



Town of Ridgefield
Board of Selectpersons Meeting Minutes
UNAPPROVED

November 20, 2024 at 6:30pm

Please note – these minutes are not verbatim.

Present: Sean Connelly, Maureen Kozlark, Barbara Manners, Rudy Marconi, Chris Murray

1. Public Comment

Karen Albright, 4 Mountain View Avenue, expressed concerns about the proposed Red Rooster project, first about the environmental impact from removing trees on the property, and second, a traffic and pedestrian safety concern. Ms. Albright shared she looked at the crash data for the intersection, which indicated it's the worst hotspot in town for crashes, with 560 crashes in the last 10 years and the highest number of injuries both in cars and on the sidewalks. Ms. Albright shared the proposal would increase the number of both traffic and people, and requested if the project does proceed there's a plan to ensure neighborhood safety for pedestrians.

Nathan Speed, 7 Old Branchville Road, shared he met with Rudy Marconi in October on behalf of over 260 Branchville residents, who signed a letter in support of creating a park in Branchville, specifically to secure Candee's Pond and increase the open space accessible within the Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) plan. Mr. Speed shared the proposal is about conservation, and also about thoughtful community planning, a space to restore the village's identity, and to encourage visitors to shop at local businesses. Mr. Marconi shared he's spoken with the Conservation and Parks & Recreation Commissions, and suggested having a meeting with the neighborhood and Conservation Commission to discuss the idea.

Michael Tory, Florida Road, echoed Mr. Speed's comments, and shared his outrage over the proposed density in the TOD plan, concern about the increased housing development, and asked to minimize the amount of tree cutting throughout Town.

Joann Murray, 62 Cooper Hill Road, supported Mr. Speed's and Mr. Tory's comments, and expressed concern about potential septic and sewer system development on the property and potential water damage. Mr. Marconi shared the current property owners are considering a "packaging plant" that would fit on the property and suit the development's needs, and DEEP would need to approve the plans.

Cary Jaffee, 29 Stony Hill Road, expressed concern about the uneven distribution of Open Space, with only Whitbeck Preserve, Florida Hill Preserve, and Candee's Pond in the southern part of Town. Mr. Jaffee expressed concern about the impact of development at Candee's Pond.

Daniel Mann, 66 Grove Street, shared 66 Grove Street is still available for the A-School and Transition Program use, and expressed concerns the new proposed property on Halpin Lane. Mr. Mann shared it was unrealistic for a new building to be built by September 2025, expressed concerns about costs, and potential room for growth.

Amy Cohen, 76 Florida Hill Road, expressed concern about the age disparity between A-School and Transition Program students, and shared the two populations of students have different needs. Ms. Cohen stated the new building does not meet the “remote school model” which must provide the same level of services as the other schools and expressed concern over equity. Ms. Cohen then read a letter from her husband, Matthias Blumrich, in support of Kirk Carr’s memo previously submitted to the BoS, which expressed the proposed plan would not meet the ethical end educational needs for the A-School and Transition Programs.

Kirk Carr, 62 Prospect Ridge, shared copies of a memo to the BoS (submitted on November 20, 2024), and expressed concern over the age disparity of A-School and Transition Program students being in the same building. Mr. Carr shared there’s excess space at Ridgefield High School, and expressed concern about denying students access to educational resources. Mr. Marconi expressed the Board of Education has jurisdiction over education issues.

2. Conservation Commission – Open Space Presentation

James Coyle, Chair, Conservation Commission, and Erik Keller, Vice Chair, Conservation Commission, were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. Coyle distributed copies of their presentation to the BoS.
- Mr. Coyle shared the Conservation Commission (CC) has done a commendable job of maintaining existing properties, and are thinking toward the future and acquiring new open space. The new development at Candee’s Pond has raised awareness of needing to acquire open space in a better way, with guidance from the BoS and residents. Mr. Coyle shared the CC has a goal of achieving 30% open space.
- Mr. Keller shared Ridgefield’s open space has been constant (~25%) for the past 5 years. In 2012, the CC identified property suitable for open space must be a minimum of 10 acres and adjacent to other open space. Currently, there are approximately 900 acres of land that fit those criteria. Maureen Kozlark shared the BoS has always been amicable about acquiring open space, and both Ms. Kozlark and Barbara Manners asked about approaching property owners. Mr. Coyle confirmed the CC has not yet done so.
- Mr. Keller shared the Town is approximately 1,000 acres short of it’s 30% open space goal, and could pick up 70-80 acres if an open space restriction is placed on existing Town properties. Mr. Keller shared the CC follows DEEP guidelines, which classifies open space as land that is designated as open space and cannot be built upon.
- Mr. Keller shared there are 44 acres of State-owned property around the Binn property and Candee’s Pond (important for the Norwalk River Valley Trail, and would connect to the Rail Trail and Weir Farm), Boehringer Ingelheim has approximately 50 acres adjacent to Pine Mountain, and a property near the New York boarder is approximately 100 acres.
- Mr. Keller shared the CC needs to have a proactive program to access potential open space properties, and voiced the possibility for adding a tax abatement for Conservation or a seller’s conveyance tax for open space bonds, in order to have access to capital for when properties become available. Mr. Keller also discussed a potential program to create habitat pathways on private property that connect between open spaces to

provide safe, uninterrupted space for wildlife. Chris Murray shared this could be of interest if there was a demonstrable financial incentive for homeowners.

- Rudy Marconi asked about next steps for Candee's Pond, strategy for the CC's proposal, and creativity about investing in town open space for parks and affordable development.
- A resident voiced support for Mr. Keller's proposal for connected open space via backyards, and shared it would greatly benefit the environment and local biodiversity.
- Renee Witworth, 17 Mountainview Avenue, suggested the CC reaches out to attorneys and real estate agents about property acquisition goals.

3. Appointments

a. Youth Commission Appointment – Krishaa Bhattacharjee

Krishaa Bhattacharjee was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Ms. Bhattacharjee shared she has attended 2 meetings, and has enjoyed the dynamic, and wants to contribute to positive change.
- Barbara Manners asked about special interests. Ms. Bhattacharjee confirmed mental health concerns (ex. stress, competition, sleep deprivation, anxiety, and depression), and expressed the importance of peer-led support groups.
- Sean Connelly asked about youth being more comfortable to seek help today. Ms. Bhattacharjee shared many young people are still afraid of consequences to seeking help, and shared peer support groups would be very helpful.
- Maureen Kozlark asked about communication of existing programs. Ms. Bhattacharjee confirmed many hear about the programs from their peers.
- Chris Murray asked about cell phone policies. Ms. Bhattacharjee shared she thinks cell phones can be an impediment and the "phone hotels" used during class have helped increase communication, collaboration, and learning.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to appoint Krishaa Bhattacharjee to the Youth Commission. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

b. Insurance & Risk Management Committee – Michael Schmer & Todd Cody

Michael Schmer, Todd Cody, and Margaux-Jane Larsen, Chair, Insurance & Risk Management Committee, were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Ms. Larsen shared both Mr. Schmer and Mr. Cody have attended meetings and made valid contributions, and the IRMC feels confident recommending both.
- Mr. Schmer shared he's part of an independent agency on Long Island, and has served in various boards, enjoys volunteering, and the insurance business.
- Mr. Cody shared his background is in IT and has grown through a number of roles to understand underwriting and claims and wants to give back to the Town.
- Sean Connelly asked whether these appointments would give the IRMC the expertise it needs. Ms. Larsen confirmed with these appointments, the IRMC would have 4 active insurance, 1 retired insurance, 1 risk management, and 1 data/risk management perspective.
- Chris Murray asked about cybersecurity and insurance. Ms. Larsen shared the Town's cybersecurity insurance policy was renewed in August at a premium decrease for the same terms.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to appoint Michael Schmer and Todd Cody to the Insurance & Risk Management Committee. Chris Murray seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

4. Ramapoo Rifle & Revolver Club Lease Renewal

John Finch and Craig Cerone were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Rudy Marconi shared the Ramapoo Rifle & Revolver Club pays \$4,000/yr in rent, and the Ridgefield Police Department (RPD) uses the club as a training facility.
- Mr. Finch shared they have made improvements to the exhaust and air filtration systems over the past 4 years, and the cost was roughly \$3,500 when the RPD used it last year. Mr. Finch shared they hadn't billed the RPD before, but they didn't have environmental systems to maintain.
- Maureen Kozlark asked about the cost being passed along to members. Mr. Cerone confirmed that it is, and the RPD uses the space at no cost. Mr. Finch shared when the RPD changed firearms last year, each officer was required to complete approximately 6 hours of training, and will require additional refresher training.
- Chris Murray asked about the membership fee if the RPD were to pay. Mr. Finch confirmed membership is \$125/yr with a one-time \$200 initiation fee.
- Sean Connelly asked about utility costs. Mr. Finch confirmed the Club pays for oil and the separate electric service for the new exhaust system. Mr. Finch shared lighting has been updated from halogen to LED.
- The Board of Selectpersons tentatively agreed to the Ramapoo Rifle & Revolver Club having their rent waived in exchange for the RPD's continued use. Mr. Marconi shared he would reach out to counsel for an opinion on whether the change is substantive, and will draft a new lease to share with the Club.

5. Prospect Ridge/34 Halpin Lane – Alternative High School & Transition Program

Jake Muller, Director of Public Works & Facilities, Susie Da Silva, Superintendent of Schools, Jill Browne, Director of Finance, Ridgefield Public Schools, Joseph Morits, Director of Facilities, Ridgefield Public Schools, Christine More, Board of Education Member, were in attendance.

Topics discussed included:

- Sean Connelly shared there was a public comment that suggested the administration didn't appropriately care for students, and he wanted to share he feels the team cares a lot, and we may have different opinions, but wanted to acknowledge their care.
- Mr. Muller shared the Town has landed on 37 Halpin Lane (at the end of the Bark Park property, the former proposed pickleball court area) to build a school with a 4,000sqft footprint (2-story, 8,000sqft total) for use by the A-School and Transition Program.
- Mr. Connelly asked about separation between the two student populations. Dr. Da Silva confirmed that was considered at all potential sites, with students having separate spaces and the option to intermingle per educator discretion. At the Halpin Lane site, there would be one floor for each program and common space for staff.
- Barbara Manners asked about a cafeteria. Dr. Da Silva shared there will be lounge spaces, and lunch can be brought over from East Ridge Middle School, the Transition students would be able to cook, and students may walk into Town if they choose.
- Rudy Marconi shared there will be a Planning & Zoning Public Hearing on December 17, and they will have a full package (including construction costs, traffic assessment, tree removal assessment, etc.) for that meeting. Mr. Marconi shared the \$275,000 previously approved for the A-School at Ballard Green was being used for planning expenses.
- Maureen Kozlark asked about the overall cost. Mr. Marconi shared \$350/sqft to build the building, per the architect, which does not include site work.
- Mr. Muller shared the site plan, indicating the proposed site and existing Bark Park. Mr. Marconi suggested adding a sidewalk connecting this property to East Ridge.

- Mr. Marconi acknowledged an email from Mr. Mann comparing the costs of Halpin Lane and Grove Street, and will request Kevin Redmond, Controller, to review.
- Kirk Carr, 62 Prospect Ridge, asked whether BoE or BoS would vote on the proposal. Mr. Marconi shared once they receive numbers, the BoS would vote to call a Town Meeting.

6. Approval of Meeting Minutes

a. November 6, 2024

Sean Connelly motioned to approve the minutes from the November 6, 2024 Board of Selectpersons Meeting. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 4-0-1, with Barbara Manners abstaining.

7. Selectperson's Report

Rudy Marconi shared the BoS received an email on November 20, 2024 about 11 acres available on Pound Street. Sean Connelly shared he remembered Erik Keller previously recommending to not purchase the land, given the topography and as it's not contiguous with other open space.

Mr. Marconi shared WestCOG is proposing construction of a regional firearm training facility in Newtown, if sufficient member municipalities are on board to distribute the cost. This would be a training facility for all participating police departments, and for practicing with both long guns and pistols. (RPD currently uses Wooster Mountain for long gun training and Ramapoo Gun & Rifle Club for pistol training.) Mr. Marconi shared there would be an initial construction cost, and the State would provide a \$1.5M grant to help offset the cost.

Mr. Marconi shared he met with Wayne Escola and Jake Muller about solar projects in Town. Mr. Marconi shared they have agreements set with Ridgefield High School and Barlow Mountain, and looking at an RFP for the South Street Garage, increasing the number of solar panels at the Rec Center, Veteran's Park, and the potential for additional solar canopies at other school parking lots. Chris Murray asked about the timeline for return on investment. Mr. Marconi confirmed it's a minimum 10% return for investors, and Sean Connelly confirmed the projects are privately funded and the Town will own outright after 20 years.

Mr. Marconi shared Andrew Neblett, IT Director, shared a few folks haven't yet transitioned to their Town email addresses, and will offer a final email set up opportunity in December. After that time, their non-Town email addresses may be blocked.

Mr. Marconi shared the Pride Flag Petition was withdrawn, and the Town is still waiting on the constitutional law review and opinion.

Mr. Marconi shared funding for the Depot Road bridge in Branchville has been approved, with construction to begin next year (2025).

Mr. Marconi shared they received a FOI request on November 20, 2024 about the Inland-Wetlands Board, who asked the Town produce all legal invoices from January 2018 through today. Mr. Marconi shared the Town will ask for more specificity, since the request is very broad.

Sean Connelly motioned to adjourn the meeting at 9:31pm. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 5-0.