



Town of Ridgefield
Board of Selectpersons Meeting Minutes
APPROVED
May 22, 2024 at 6:30pm

Please note – these minutes are not verbatim.

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

1. Public Comment

Kirk Carr, 62 Prospect Ridge, distributed a document he sent to Rudy Marconi on April 30 and the entire Board of Selectpersons on May 7, summarizing attendance records submitted by the Chairmen of the Boards, Committees and Commissions (BCCs). Mr. Carr expressed his desire to recognize people who do attend and ensure those who do not attend also receive the attention they deserve. Mr. Carr noted Maureen Kozlark's previous comment about singling out the ECDC, and shared 13 BCCs have attendance issues, including the ECDC.

Debra Francheschini, 72 Spire View Road, expressed the potential to consolidate BCCs with similar missions and mandates to improve overall participation, such as the Historic District Committee and Architectural Committee, Tree Committee and Parks & Recreation, Arts Council and Film Commission, Prevention Council and Substance Abuse Commission and Youth Commission. Mr. Marconi asked Ms. Francheschini to send him an email with her specific ideas and recommendations.

Kevin Julier, 90 Fieldcrest Drive, expressed concern about the new traffic lights and traffic pattern at CVS/Prospect Street and asked about installing an advanced green/green arrow light so you know when safe to turn left from CVS. Mr. Marconi confirmed he'd reach out to the State and ask them for an analysis of the intersection. Ms. Kozlark shared the intersection at 116/35 can also be problematic and requested the State also reexamine that intersection.

Levi Groth, 44 Old West Mountain Road, informed the BoS of their intention to petition a Town Meeting to amend the Town Flaggpole Policy to allow access for residents to fly a flag other than the four currently listed within the Policy.

Debra Francheschini, 72 Spire View Road, shared further to Mr. Julier's point, the intersection at Grove Street/35 can also be dangerous and asked that it also be reexamined.

2. Youth Commission Presentation

Denise Dammer-Qualey, Chairperson, Tina Malholtra, Commission Member, Youth Members Julia Knispel, Rian Malholtra and Akshay Pertab, and Vijay Pertab, Youth Advisor, were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. A. Pertab shared RYC participated in the Pride Crosswalk Dedication and focused on teen's mental health crisis this year, sharing RYC provides a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth and holds a LGBTQ+ Support Group, part of the Lighthouse Program.
- Mr. V. Pertab discussed the demands of high school and recommended they build a meditation room at Ridgefield High School, like at Wilton High School, to provide a calm space for students and staff during the day. Mr. V. Pertab shared 25-200 people use the WHS space daily and they plan to build similar spaces in middle and elementary schools. RHS has expressed interest, but space is limited.
- Mr. Malholtra discussed RYC's Mental Health Matters webinar in February.
- Ms. Knispel shared RYC's upcoming plans: Narcan training in June, a greater partnership with Ridgefield Prevention Council, February webinar, Holiday Stroll Open House, and a Lighthouse Program event for the LGBTQ+ community.
- Maureen Kozlark asked about the February webinar and how it's publicized. Ms. Knispel shared RYC put up fliers around RHS and posted to Instagram, their goal is to publicize more widely next year. Ms. Malholtra shared the event was also shared with PTAs, the Board of Education, and shared in e-blasts.
- Chris Murray asked about social media and bullying. Mr. A. Pertab shared there's greater awareness about bullying, but RYC could consider that as a goal for next year.
- Barbara Manners expressed support for the meditation room idea. Mr. Marconi asked about Wilton's space. Mr. A. Pertab confirmed it's a converted classroom (~20'x20'). Ms. Kozlark asked how their space was outfitted. Mr. A. Pertab shared they added colorful ceiling tiles and blue vinyl walls with some pillows and mats to create a soundproof, calming atmosphere. Ms. Manners asked if Wilton has had any issues. Mr. A. Pertab shared phones and devices are collected and can't be used in the space. Sean Connelly expressed support for the idea and asked how the space would be used. Mr. V. Pertab confirmed their original intention would be for use during free periods but could consider further staffing to make it open throughout the day.
- Mr. Marconi asked about Kids in Crisis Counselors at the school. Mr. Malholtra shared not everyone wants to face their anxiety at school, but a lot of students go to their counselors to discuss a range of topics. Mr. Marconi asked about peer counseling. Anisa, a new RYC member, shared her school has a trained, confidential peer counselor program. Mr. Marconi expressed support for this idea and asked they bring it forward.

3. NRVT (Norwalk Valley River Trail) – Update

Charlie Taney, NRVT Board President, was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. Taney shared the NRVT will be a 30-mile fully accessible trail from Norwalk to Danbury, once completed. Some sections have already been completed with others in progress. Most of the trail will be built on DOT-owned land (previously purchased with the intention to expand Route 7), some sections will require easements from private property, and others will be through Town open spaces.
- Mr. Taney shared the project is approximately 50% completed, three more miles of trail has been fully funded and will be built over the next two years, one section in Ridgefield and another in Wilton, both just need permitting.

- Barbara Manners asked about the first 15 miles of trail. Mr. Taney confirmed they are not continuous but will connect over time.
- Mr. Taney shared the Ridgefield Ramble (1.5 miles) will meet an existing mile of trail that's been built. The NRVT was awarded \$3M for construction costs, awaiting consent from DEEP, then will proceed to permitting and the RFP process for construction.
- Mr. Marconi asked about the RAISE grant. Mr. Taney shared WestCOG submitted and was awarded a \$5M federal planning grant request for engineering plans for the second half of the trail. This award will improve future construction grant possibility, as the project will be planned and shovel ready, and will also do a feasibility study to eventually extend the NRVT to the Still River Greenway and the Empire State Trail in the future.
- Sean Connelly asked about the Rail Trail connecting to the Ridgefield Ramble and Parks & Rec. Mr. Taney confirmed yes, and the engineering plans will determine how.

4. Branchville Schoolhouse Lease discussion with Ridgefield Historical Society

Stephen Bartkus, Executive Director, Tracy Seem, Board of Directors President, and Officers Raymond Murphy and Kevin Julier were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Rudy Marconi shared the Ridgefield Historical Society wishes to restore and maintain the Branchville Schoolhouse, like Peter Parley, but it requires complete restoration. Ms. Seem confirmed a full assessment is necessary but will be an adaptive reuse project, estimated to take 3-5 years from fundraising through completion. Barbara Manners asked about estimated costs. Mr. Bartkus confirmed \$1M for current vision. Chris Murray asked about square footage. Ms. Seem confirmed roughly 800 square feet.
- Section 5B of the lease agreement was discussed, about the landlord's responsibility for ongoing ordinary maintenance. Sean Connelly expressed a need for a standard understanding of what the Town, as a landlord, should be responsible for. Some discussion followed about responsibility for electricity and oil payments. Ms. Seem confirmed the end-usage of the Branchville Schoolhouse will be similar to Peter Parley, which is not used routinely. Mr. Connelly asked the Historical Society to propose updated language to Section 5B. Maureen Kozlark asked they also share their scope of work information to plan for costs and utilities and to use Peter Parley as a benchmark.
- Mr. Bartkus shared in the Preservation Plan, will go to the State Historic Preservation Office for funding, seeking up to \$770,000 through various grants, and other grants through Connecticut Communities for rotating museum exhibits.
- Mr. Marconi asked whether the Town will be asked to support the project. Mr. Bartkus shared they would reach out to private individuals and foundations first.
- Chris Murray asked about what they would be mandated to preserve. Mr. Bartkus confirmed they are required to keep historic integrity but bring up to code.
- Mr. Murray asked about trees. Ms. Seem confirmed 3-4 need to be taken down immediately. Mr. Marconi will ask the Tree Warden to complete an inspection.
- The BoS expressed support for the proposed edit to Section 14, increasing the default window from 10 days to 30 days.

5. Pension Commission – Pension and OPEB Plan Updates

Christofer Christiansen, Chair, Andrew Okrongly, Member, and [OTHER PERSON] were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. Christiansen shared the Pension Commission hired Vanguard 6 years ago, and before that they handled their own trades. In December 2023, Vanguard sold this part of their

business, TAM does not currently offer services for municipalities. The Pension Commission is actively seeking a new investment advisor and payroll advisor.

- Sean Connelly asked about the increase in enrollees from Ridgefield Public Schools (RPS). Mr. Christiansen confirmed these were paraprofessionals. He also shared from 2011-12 the Town closed their plan (to new hires, existing enrollees remain), then in 2019 RPS started closing their plan to specific groups (i.e. nurses and non-union staff).
- Mr. Okrongly shared a 10-year history of returns, showing a return of 6.5% for this fiscal year (as of April) with 6.25% being the target.
- Some discussion followed about Pension and OPEB fund balances relative to other AAA-rated towns in Fairfield County, assumptions, fund balances, open and closed plans, returns and liability projections, and their goal rate of return (6.25%).
- Mr. Connelly asked how the Town is doing relative to Darien's more actively managed funds with higher administrative fees. Mr. Okrongly shared the administrative fees are built into the actual return, and the Town's fees are low relative to other towns.
- Rudy Marconi asked the Pension Commission's recommendations for moving forward. Mr. Christiansen shared if the Town wants the most predictable pension costs possible, they recommend discussing with the Board of Education about having new hires use a defined contribution plan and close the pension plan. Mr. Christiansen confirmed the teachers use the state pension plan, the employees in the Town's pension plan are the paraprofessionals, nurses, administrators, etc. He shared the retention rate for paraprofessionals is very low, so a pension plan isn't as beneficial as a defined contribution plan would be, and it could be more attractive than a pension.

6. Approval of Meeting Minutes

a. May 7, 2024 – Special Meeting

Maureen Kozlark motioned to approve the minutes from the May 7, 2024 Board of Selectpersons Special Meeting. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

b. May 8, 2024

Sean Connelly noted in the discussion about a Housing Trust Fund about the funds going to the general fund to indicate that those funds “would” go into the General Fund, but none have been collected to date. And that those fees “could” go into the Housing Trust Fund, if approved.

Mr. Connelly also commented on the document distributed in the Selectperson's Report, suggested changing the language to “document” from “confidential document.”

Sean Connelly motioned to approve the minutes from the May 8, 2024 Board of Selectpersons Meeting, as amended. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

7. Selectperson's Report

Rudy Marconi shared testing at 145 High Ridge Avenue will happen on May 28. Chris Murray asked whether a Town Meeting was required to authorize the expenditure. Mr. Marconi confirmed the Town has sufficient funds in the approved contingency fund.

Mr. Marconi shared the interns are doing a great job:

- Evan Honore has spoken with Vancouver, BC, Canada, who has adopted a policy of all-new PFAs-free bunker gear and turnout gear and they've kept the old turnout gear with the PFAs barrier as a backup. Mr. Marconi shared this information with Fire Chief Jerry Myers.
- Kaleigh Olsen is completing a comparison of government survey, calling local communities to ask about their governments, focusing on populations from 24,000-35,000.

Mr. Marconi shared he'd received an email from Debra Francheschini about a contradiction in the Charter relative to BCCs, which he forwarded to Jason Buxbaum from Cohen + Wolf for a legal opinion. Mr. Marconi distributed copies of this email exchange with the BoS. Sean Connelly expressed that each Chair should use their judgment to either use an excused or unexcused absence, and suggested excused absences be noted in attendance records.

Mr. Marconi distributed a document about the Memorial Day Parade sent by the parade coordinator.

Mr. Marconi shared Ridgefield was recognized by the American Heart Association as a heart-safe community. Barbara Manners asked how that was awarded. Mr. Marconi confirmed it's partly through an EMS program and includes access to defibrillators.

Mr. Marconi discussed a recent meeting about overdoses. Currently, about one drug overdose-related transport per month in Ridgefield. Mr. Marconi shared the Opioid Settlement Advisory Council is distributing as much Narcan as possible.

Mr. Connelly asked about test results from 145 High Ridge Avenue. Mr. Marconi confirmed by the end of May, and questioned why DEEP didn't notify residents.

8. Executive Session – Leaf Blower Task Force

Maureen Kozlark motioned to enter executive session at 9:43pm. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

The Board of Selectpersons returned to public at 10:22pm.

9. Possible Vote

The Board of Selectpersons voted to appoint the following residents to the Leaf Blower Task Force: Donald Hulnick, Vincent Giordano, Flint Mu, Andrea Leone-Bay, William Cygan, Carson Fincham, Arnie Nielson, and William Dornfield. Motion carried 4-0-1.

Sean Connelly motioned to adjourn the meeting at 10:24pm. Chris Murray seconded. Motion carried 5-0.