

RIDGEFIELD HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
Town Hall, 400 Main Street
Ridgefield, CT 06877
October 20, 2025
Minutes are not verbatim

Policy: Historic District Commission meetings will be conducted under Roberts Rules of Order and all participants are expected to conduct themselves with dignity and treat all those present with respect, empathy and civility.

APPROVED PUBLIC HEARING MINUTES

A Public Hearing of the Ridgefield Historic District Commission (“HDC”) was held at 400 Main Street, Ridgefield CT 06877, on Monday, October 20, 2025, and beginning at 6:30 p.m.

The following Historic District Commission members were present:

Dan O’Brien (Chair), Sean O’Kane (Vice Chair), Rhys Moore, Kathleen Daughters, Sara Kaplan (alternate) and Mark Blandford (alternate)

Agenda / Meeting Objectives

To provide a brief overview of the historical significance of the East Ridge Road area and the chronology and historic designation timetable, and answer your questions and address any concerns of the public.

Meeting

The meeting was called to order by Dan O’Brien at 6:30 p.m.

Dan O’Brien introduced the HDC members: Sean O’Kane, Rhys Moore, Mark Blandford, Kam Daughters and Sara Kaplan.

Historic District Designation Process/Timetable – Prior Actions Completed

- November 2024 – Some East Ridge neighbors expressed interest in exploring the possible designation of the area as an historic district.
- January/February 2025 – Other East Ridge neighbors communicated with the Commission to assess level of possible support for historic district designation.
- April 23, 2025 – Board of Selectpersons appointed the members of the Historic District Commission to serve as members of the Study Committee to prepare the East Ridge Study Report.
- June 25, 2025 – Study Report completed and submitted to:
 - State Historic Preservation Office (unanimously approved August 6, 2025)
 - Planning & Zoning Commission (unanimously approved September 2, 2025)
 - Economic & Community Development Commission (unanimously approved September 8, 2025)

Upcoming Actions

Date

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|---|------------------------------|
| 1. Town Clerk mails ballots to the 18 property owners | Tuesday, October 28, 2025 |
| 2. Ballots to be returned to Town Clerk no later than... | Thursday, November 20, 2025 |
| 3. Town Clerk reports on results of balloting | |
| 4. If 2/3 “yes” vote on balloting realized, then at a Town meeting likely in December, Town voters (“Legislative Body”) votes to: | Wednesday, December 10, 2025 |
| 1. Accept or reject Study Report, and | |
| 2. Enacts Ordinance Amendment to add new Historic District | |

A Study Report copy was mailed to all 18 East Ridge property owners, which is also available on the Town’s website at the top of the Historic District Commission web page by hitting the button for complete download. Copies are also available from the Town Clerk.

Town property is not included in the vote as the Town voters “Legislative Body” has the final vote if 2/3 “yes” votes received of the ballots cast by property owners.

East Ridge Historical and Architectural Significance

East Ridge Road, located in Ridgefield's Town Center, has an important place in Ridgefield history and is one of the most beautiful and appreciated historic streetscapes in Ridgefield.

East Ridge Road runs parallel to Main Street on its east side. The proposed historic district runs the entire $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile length of East Ridge Road from the corner of Branchville Road running north to the corner of Prospect Street. A map of the proposed East Ridge Historic District is included on page 4 of the Study Report. A copy of the proposed amendment of the current Ridgefield Historic District Ordinance is also included on pages 59 to 63 of the Study Report.

At the time of Ridgefield's founding up until the 1880's when house construction began, East Ridge Road was a farm road through the "plough" fields on the east side of Main Street. Kam Daughters spoke of the historical significance of East Ridge Road and highlighted that when the Town of Ridgefield was founded in 1708, the founders laid out three parallel roads running north and south along the three ridges comprising the Ridgefield Town Center. More than 300 years later, these three ridges, namely, Main Street, High Ridge Avenue and East Ridge Road, continue to comprise the Ridgefield Town Center. Each of these three roads and the historic properties lining these ridge roads have been fairly well preserved over a great many years.

It is noteworthy that the ridges of Main Street and High Ridge Avenue are included in regulatory historic districts which are subject to preservation protection but the East Ridge area is not.

Fortunately to date, East Ridge Road has maintained the look and feel of a beautiful rural road. The purpose of designating East Ridge Road as an historic district is intended to preserve this beautiful rural road neighborhood for future generations.

The Battle of Ridgefield on April 27, 1777, took place in part on East Ridge Road as American Patriots engaged British forces attempting to outflank the principal battle line on Main Street. The engagement continued down the length of East Ridge Road.

Sean O'Kane and Sara Kaplan spoke about the architectural significance of the East Ridge historic area. The entire historic neighborhood was developed during the 100-year period between the 1880's and 1970's and represents three different important architectural, construction and population growth periods in Ridgefield's history.

The four mansions on the east side of the road between Governor and Market Streets are excellent examples of the large "resort" type houses built in Ridgefield during the period 1880's to 1900's. Home construction on the north end of East Ridge Road from the corner of Prospect Street to Governor Street represents the "Revival Period" of architecture occurring 1900's to 1930's. This neighborhood was initially inhabited by craftspeople, merchants and other working families, many of them recent immigrants from Europe.

Finally, during the 1940's to 1970's, architecture known as the "Mid-Century Period" as represented by the houses on the south end of East Ridge Road and representative of the significant housing development in Ridgefield and elsewhere throughout the country following World War II.

Historic District Property Owner Benefits

- Owning property in an historic district is desirable due to its preserved beauty and history as compared to neighborhoods with no similar preservation protection.
- Studies by various towns and cities in the United States show that historic district properties appreciate at higher rates above market and afford better protection in weak real estate markets.

Certain Concerns Regarding Historic Districts

1. Does Owning a Property in an Historic District Affect My Real Estate Values?

Yes, historic districts have a positive effect on your real estate values.

2. Does Ownership in an Historic District Affect My Taxes?

Absolutely not.

3. Is Getting Approval for Changes a Hassle?

- Changes subject to review are very limited.
- Review only pertains to exterior features visible from a public way.
- Work not requiring an historic district review include:
 - All interior changes
 - All maintenance and repair work
 - Exterior changes not visible from a public way
 - Landscaping
 - Paint color
- Review process is not intended to be onerous and requests are processed quickly.

Public Comments

[Replies to questions are from Dan O'Brien unless otherwise noted.]

Stephen Bartkus, Executive Director of the Ridgefield Historical Society (“Historical Society”), read a letter of support. Copy of the letter is attached to these minutes. The letter's key points are:

- The proposed East Ridge Road area Historic district is an excellent collection of high style and modest residential period buildings coexisting with carefully integrated town owned civic properties.
- Most of the area has retained the character for well over a century and remains largely intact.
- Given the historical significance of East Ridge, the Historical Society strongly urges property owners in the proposed district to support designation of the area as a local historic district and help to safeguard the Town's rich heritage for future generations.

Chris Vahlsing – North Street

Mr. Vahlsing had several questions.

Question: Which municipal buildings were to be included in the proposed historic district?

Reply: The “old” high school including the Playhouse, Veterans Park School and the East Ridge Middle School. Also included is the Boys & Girls Club on Town land.

Question: What is the difference between the four mansions on East Ridge Road being on the National Register versus being in the Historic District?

Reply: Listing on the National Register is an important recognition of the historic value of the named property but does not provide any preservation protection against inappropriate changes or even demolition.

Question: What if the Town were to change the use of the Veterans' Park School?

Reply: An historic district commission has absolutely no purview over a property owner's use of the property. That is a matter for P&Z.

Question: Had the new addition to the library been in an historic district, would they have been restrained from building it as they did?

Reply: Dan O'Brien said the library addition is beautiful and would look appropriate in an historic district. Sara Kaplan made reference to the recent addition of the sculpture garden to the Aldrich Museum and Sean O'Kane said that the front façade of the Aldrich addition several years ago was beautiful and quite appropriate.

Question: Regarding the Queen Anne style mansion of the Police Department, what is the likelihood that an historic district commission would approve a demolition of the building? To what extent is it visible?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said it appears visible from all angles.

Mr. O'Brien said that given the historical and architectural significance of the current Police Station, which is also on the National Register of Historic Places, demolition approval is not likely. However, significant expansion and modification of the structure is possible depending on the plans.

Question: The Boys & Girls Club expanded a while ago. Would the HDC have approved?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said they did a beautiful job. There have been any number of large-scale renovations and new buildings that have been constructed in the Ridgefield Historic District which are appropriate to the area. This would be one of them.

Question: There were so many house variations within the proposed district. Would property owners have to rebuild in the same style?

Reply: No. Every property is uniquely different and the Commission would consider any plans submitted. Mr. O'Brien said a structure built in the 1950s-1970s would have more latitude than something built over 100 years ago. Mr. O'Kane said everything doesn't have to be embalmed. Remember, the HDC would only govern exterior changes. Not paint color, landscaping or interior renovations. Property owners would go before the HDC who would review and possibly make suggestions. But at the end of the day, if appropriate, it would be approved.

Question: If the school was not needed, could it be reused as housing, office space or workshops?

Reply: Nothing is locked in time. An historic district commission has absolutely no purview over a property owner's use of the property. That is a matter for P&Z.

Question: What about the elevation of a structure?

Reply: Plans are submitted to the Commission for review and such plans – architectural plans, sketches or renderings depending on the case – include elevations and dimensions. Upon review and approval of plans, a Certificate of Appropriateness (which means it is appropriate to the historic district) is issued.

Question: What about ceiling heights?

Reply: Changes to the interior of a structure are not subject to review unless it affects the exterior building design.

Question: Was the library expansion in a regulated historic district?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said no. He said the library was in the central business historic district which is on the National Register of Historic Places. Not in a regulated historic district.

Question: Regarding the trailers being used at Veterans Park School, would these be required to be removed if an historic district is designated?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien replied that whatever is in place at the time of designation would remain unless the property owner was interested in making changes in the future.

Question: What about the ability of a property owner to demolish an asset when it may make sense to do so?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien replied that historic district demolitions may be approved if the result and future plans are considered appropriate to the historic nature of the neighborhood. Whether a proposed demolition is appropriate or not is based on various factors including the historical and architectural significance of the structure and age.

Betsy Reid – Great Hill Road

Question: Of the 18 property owners, are any of those Town owned properties?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said no, they are all private residences.

Question: Ms. Reid asked for clarification on the ballots.

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said designation needs 2/3rd of the votes cast by the 18 property owners.

Question: What if a neighbor votes no – is there a legal appeal?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said that he was not aware of any provision in the State Statute that provides for appeal. Upon a 2/3 vote, the designation question goes to the Legislative Body of the Town who are the Town voters at a Town meeting. Mr. O'Brien said the Town vote is the final approval. But if there is not 2/3rd of the vote cast by the property owners, then the matter doesn't go before the Town, and the designation is dead.

Mack Reid – Great Hill Road

Question: Why does the Town not have a vote as the property owner?

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said that he was advised by Town Counsel that no one person or body from the Town is authorized under the State Statute to cast that vote on behalf of the Town and that is why the ultimate approval of the designation comes back to the Legislative Body of the Town (the voters) – the Town voters have the final approval. Mr. Blandford said that the Town meeting is the proxy for the Town.

Amy Dennis – East Ridge Road

Ms. Dennis had several questions.

Question: She has one of the 1970s homes on East Ridge Road. The most she can do in her opinion, for example, is take her shutters down, build a tiny portico over her front porch or a cute little Costco green house.

Reply: Mr. O'Brien said that there are no stated limitations on what property owners may consider. Building additions, auxiliary structures, swimming pools are types of common projects regularly approved by the Commission. Certain property changes are subject to P&Z regulations.

Question: Do I have to ask for a review every time I do a renovation?

Reply: Only changes to the exterior of the structure visible from a public way. All repairs and maintenance items are excluded as well as landscaping changes.

Question: Do I have to pay to get approval from the Commission?

Reply: There is a stated \$50 filing fee which we will gladly waive.

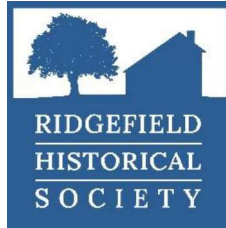
Question: If this passes and changes are made to the public buildings, will taxpayers have to pay more because of certain standards of building as opposed to just building what might be efficient or best use at the time?

Reply: The Town of Ridgefield has always been very sensitive and committed to preserving the historic character of the Town in general and its public municipal properties.

The Historic District Commission, as part of the Town's government, has had a long history of being an advisory partner to the Town on preservation and development matters whether or not the questions pertain to the regulatory historic districts.

Accordingly, any proposed significant changes to these municipal buildings within the proposed East Ridge historic district would be considered in collaboration with Town relevant parties, including the Board of Education, Board of Education employees, the Planning & Zoning Commission and the Economic & Community Development Commission, among others, and open for public comments throughout.

Public hearing was adjourned at 7:43 p.m.



Ridgefield Historic District Commission (HDC)
400 Main Street
Ridgefield CT

October 20, 2025

RE: Proposed East Ridge Road Area Local Historic District

The Board of Directors of the Ridgefield Historical Society wishes to acknowledge the efforts undertaken in a study report to explore the creation of a possible third, state-statute-based local historic district in the heart of the town. One of the Ridgefield Historical Society's core roles is to *preserve, interpret, and foster public knowledge of Ridgefield's architectural heritage*. Our Historic Preservation Committee is asked from time to time by the Town of Ridgefield, Planning and Zoning, and the Architectural Advisory/Village District Committee to weigh in on matters concerning changes to the historic built environment of the town as well as provide historic research. It usually revolves around the potential impact to loss of our character and quality of design. The Historic Preservation Committee is also a co-author and, with the Historic District Commission, a consulting party to Ridgefield's state statute-based Demolition Delay Ordinance.

The goal of historic preservation encourages the retention of historic character, both in architecture *and* its setting. The proposed East Ridge Road Area historic district is an excellent collection of high-style and modest residential period buildings coexisting with carefully integrated, town-owned civic properties. Most of the area has retained this character for well over a century and remains largely intact. Given the historical significance of East Ridge, we strongly urge property owners in the proposed district and the Board of Selectpersons to support and adopt this area as a local historic district. This effort will help continue to safeguard our town's rich heritage for future generations.

Careful consideration of the value of the historic character of the south side of Main Street over fifty years ago has helped retain that special feel that might have been lost to unchecked changes. This is an excellent opportunity to use a state-statute-based process to preserve our cherished streetscapes, particularly in today's development environment, where new construction does not always fit in well with, or respect the historic built environment. We appreciate the consideration and continue to work with all town agencies in careful stewardship of what has made the town so desirable for countless generations.

Respectfully,

Board of Directors, Ridgefield Historical Society