Just recently there have been questions from DEEP about increasing the budget. It seems coincidental because they have been asking quarterly about it.

In looking at the agenda, the Capital Region Development Authority (CRDA) is making the request so does that change what Mr. Gillespie is talking about at all.

Mayor Montinieri responded that he did not believe so. The reason that CRDA is involved is that the State's assessment of the project requirements and the five million bonding is more expedient through their office because they work more exclusively with residential property development. That was the suggestion of OPM [Office of Policy & Management] as opposed to another mechanism. The developer has met with them to talk about that timeline. His [Chairperson Montinieri] estimation would be that Lexington will overlap those two.

Councilor Rell also wanted to ask about this process; on how this item got on the bond commission agenda. Having worked in the legislature for a number of years, he knows bond agendas and the requests. There are items that date back to the 1980s. How quickly has this been on the bond commission's radar?

Mayor Montinieri replied the discussion with OPM has been almost a year.

Councilor Rell inquired whether this was a priority of OPM for the Town or Lexington Partners.

Mayor Montinieri stated he would put the priority in the order of Senator Fonfara and himself pushing hard for it so that Wethersfield might prevail, then OPM and Lexington last. It was very challenging without that help. There is some good fortune that Lexington has some other projects with the state.

Mayor Montinieri commented that Senator Fonfara and he had attended several of the meetings. Senator Fonfara had a sense of how the process worked and he shared his view from the development point for the town. With respect to the reference to Town of Wethersfield in the bond, the town is not being represented by the commission or playing any role. The funds are impacting the economic development in Wethersfield. There won't be anybody from Wethersfield participating. It is heavily invested by private money so they are representing it as roughly almost 30 million. CRDA has an equity investment arrangement so the state will actually have equity in the property. They will not be able to sell it for 15 years. It is not a grant. It is a source of funds that is earmarked that way so the state will get its equity investment on it.

Councilor Rell commented that this reflective of what's going on in economy right now. Today the legislative approved 220 million dollars but the Governor hasn't signed it yet to keep Sikorski jobs here which is reminisce of what people call typical corporate welfare. Developers came in and said they need to find some financial backing and if it's not the town then that State to get them over that hump which is what we are seeing around the state in the economy. We are ranked last in job growth 40, 45 & 50th in some categories and then we have to look to the State or to Lexington Partners to get a project approved. He hopes to see in the future to change the way we are doing things in state government and how things are handled in the state budget so that businesses are not looking to towns with tax abatements or to the state for grant money.

Deputy Mayor Barry asked if he was against this particular project.

Councilor Rell stated no, not at all. In this economy when you have to look for state backing to keep a business in, we need to look for other ways to finding funding to guarantee a development.

Deputy Mayor Barry commented that this particular development is an incredible positive potential for the Town and taxpayers if it all shakes out. This is exciting news for the future of Wethersfield.

Councilor Rell commented he just wanted to see that our economy gets better so that we don't have to use State money as leverage.

Mayor Montinieri replied that he agreed with that concern. Over the last few years there has been a range of assistance that the town has looked into. For example D&D never asked for any money. They knew what they had to put in so our participation was limited. And Urgent Care was looking in West Hartford but we offered them some façade money which we had left so that got them here. Weight Watchers and Ashley Furniture we were trying to get them seed money but then we ran into costs there. He agrees to the point that Councilor Rell made but it is unfortunate that economically these projects won't happen exactly on their own without some

help. We all have a different philosophy on that and that's fine but as long as there are funds out there we should participate.

At 6:15 Councilor Hemmann left.

Mayor Montinieri stated that Connecticut needs to get more competitive because money is going out the door to Massachusetts and we can't compete with them; for example, the GE proposal. If the state were truly able to say that economic development doesn't naturally happen without a lot of participation from the state then in the interim we need to fight for these places. Weight Watchers, Fun Zone and Ridge Road are blighted properties which could have huge potential economic impact on the grand list and taxes and those are the ones that need the help because they just won't happen otherwise.

Councilor Latina asked if Lexington Partners reached out to him specifically and inquired as to why Mr. Bridges and Mr. Gillespie were not at the table in discussions.

Mayor Montinieri indicated that he reached out to them and he didn't want to waste their time if it might not happen so it was more "cheerleading" and also confidentially was an issue and to keep it low key. This is a concept only right now but the bond is a huge hurdle.

Councilor Latina asked if he thought, after Friday, will he come back to us in the form of "hey, what can Wethersfield do for us" attitude?

Mayor Montinieri replied no. He thought that there could be an expectation that will come after he gets approval, in advance of pre-design, to make sure that he is doing some education through Council and the public. Other than the public hearings he will want to build excitement about it because he is going to have some challenges with design and wetlands and he knows he needs leadership and support of the community.

Councilor Hurley asked if this was not a TIF (Tax Increment Financing) project.

Town Manager Bridges stated no, not that he was aware of it. A TIF project normally requires local community and we have not been contacted by anyone.

Councilor Hurley stated he was talking with a resident on Ridge Road who said he had ran into the Mayor and that he told him that there was a Blue Back Square like property going in where the Fun Zone was and that it was a done deal the way he said it. He indicated he would have him come to the next town council meeting. He was a little taken back that there was secrecy around the project but that residents knew and then it brought back a de ja vu of Weight Watchers. It was said to keep it confidential but if you didn't tell the Council members but you told the public.

Mayor Montinieri replied that was never said by him. He asked Councilor Hurley if he had been advised that this was coming up on Council.

Councilor Hurley responded no, he was not advised that this was coming to Council. He was advised that you were looking at something and trying to maybe getting a bond for 14 million dollars. He didn't know about this. He had a small discussion with Mr. Bridges about the Mayor potentially going after 14 million dollars. Nothing came to him that said okay now it is a done deal and that it is at the State level already which brings and that brings back the Weight Watchers. So when this guy said done deal to him that brought back that election ploy.

Mayor Montinieri indicated they don't agree with that characterization that it was an election ploy but he did understand the dynamic. He continues to labor all the time to get projects done in Wethersfield. We had a purchase agreement between buyer and seller one week before the election and we had definite money in play and confirmed in writing but he didn't consider that a done deal. The reason he has been a little cautious on this is because of that commentary by him so he is trying to a little longer on this one. He is just trying to get these projects done and it is not easy. He knows the truth and he respectfully disagree with that assessment. He truly believes that he and Councilor Hurley agree that what's best for Wethersfield is in both their hearts. He stated that we all have misses and he will take the responsibility for any of the hits but he doesn't hear all about any of the successes.

Councilor Latina inquired about CRDA if they have any special authority over the schedules of when they would have to come to our process as opposed to whatever they have to work out.

Mayor Montinieri commented that there would be some juggling of schedules to get approvals but will be steered by the town's procedures/thresholds. The developer shared that he will do all that he can to be respectful of those timelines and accommodate them.

Councilor Latina questioned if CRDA could override our local rules. When she was working at the legislature, she knew they were working on language to have some legislation trying to go for development authorities in which case they would have rights to do eminent domain when it had transportation oriented development attached to it.

Mayor Montinieri said he hadn't heard of anything contrary to that. There are going to be speed bumps but we are working with a savvy developer that knows this area and they understand the scope of this project and the mixed use concept.

Mr. Gillespie commented that the developer will have to be creative with the site and our mixed use regulations do have some flexibility. Also there is conversation with the adjoining property owner about potentially redesigning their parking maybe sharing the parking. The details need to be worked out.

Councilor Latina asked if Council would be notified when they get the pre-application.

Mr. Gillespie commented he could do that and that their agenda is posted. Also if there was an interest, there could be a presentation set up.

Councilor Rell inquired when the pre-application would be.

Mr. Gillespie indicated that the pre-application review process does not require a great deal of detail. They do have some conceptual plans and once they get over the financial formula and get that figured out, he was hoping maybe before the year is out.

ADJOURNMENT

At 6:30 p.m., Deputy Mayor Barry moved "**TO ADJOURN THE MEETING**" seconded by Councilor Latina

Vote: All Councilors present, including the Chairperson voted AYE. The motion passed 8-0-0.

Dolores G. Sassano
Town Clerk

APPROVED BY VOTE OF COUNCIL (8-0-0)
(Councilor Hemmann left at 6:15 p.m.)
October 17, 2016