



Town of Ridgefield
Board of Selectpersons Meeting Minutes
UNAPPROVED

June 26, 2024 at 6:30pm

Please note – these minutes are not verbatim.

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

Sean Connelly motioned to make two modifications to the Agenda: first, to move item #6, “Board of Education: 66 Grove St. – Set Public Hearing & Town Meeting,” up to be item #1A, and second, to add an item, “Comparison of Government Task Force” to the end of the agenda, before the Selectperson’s Report. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

1. Public Comment

Catherine Sementini, 7 Old Wagon Road, shared she sent emails to the Board of Selectpersons, and read her letter aloud, expressing concern about flying flags other than those included in the Town Flagpole Policy and expressed support for keeping existing limits.

Peter Bancel, 120 Prospect Street, asked about the decision Ms. Sementini was referring to. Rudy Marconi shared the BOS agreed to fly only the country, state, POW-MIA and GRAAD flags on the flagpole in front of Town Hall, per the Town Flagpole Policy.

Jennifer Brakenwagen, 96 Pin Pack Road, asked about other large potential capital expenses in the next 3-5 years, other than the new Public Safety Building. Sean Connelly shared the capital improvement plan is on the website to give a sense of what’s envisioned for the Town.

Dawn Marie Callahan, 56 Ridgewood Road, expressed her understanding of “banners” are those that are currently hung outside of Town Hall, separate from the flagpole. Ms. Callahan discussed inclusivity, respect, and building a welcoming society, and shared about mental health concerns and self-harm among LGBTQ+ youth.

Andrew Sternlieb, 62 Ridgecrest Drive, expressed concern about prohibiting speech, and sharing some viewpoints and not others on Town property.

Dean Defino, 34 Aspen Mill Road, shared there’s a difference between ideology and identity banners, and expressed diversity is what built the Town.

Will Defino, 34 Aspen Mill Road, expressed support for outward displays of Pride in Town.

Jeffrey Olsteen, 235 Nod Road, asked whether the discussion was about a single type of town banner or eliminating all town banners. Mr. Marconi shared he's agreed to hang a banner outside his office for any kind of activity or Town event.

Peter Bancel, 120 Prospect Street, shared the loneliness he felt growing up before Pride, and the importance of being open to discussing others' concerns, different points of view, and having patience. Mr. Bancel also expressed support for a local demonstration of support for Pride.

Robert Byrn, 27 Topstone Road, shared his family has lived in Town for years, and expressed desire for the Town to be known as a welcoming, inclusive place.

Victor Torchia, 25 Ketcham Road, shared he and his family have appreciated the community support since moving to Town in the 1980s.

Alisa Trachtenberg, Hulda Lane, shared Ridgefield has made strides toward inclusivity, but expressed concern about residents who have received hate mail and had Pride flags stolen. Ms. Trachtenberg requested the Pride in the Park and Pride banners both be hung at Town Hall.

1A. Board of Education: 66 Grove Street – Set Public Hearing & Town Meeting

Dr. Susie DaSilva, Superintendent for Ridgefield Public Schools, Jill Brown, Director of Finance for RPS, Joe Morits, Director of Facilities for RPS, Tina Malhotra, Board of Education Chair, and Jacob Muller, Director of Public Works & Facilities, were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Rudy Marconi shared the Town has received a lease from 66 Grove Street, both Mr. Morits and Mr. Muller have been through the building, and the building is ADA compliant and has a fire suppression system in-place.
- Dr. DaSilva shared the BoE has been looking for a new space for the A-School for 4 years. Currently at the Housing Authority, but too small for current needs, and have a waitlist.
- Maureen Kozlark asked how many students are on the A-School waitlist. Dr. DaSilva confirmed 6, which is typical.
- Chris Murray asked whether the 66 Grove Street space represents a long-term solution. Dr. DaSilva shared the space would allow for future expansion. Mr. Murray shared the draft lease is a 10-year lease with three 5-year options. Dr. DaSilva confirmed 10 years would be okay and has no concerns about the appropriateness of the space, the design will meet the diverse needs of all students.
- Mr. Marconi shared the lease is still being negotiated, but currently is \$200,000 rent per year (\$15/sqft), and the Town will take an abatement on taxes (\$1.88/sqft).
- Ms. Kozlark asked about build-out cost. Mr. Marconi confirmed it would be a capital expense approved by the BoF and would use the previously approved \$275,000 to begin. Dr. DaSilva shared the final number will be in the upper six-figures.
- Mr. Marconi shared they will continue contract negotiations, with a Public Hearing likely to be scheduled for August and a Town Meeting in September.

2. Appointments & Reappointments

a. Board of Assessment Appeals (BOAA) Appointment (R&D)

Andrew Sternlieb was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Rudy Marconi shared two of the three former members moved out of Town, and the current remaining member cannot choose replacements for the rest of the Board, so the BoS will appoint the replacements.

- Mr. Marconi shared the Democrats put forward Andrew Sternlieb and would ask the Republicans if they had selected anyone, if not, recommended it be advertised broadly.
- Mr. Sternlieb shared he recently moved to Town and wanted to get involved, has experience in education and spent 40+ years in the real estate finance business.

Barbara Manners motioned to appoint Andrew Sternlieb to the Board of Assessment Appeals. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

b. Prevention Council Appointment – Will Knispel

Kim Carrone, Youth Commission Director, was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. Marconi shared Will Knispel was at the previous meeting, but wasn't included on the agenda, and is currently at debate camp and unable to attend today.
- Ms. Carrone voiced support for Mr. Knispel and shared he had a student role pre-Covid, set up a Narcan training at RHS at the end of the school year, and was previously appointed to the Youth Commission.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to appoint Will Knispel to the Prevention Council. Chris Murray seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

c. Pension Commission – Christopher St. Victor-de Pinho Reappointment

Christopher St. Victor-de Pinho, Pension Commission Secretary, and Chris Christiansen, Pension Commission Chair, were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. Marconi thanked Mr. St. Victor-de Pinho for his efforts and asked his thoughts on the pension fund. Mr. St. Victor-de Pinho shared the commission does a good job with a conservative approach yielding stable returns that often out-perform the market.
- Mr. Marconi asked about other communities returning to a pension or a hybrid model. Mr. Christiansen voiced support to stay with a direct contribution plan.
- Mr. St. Victor-de Pinho shared he would like to continue to serve on the Pension Commission, and voiced support for Mr. Christiansen as Chair.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to reappoint Christopher St. Victor-de Pinho to the Pension Commission. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

3. Main Street Trees – Dan O'Brien

Dan O'Brien was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. O'Brien shared he and John Katz have raised \$27,000 to start replanting trees on Main Street, with 16 just being planted. Tom McManus, Tree Committee Chair, and Steve Lavatori, Tree Warden, have been very helpful, seeking approval from the State, purchasing the trees, and overseeing the planting.
- Mr. O'Brien shared they would like to have a plan to plant an additional 16 trees and remove existing tree stumps. The Rotary will help with a public fundraising campaign, with the target of raising \$60,000 to finish the project.
- Maureen Kozlark asked about the type of trees being planted. Mr. O'Brien shared Mr. McManus and Mr. Lavatori are selecting the trees, which are all native species.
- Rudy Marconi shared he would meet with Mr. Lavatori to examine the budget.
- Ms. Kozlark suggested memorial tree plantings as a fundraiser, which Mr. O'Brien confirmed is what the Rotary is planning.

4. TeenTalk Program Update – Ellen Brezovsky

Ellen Brezovsky, Director of Outreach and Community Initiatives for Kids in Crisis, Olivia Bucci, TeenTalk Counselor at East Ridge Middle School, Alex, TeenTalk Counselor at Scotts Ridge Middle School, and Michael Ferguson, Director of Quality Assurance, Evaluation and Training for Kids in Crisis, were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Ms. Brezovsky shared copies of a report with the BoS, and reported anxiety remains the largest presenting problem, along with peer issues in middle school and parental instability in high school. Mr. Ferguson confirmed anxiety is the top-rated presenting problem, and the only presenting problem across every single school.
- Maureen Kozlark asked about space. Ms. Bucci confirmed they have their own spaces.
- Rudy Marconi asked about referrals made to the Youth Service Bureau. Ms. Bucci confirmed it's the top resource and expressed a shortage of counseling services with immediate availability.
- Mr. Marconi asked about mental health challenges. Alex and Ms. Bucci cited cell phones, social media, lack of interpersonal communication with peers during the pandemic, and cyberbullying as driving forces.
- Sean Connelly asked about program use over time. Ms. Brezovsky shared they saw higher numbers immediately after the pandemic, and they've reduced a little, but are holding steadily higher than before the pandemic.
- Mr. Marconi asked what more the BoS could do to help the mental health crisis. Ms. Brezovsky shared Ridgefield is rich in resources (Youth Service Bureau, Youth Commission, Prevention Council) and asked they keep talking about mental health.

5. Senior Tax Credit – Intern Jack Matthews

Jack Matthews, Town Hall College Intern, was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. Matthews shared 2,200 residents are enrolled in the senior tax credit program (65+), which costs \$2M per year, and 60 families are enrolled in the tax deferral program, representing roughly \$2M in cumulative deferred tax revenue.
- Mr. Matthews noted the senior tax credit program hasn't been updated since 2008, and to simply account for inflation, would be \$1,526 vs. the \$1,048 set in 2008, which would increase the cost of the program by approximately \$1M.
- Mr. Matthews recommended minor tweaks to both programs, including a modest increase to the tax credit, and raising the age to qualify for the deferment program.
- Sean Connelly suggested considering both age and length of residency to recognize long-term residents and potentially incentivize people to move to Town earlier in life.

6. Town Hall Banners

Sean Archambault, Town Resident, was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Rudy Marconi shared the Town has a Flagpole Policy, but not a specific banner policy.
- Mr. Archambault expressed the Town Hall represents the Town and feels the Town should be neutral and would support banners being included in with the Flagpole Policy.
- Maureen Kozlark shared the BoS should consider standard banner size and timespan to be displayed. Mr. Marconi shared currently two weeks before an event, per zoning laws.
- Sean Connelly voiced support for crafting a draft policy to discuss in a future BoS meeting.

7. Tax Collector Refunds

Rudy Marconi noted a total of \$6,354.69 in automotive tax refunds from the Tax Collector.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to approve the automotive tax refunds totaling \$6,354.69. Chris Murray seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

8. Approval of Meeting Minutes

a. June 11, 2024 & June 12, 2024 Special Meetings

Sean Connelly motioned to approve the minutes from the June 11, 2024 and June 12, 2024 Board of Selectpersons Special Meetings. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

b. June 12, 2024

Sean Connelly clarified in item 3: “not certified to wear in a structure fire” instead of “structurally certified,” in item 4, indicate “First” in front of “Selectperson,” in item 5b, list all names of the Ridgefield Commemorates America at 250 committee, and in item 7, correct “19,000 sqft” to “11,000 sqft.”

Sean Connelly motioned to approve the minutes from the June 12, 2024 Board of Selectpersons Meeting, as amended. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

9a. Comparison of Government Task Force

Rudy Marconi shared the BoS selected 9 of the 17 applicants for the Comparison of Government Task Force: Laurie Christiansen, Robert Hendrick, Mike Rettger, Charles Robbins, Jonathan Seem, Rachel Sondheimer, Dennis Tracey, Todd Zagorec, and Steven Zemo. Mr. Marconi noted all applicants were highly qualified, it was a very difficult decision, and thanked all applicants.

Sean Connelly motioned to appoint the members to the Comparison of Government Task Force: Laurie Christiansen, Robert Hendrick, Mike Rettger, Charles Robbins, Jonathan Seem, Rachel Sondheimer, Dennis Tracey, Todd Zagorec, and Steven Zemo. Barbara Manners seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

9. Selectperson’s Report

Rudy Marconi shared he’s waiting on the report for 145 High Ridge. The Town has received a blight complaint for the property, focusing on the contamination as the blight issue. Per Cohen & Wolf, the blight ordinance also applies to the parcel of land.

Mr. Marconi shared upcoming Public Information Sessions for the Public Safety Building: July 1 at 3:00pm at ACT, July 1 at 4:00pm at Sunset Lane, and First Congregational Church in August. Chris Murray asked about commonly asked questions. Mr. Marconi shared noise, elevation of the building, traffic, and the size of the building.

Mr. Marconi shared Fireworks will be on Saturday, July 6 and passes are available at Town Hall. Barbara Manners shared Fairfield Counts will be performing on July 4 at 4:00pm in Ballard Park.

Mr. Marconi shared the parking canopy project has started at Ridgefield High School and is making good progress. The crew is working 6-days a week, 10 hours a day, and will be open for parking for the fireworks.

Mr. Marconi shared Suzanne Browning, in the Assessor's office, gave her two-week notice today, and has accepted a position elsewhere after 18 years of service.

Mr. Marconi shared an update on the empty parking lot behind USPS, the Town is proposing a new layout, which add approximately 20 parking spots at USPS, 30 in the back for employee parking, and a pocket park on Catoonah Street. The Plan will be sent to Congressman Himes and Senator Blumenthal for further discussion.

Maureen Kozlark shared the WPCA will hold an executive session prior to their regular meeting on July 17 for a presentation from engineers, budget overview, etc. Ms. Manners asked about a completion date. Ms. Kozlark shared the substantial completion date is further out, but the building itself is in the turnover phase, getting calibrated.

Sean Connelly motioned to adjourn the meeting at 9:40pm. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 5-0.