

**Durham Economic Development Commission
Minutes of Meeting of May 22, 2007**

The meeting opened at 7 p.m., called to order by Peter Cascini, filling in for Chairman Rick Hanley, who was absent due to a scheduling conflict. Diana McCain was asked to take minutes in lieu of Mr. Cascini. Members present were: Peter Cascini, Diana McCain, Carlo Montagano, Jerry Lipchus, and Gary Sheldon.

Diana McCain called the roll of the Economic Development Strategy Plan Stakeholders Committee from the list distributed to EDC members on what date. Present, or arriving during the course of the meeting, were:

James McLaughlin, First Selectman
Maryann Boord, Selectman
George Eames, Planning & Zoning Commission
Ralph Chase, Planning & Zoning Commission
Duncan Milne, Historic District Commission
Richard Eriksen, Inland-Wetlands Commission
Lainey Melvin, Senior Citizen's Board
Geoff Colegrove, Middlesex RPA
Katherine Chase, resident
Luke Backus, resident
Marge Stahl, resident

Stakeholder Committee member Diane Moore of the Connecticut Central Regional Tourism District was unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict.

Brian Miller of CERC asked if the Stakeholders Committee membership had been established. Diana McCain reported that a nearly full roster had been distributed to EDC members, but that some of the individuals on the list had yet to commit to participating in the process.

Miller opened the Strategy Plan session by asking why Durham wants economic development. Speakers put forth several reasons, including:

To increase the percentage of property tax income produced by commercial and industrial properties

To lower the property tax burden on residents

To solve the chronic need to adequately fund the schools in an environment in which the town has no control over the amount of funding that will come from the state

To preserve the town's agricultural heritage by keeping more land in farming, reducing the amount of land developed into housing.

Miller pointed out that while putting available land to agricultural use does not significantly increase property tax revenue, it does keep it from being developed into houses that will be home to children whose presence in the school system will increase the education budget.

It was pointed out that despite the emphasis placed on preservation of agricultural heritage, there was as of yet no farmer attending the Steering Committee's meetings. The names of several individuals working in either farming or operating stables who could be invited to participate on the Steering Committee were put forth. Geoff Colegrove commented on how one Durham grower has secured state grants for innovations that allow minimal use of water in operating greenhouses and growing seasonal crops.

Miller asked if employment was a goal of economic development in Durham. There was no response to support that position.

Miller summarized the two goals of economic development in Durham as being to increase the grand list to reduce the overall tax burden on property owners and to preserve the rural/agricultural character of the town.

There was discussion of the fact that existing vacant commercial properties in town have taken a long time to find tenants. Miller commented that most manufacturing/commercial tenants will want to move into a building rather than build one.

There was discussion of the impact of existing, planned, and potential senior citizen housing, in particular affordable senior housing, on aspects of the town's future development, including the size of the student population and cost of education as well as retaining residents as they age with the resulting diversity of generations in the community. Notice was made of an effort currently underway by the town to develop an elderly tax relief program. Miller raised the prospect of an aging population as something that will bring increased demands for certain services that could drive economic development, such as continuing care facilities, medical facilities, and remote or satellite doctor's offices.

There was discussion of the existing water and sewage infrastructure, the limitations it poses on residential, industrial, and commercial development, and options for alleviating those limitations.

Also discussed was the value of open space both monetarily and to the health of the community as a whole in the broadest sense in retaining the rural character of the town. One study indicated that open space, whether kept as forest or put to agricultural use, ultimately results in a "positive cash flow" to a town, primarily because it is not developed into residences that will house children that the town will need to pay to educate.

Miller said the next Steering Committee meeting would be devoted to discussing specific ideas, and asked participants to think about what steps might be taken. In preparation for that discussion, Miller distributed copies of Chapter 6 of the Plan of Conservation and Development, prepared by the Planning and Zoning Commission, effective March 1, 2003, including a list of 12 strategies that were identified in that document. He asked members to provide information about the status of each strategy, if a strategy hasn't been addressed why not, are unaddressed strategies still valid, and what new strategies might be proposed. The existing strategies, and the information provided by group members on their status, included:

Strategy #1

Develop a municipally controlled industrial park south of the Durham/Middlefield municipal boundary, east of Route 147 and west of the

Parson's and Magee facilities. Portions of two parcels assembled within this area would allow the creation of a forty plus acre industrial park that could be serviced by extending Old Indian Trail, which services to Middlefield industrial park, southerly and then easterly to Route 17. The marketing concept is to limit the sale of these parcels to businesses or industries that could meet a minimum assessed value per square foot standard. Although this policy will slow the rate at which the industrial park will be filled, it will, in the long term, provide a higher tax yield on a per acre basis and probably assure a more stable tax base.

The property in question is not zoned industrial, and an attempt to change it to industrial was defeated.

Strategy #2

Develop a detailed inventory of all vacant land zoned for industrial or business use and place this information on file at the Connecticut Economic Resource Center. An immediate second phase would be to inventory all developed parcels including non-conforming uses and again to make this information available to CERC.

Some sites were identified, but nothing further has been done.

Strategy #3

Continue to survey local concerns as to their various needs and provide technical and financial assistance through town regional and state resources.

No action has been taken.

Strategy #4

Continue to market Durham's quality of life to attract compatible businesses. A very attractive flyer has been published and was distributed and has been the source of many inquiries. The document should be maintained and updated as required. The implementation of an aggressive open space acquisition program in excess of 800 acres will help assure Durham's quality of life.

Acquisition of open space has been pursued, using both available state money and bonding, and is ongoing. Concerning marketing, Miller cautioned that it was essential to have something to market, know to whom (manufacturers, commercial) it is being marketed, and to utilize modern technology, specifically the Internet, in that marketing effort.

Strategy #5

Prepare a non-residential development handbook to outline the land use approval process and the various players. The intent would be to produce a concise booklet with all of the key personnel listed and an outline of the land use processes. To remain effective, it should be updated as personnel change and would be available to anyone considering a non-residential application.

The First Selectman would be designated as the contact person for economic development inquiries.

The Economic Development Commission produced something similar to the proposed handbook approximately seven years ago. Miller pointed out that the town web site includes some of the information that the proposed handbook would, and questioned if a booklet was still needed.

Strategy #6

Continue to utilize tax abatement as an incentive to encourage expansion or relocation of businesses into the community on a case-by-case basis. There have been general guidelines adopted for qualifying for the tax abatement program. As the types business and industries we wish to target are refined, it would appear desirable to add addition criteria reflecting these goals.

This is reportedly taking place.

Strategy #7

Hold the line on the existing commercial zoning fronting on Main Street. This policy will limit the amount of additional traffic that can be generated from commercial sources in the future along Route 17/Main Street and help to maintain the residential fabric between the commercial zones. Some adjustments to reflect lot lines are still appropriate.

Much of this has been achieved, although there are still issues to be addressed.

Strategy #8

In conjunction with the Economic Development Commission, the Planning and Zoning Commission should evaluate the desirability of permitting adaptive reuse of residential structures in the Main Street Residential Zone. Traffic volumes have decreased the desirability of Main Street as a residential environment and this concept could be used to encourage property owners to maintain the residential character of the buildings.

This strategy has been addressed most recently in Planning and Zoning hearings on an application to put the Grange Building to retail use, which if approved would affect the zoning of 18 other properties on Main Street. The application had been turned down as of the May 22 Economic Development Commission meeting.

Strategy #9

The Economic Development Commission and the Planning and Zoning Commission staff should work with existing businesses to implement access management recommendations contained in the Route 17 Corridor Study. At the time of the next road resurfacing of Main Street by the Connecticut Department of Transportation, there will be an opportunity to implement some of these specific recommendations. The Department of Transportation will fund some of these improvements, but it will be the town's responsibility to obtain the agreement of the various property owners. This process could require significant lead time and should be an immediate and on-going priority.

A small amount of progress has been made.

Strategy #10

Complete the master plan for Main Street Enhancement Program. To date, detailed mapping exists on the east side of Main Street from the Dairy Serve to Haddam Quarter Road. The west side has been field updated sufficient for planning purposes.

This has been completed.

Strategy #11

Implement a program for common graphics and signage for all public buildings, facilities, and attractions. This program is a component of Strategy #10 and should be included in the scope of services for the preparation of the Master Plan. Removal of the billboards at the north and south ends of Main Street is critical in creating an appropriate gateway to the community. Relocation of Haddam Quarter Road to line up with Route 147 could be a mechanism to eliminate the billboards at the north end. The billboards at the south end would have to be purchased with either local or enhancement funds. There is also a need to develop a uniform and visible identification system for ranges of street numbers to assist the business as well as the traveling public. Removal of excess traffic signs and illegal commercial signs would enhance Durham's quality of life.

Efforts made toward implementing this strategy have met with little success. The company that owns the billboards and the land on which they stand has expressed no interest in either removing them or selling the land. A proposal to relocate Haddam Quarter Road has been presented to the state, but is unlikely to begin in the foreseeable future. DOT has been contacted about the signage issue, but there has been no response.

Strategy #12

The Planning and Zoning Commission and the Economic Development Commission should meet at least quarterly to assure close communications on projects and policy changes.

This has not occurred. Miller said he did not think quarterly meetings were necessary, and suggested meetings be held "as needed."

The meeting adjourned at 8:50 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 29, at 7 p.m. in the Durham Public Library.

Respectfully submitted,

Diana McCain

May 28, 2007