

PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION
TOLLAND, CONNECTICUT
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF JANUARY 11, 2010

MEMBERS PRESENT: Michael Cardin, Chair
Marilee Beebe-Kostrun, Vice Chair
Sue Errickson, Secretary
Jack Scavone, Regular
John Hughes, Alternate
Benjamin Stanford, Alternate

MEMBERS ABSENT: David Barrow, Regular

OTHERS PRESENT: Linda Farmer, Director of Planning & Community Development
Town Staff, members of Boards and Commissions,
Business Community members, and Residents

1. Welcome. Michael Cardin, PZC Chair called the meeting to order at 7:35p.m. at the Tolland High School Library. He introduced the various members of the PZC present and explained the PZC's role and when they regularly meet. He said one goal of this new commission is to hold a workshop that will begin to build a renewed relationship with the business community. He also explained that the PZC's role is to weigh both development of residential and commercial properties for the best interests of the community and that the recently updated Plan of Conservation and Development is used as a guiding principal. He than opened the floor to the public to express their concerns and to ask questions.
2. Workshop with Members of the Business Community. Bob Stewart, Chair of the Economic Development Commission and principal of Stewart Appraisal Services, a local business, said he understands the purpose of this meeting is for the PZC to tell the public they are open to ideas from the business community and to see how those ideas might fit. He said Tolland is unique in that there are a lot of small businesses in town, many of them owned by local residents. He said the public has expressed that they don't generally want Tolland to be home to big box development and that they would like to nurture small businesses. However, small businesses don't have a lot of money in their budgets for advertising and so signage becomes an important concern to give these businesses needed exposure. Mr. Cardin also noted that there will be a workshop in March about signage. Mr. Scavone said it will be held on March 8 in Council Chambers at the PZC's new meeting time of 7:30p.m.

Christopher Sparke, who owns a chiropractic practice in the Twin Ponds complex, said he has had his business in town for about three years. He said it is very hard to produce a sign that is both visible to the public and also conforms to the regulations and aesthetics wanted by the town. He said they need to have visibility day and night that is close enough to the road for passerby to see. He said his particular sign is 40' to 50' from the road and with a business that is only 1,000 sq. ft, it only gets a small square footage signage allotment. He said there are about twenty-six businesses in Twin Ponds, which further complicates things, and they cannot put up lit signs or have larger dimensions.

Linda of Colonial Gardens said she feels the PZC is working backwards and that they should be tackling the regulations that address the type and size of signs first. She said she feels many business owners are being forced to use sandwich boards because they don't have a lot of other options right now.

Ken Hankinson of 54 Johnson Road is a retired businessman. He said other towns have business expositions and, while it may not fall under the auspices of the PZC, it might be a good idea for Tolland. Mr. Stewart said the Tolland County Chamber of Commerce has done expositions, but it has been tough to get a good turnout from the general public. He said they have not explored it much in recent years. Ms. Errickson suggested holding one on the Green, possibly in the Lion's Club tents. Mr. Sparke said he doesn't feel the Green would be a good location for an exposition because parking is a problem, and even with tents, many businesses are going to be providing take-away pamphlets and when the wind blows, they will be scattered all over. He said these expositions also often only attract other business people rather than the public, which is where their customer base comes from.

Linda of Colonial Gardens said the Town had developed a website targeting new residents that had advertising for local businesses. However, the advertising was cost prohibitive to many and she recommended finding a way for it to be more cost-friendly to all local businesses. Town Manager Steve Werbner explained that she was referring to a video that can be accessed from the Town's home page. It was an Introduction to Tolland video that was created by a private entity and paid for by advertising. Mr. Werbner said there is an Economic Development Commission web page where they could create links to local businesses, but they don't have a webmaster so time to do this becomes an issue. He said it is in the development stage to create an email program and comment box for businesses on this page. Mr. Cardin suggested that high school students might help develop databases for this.

Mr. Cardin asked the business community how business is doing in general. Mr. Sparke said he has taken a 40 percent cut in business since the previous year, but he is stable. He qualified that he is a fairly new business and is not as established as others. Mr. Sparke said many of his clients come from Ashford and Coventry as well as locally, as there are not a lot of chiropractors in the northeast section of the State. Mr. Sparke added that he has a website and it might be helpful to local businesses if a link to local businesses could be posted from the Town website. Creating links by categories of businesses would be helpful.

Derek Pacheco from Dunkin' Donuts asked if the PZC will be considering allowing drive-throughs. Ms. Farmer said drive-throughs were prohibited in town in 1988 after an application for a McDonald's off the highway was defeated. She said the application was not granted due to traffic, septic, and concerns about impacts to the aquifer. The prohibition was put in place to control intensity of use. Ms. Beebe-Kostrun further explained that the regulation was in place when she came on board the PZC. She explained that the PZC cannot legally allow drive throughs at some food establishments and not at others, and there was a desire in town not to want Route 195 to develop into a strip of fast food restaurants. She said these types of businesses also don't generate the best tax base. She said banks are presently allowed to have drive-throughs because they are a different use. Ms. Farmer said the goal was to create complementary business uses that get people out of their cars to go from one business to another.

Ms. Beebe-Kostrun said they have approximately 100 acres on and around Route 195 between Big Y and Anthony Road and they have been trying to determine what kinds of businesses they want to incentivize in this area. She said the public has been vocal that they do not want the area to develop into something similar to Route 83 in Vernon.

Theron Debella asked if there is a possibility of grandfathering drive-throughs so that only existing businesses could have one but not allowing new businesses to come in and build them. Ms. Beebe-Kostrun said this may not be legal, and they would need to get legal counsel on this. Mr. Pachecho said drive-through business is typically 60 percent of Dunkin' Donut's business. He said people like it because mothers don't have to leave their kids in the car alone and elderly people don't have to walk. He said he feels 9 out of 10 people would want this.

Ms. Farmer said that some towns allow drive-throughs with certain permit conditions, but they have trouble standing up legally. Additionally, encouraging car dependent businesses is contrary to the Plan of Conservation and Development. Ms. Errickson added that grandfathering doesn't really apply here, that grandfathering is more about when regulations become more restrictive but allowing existing businesses to stay as they were before that regulation change.

Patricia Fox asked where they are moving in town. She asked why they are going for a big change in what is now termed the Village Area. Mr. Cardin said the Village concept came about when soliciting feedback from the community when they were laying out a vision for the area. He said they were not comfortable with the types of development that could legally go in this area, such as warehouses, and one of the goals that came out of the eighteen-month process of the Plan of Conservation and Development was to strive for village nodes. There was a desire not to allow the area to develop haphazardly. Ms. Farmer added that copies of the POCD are available on the town website as well as in the Planning Office, free of charge.

Ms. Beebe-Kostrun said it is important to understand that the planning process for a village center is a long range process of twenty to thirty years. She said the POCD promotes or incentivizes development that town residents have expressed they want. She said what they have heard is that the residents want a New England Village style setting. She said developable land in town is running out and they realized they need to develop regulations that promote the type of development people want.

Joseph Duval of Goose Lane asked how many commercial acres are available between the Big Y and Anthony Road. Ms. Farmer said there are about 100 acres of developable land. About 30 of these acres are across from NERAC. He asked how the town works with the State to develop Route 195. Ms. Beebe-Kostrun said they need to make clear that the town is not going to develop anything. Rather, the town's role is to put regulations in place so that when the private sector wants to develop land, they will move in the right direction.

Ms. Farmer said the town is included in discussions about Route 195. She said they are fortunate that the head of the Right of Way division at the Department of Transportation lives in town, and she has discussed with this person the possibility of using the parking area of the commuter lot to enhance development. Mr. Cardin added that the State has worked with the Town Council, the Planning Office and the community with plans for widening Route 195.

Mr. Sparke said he lives in Vernon but doesn't see Tolland as developing into a walkable environment because Route 195 is so busy. He said the idea of a sleepy town could only develop around the Green area.

Ms. Errickson provided a little history about the development of the town. She said Tolland originally developed around the courthouse in the 1800's and the Green developed with businesses that served the lawyers and others who were there for court business. She said when the courts moved to Rockville, Tolland went to sleep and many of the houses on the Green became simply

summer homes. Along the way, a conscious decision was made to keep the Green basically residential. There was an understanding, however, that walkability is attractive to 30-somethings and older residents and that the most viable area to create this type of development is near the highway. This would require a mix of housing, businesses, and parking—the components to create a walkable community in miniature. There have been several workshops with a facilitator to design this type of area.

Ms. Farmer said Tolland has been one of the fastest growing communities over the last ten years, but this has put a burden on schools and town services. About four to five years ago, she said regulations were changed that cut potential density to protect natural resources. The idea was then to allow for increased density where they have the suitable infrastructure, namely sewer and public water. She cited the senior housing development that is moving forward in the area.

Pat Fox echoed Mr. Sparke's comments, saying many residents chose to move to Tolland for the large lots and privacy from neighbors. She said she doesn't feel walkability will happen. Ms. Beebe-Kostrun said this is the nature of a 30-year planning process. She said she expects there will be a significant change in what kinds of people will be here in 30 years.

Ms. Farmer said that during the POCD process they had a development workshop on housing where about 80 people attended. She said they were surprised to find an overwhelming response that there are not enough apartments, condominiums, and small single family residences in town. She said people have expressed the desire to age in place, but such development needs to be created where they have the appropriate infrastructure.

Rob Arute of 174 Merrow Road said they keep referring to the community determining the future of the business area. However, while the desire may be to create a picturesque New England Village area, that type of development may not be viable. He said development should be heavily weighted toward those with ownership interests in business properties. He said they need to research and find out what businesses would like to come to Tolland and then ask if the residential community would welcome that kind of business. He said many of these desirable picturesque towns developed before regulations and what went in and stayed were what could succeed. He asked if there is a way to find out what businesses want to come here.

Ben Stanford, an alternate on the PZC, said he moved to Tolland like many other residents—for the rural, low-density, larger lots. He said due to the economy, he does not see much business coming to town soon. He said the bigger issues are those on the State level. He said people are leaving Connecticut, and they should be cautioned about putting things in place based on wants when other greater issues may work against them. Ms. Beebe-Kostrun said it is important to recognize that regulations are not static and that desirable development will not come at all if the proper infrastructure is not in place to begin with.

Mr. Arute of 174 Merrow Road said he spent thousands of dollars and had an appraisal only to learn that the town wanted a portion of his property to facilitate sidewalks, a median, and access to other areas, which would render his property commercially useless. He said he was concerned about a mindset within the town to do this. He said you can't force a walkable community in a business area and that Tolland residents will continue to want to drive to urban areas to do their shopping.

Mr. Stewart said there have to be regulations and while they are market driven, there has to be a concept idea out there to guide developers.

Mr. Arute asked if there are any resources available to get a clear picture of what businesses want to locate in Tolland. Ms. Stewart said they are not getting any calls to create any feel for this. He said in the 1980's the market dipped significantly and the Meetinghouse Commons shopping area was nearly empty. The EDC at that time focused more on filling empty spaces and less on new development. Ms. Farmer said Planners have learned over the years that in order to make walkable communities viable, they need to have not only a mix of commercial and office development, but also a residential component to give the area a jumpstart.

Steve Werbner said in his five years serving as Town Manager he has heard that Tolland is not business-friendly. However, he has not found that. He said his door is always open to talk to business owners who feel they are experiencing negative impacts. He will try to assist them. He said they have had low grand lists in recent years and need to have a diverse tax-generating business base. He said development concepts that are endorsed by the community serve to assist developers and make it easier for them to come in with something that will be accepted.

Bob Rubino of Weigold Road asked if anyone can think of a business, with the exception of drive-throughs, that wanted to locate in Tolland but did not do so because the regulations would not allow for it. Mr. Stewart said some potential businesses have found Tolland's requirements for lighting, signage, impervious coverage, sidewalks and sideyards too restrictive. He said CVS will not come to Tolland unless they can have a drive-through, and Sami's Garage could not expand due to restrictive regulations.

Steve Werbner said the Town Council will be holding another meeting on February 11 at 7:00p.m. at the Fire Training Center. There will be representatives from the fire and police departments about what the town can offer businesses from a public safety aspect. This will be another opportunity for business owners to express their concerns. They would also like to start a business visitation program on a systematic basis where business owners can say who they would like from town staff to visit them regarding their concerns.

Mr. Cardin introduced Town Council member MaryAnne Tuttle, who serves as liaison to both the PZC and EDC, and also State Representative Brian Hurlburt. Mr. Hurlburt asked residents and business owners to contact him if they experience any concerns with issues regarding State agencies. He said he will be hosting a February 27 business assistance program at the Willington Library for grants and small loans for businesses. The meeting will be from 9AM to 11AM.

Mr. Cardin read a written communication from Allan Koiva of Nordic Builders dated January 11, 2010, which states regulations in recent years have made new development unappealing in Tolland. He asks for the Commission to provide some positive feedback about what kinds of housing stock the Town is willing to support.

3. Adjourn. Mr. Cardin said that this meeting is just a beginning and the discussion will be continued. Ms. Farmer said responses to the questions raised will be put up on the town web site. The meeting was adjourned at 9:20p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Annie Gentile
Clerk