

**CITY OF NORWALK
PLANNING COMMITTEE OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
AUGUST 4, 2016**

ATTENDANCE: John Kydes, Chair; Shannon O'Toole-Giandurco, John Igneri, Faye Bowman (7:06 p.m.)

STAFF: Hunter Arton, Community Outreach Administrator; Timothy Sheehan, Redevelopment Director (7:07 p.m.); Tami Strauss, Director of Community Development Planning (7:07 p.m.)

OTHERS: Bruce Kimmel, Council President; Council Member Eloisa Melendez; Matt Storch, Peter Bondi, Richard Brescia, Parking Authority Chairman; Michael Harden, Parking Authority Vice Chairman

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Kydes called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m. A quorum was not present.

PUBLIC HEARING

Review CDBG Program Performance for Program Year 41 (July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016).

Mr. Kydes opened the Public Hearing on the CDBG Program Performance for Program Year 41 (July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016) at 7:04 p.m. He asked if there was anyone present who wished to address the Committee regarding the CDBG Program Performance for Program Year 41. He repeated the question. Hearing none, Mr. Kydes closed the Public Hearing on the CDBG Program Performance at 7:05 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Mr. Kydes called the roll. A quorum was not present.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Mr. Matt Storch came forward to address the Committee.

Ms. Bowman joined the meeting at 7:06 p.m. A quorum was now present.

Mr. Storch said that he was present to talk about the parking rate increase and the parking in Norwalk and South Norwalk. The restaurant business needs to stay competitive in

parking. He said that Norwalk has been on the lower side of the competitive rates. He said that at night the attractiveness of Saugatuck and Westport as a destination has been increasing and the available parking inventory in Norwalk has been increasing because of this. He said that the price increase of \$1.50 an hour may discourage people from coming to South Norwalk.

Mr. Sheehan and Ms. Strauss joined the meeting at 7:07 p.m.

Mr. Storch said that he noticed that when the parking deck changed over to the license plate system at the Haviland deck, there has been a bit of difficulty for some of the customers. There are a group of merchants that were considering parking validations. There wasn't a consistent level of enforcement with the issuance of parking tickets. Right now, the parking staff is more aggressive and the customers have become annoyed and don't come back.

The new owner of one of the restaurants then came forward and spoke about the fact that the merchants just found out that the parking rates were going up. The back lot rate increased from \$7.00 to \$10.00 and the patrons get angry when they get a ticket. In the summertime in Norwalk, the businesses slow down. He suggested that the merchants work with the City to find a solution.

Mr. Peter Bondi, the owner of the Bondi Realty Group, said that he often sits in on many of the SoNo meetings. He said that while he often suggests to people that they use the Maritime Garage, many people are afraid to walk to the garage from Washington Street. He said that the Parking Authority was considering putting in more lighting. However, the restaurant employees often can't use the garage because it closes at 2 a.m., but the employees aren't finished with their work. He pointed out that when something like this hits social media, it can kill a business.

Ms. Arton left the meeting at 7:10 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES.

July 7, 2016 Regular Meeting

**** MR. IGNERI MOVED THE MINUTES OF THE JULY 7, 2016 REGULAR MEETING.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED WITH TWO IN FAVOR (IGNERI AND KYDES) AND TWO ABSTENTIONS (BOWMAN AND O'TOOLE-GIANDURCO)**

BUSINESS

A, Discussion of Parking Authority's Rate Adjustment

Mr. Kydes thanked Mr. Brescia, the Parking Authority Chair, for attending. Mr. Brescia introduced Mr. Harden, who is the Parking Authority Vice Chair. Mr. Brescia said that he was happy to hear that the restaurants were getting together to talk about creating energy and would be open to meeting with them in the future.

Mr. Brescia then spoke about the rationale of the rate changes in SoNo. He explained that before he joined the Parking Authority in 2014, he was not even aware there was a Parking Authority in Norwalk.

The rationale for the rate increases was designed to create an atmosphere for the customers who were coming down to SoNo for the restaurants. When the parking study was done, it revealed that the parking spaces nearest the restaurants were the most valuable spaces, so the increase in rates was done to encourage the business employees to park in the garages. This would give the restaurant customers more street spaces. He said that the Authority had sent out staff to various businesses and restaurants to explain that the garages offer a cheaper rate than the on street parking.

Mr. Kydes said that he had been asked about the change of times from 6 p.m. to 12 midnight. Mr. Brescia said that the Desman study was not set in stone and their staff had interviewed many businesses. Furthermore, the Authority did not agree with all of the specifics included in the study recommendations.

Ms. Bowman said that she felt that the times should be kept more consistent and there should not be arbitrary time changes. She also pointed out that the \$1.50 rate was more expensive than what the City of Boston charges. She suggested that the meters have a two hour limit. The residents around the train station are complaining, along with many other people. Even though Ms. Bowman lives in South Norwalk, she felt that she would be less likely to go check out a new business or restaurant because of the high cost of parking.

Ms. O'Toole-Giandurco asked if the Authority knew the percentage of people that use the parking app. Mr. Brescia said that the number of people using it is climbing every day. He said that it is very easy to use, but that people don't know about it. Mr. Harden said that when this first started a few months ago, the Authority staff told the businesses to let their customers know about the app.

Mr. Igneri commented that the concept of using the garage was excellent but said that there have been times when the Council Members have gone out for dinner after a meeting and the idea of having to walk back to the garage is bothersome. He suggested that perhaps it might be a good idea to have a valet service. There were also concerns about safety.

Mr. Brescia said that the businesses would have to discuss valet parking among themselves. He said that the Authority was talking about adding more lighting

particularly by the railroad underpass on Water Street. He also mentioned that there was a blue light system that could be installed so people will feel safer. Ms. Bowman asked if the problem was a perception of danger or if there were actually crimes that had happened in that area. Mr. Brescia said that it was more of a perception than actual fact. Mr. Sheehan said that adding some additional lighting into an area that is dark may be a positive change.

Mr. Kimmel said that he did not remember if there was any increase in the parking rates when the budget was being done. He said that if he had had the rates in front of him when the vote was taken, he was not sure he would have voted in favor of it.

Mr. Kimmel said that he was aware that they wanted to increase the foot traffic in South Norwalk. However, he pointed out that if the same movie was playing on Westport Avenue and at the SoNo cinema, he would choose to go to Westport Avenue because parking was free versus having to pay for parking in SoNo.

Mr. Kimmel then laid out the actual cost of commuting from South Norwalk, which he said was about \$13,000 annually just to get from South Norwalk to the City. He pointed out that the Desman study said that because demand is high, let's do it. However, he was not sure that would be a healthy situation for Norwalk.

Mr. Kimmel said that his larger concern was figuring out how to bring the Mayor and the Council into the negotiation. Many people believe that the Council has a role in setting the rates. Mr. Brescia said that he had commuted into the City and then walked from Grand Central to his job. He said that the personal impact of raising the rates in SoNo was an additional \$78.00 a year.

Mr. Brescia said that the Desman study was right when they said that there was a supply and demand issue in South Norwalk and there is a commuter parking space wait list of 2 years. In East Norwalk, there is a wait list of a year and a half for a commuter parking space.

Mr. Brescia said that he agreed that there should be some way to bring the Council into the Parking Authority's work. It is important for everyone to be involved in planning for the City's future. The Parking Authority is trying to engage people in a collaborative effort to start focusing on the future challenges for the City. He added that he was looking forward to hearing the Council Members' suggestions.

Mr. Kydes said that it would be important to advertise the meetings, particularly when these types of actions might be taken. Discussion followed about how to improve communications with the business owners and with the Council Members.

Ms. Melendez said that the Council Members often are blamed for things, but it is hard to deal with when the Council Members are not aware of what is going on. She said that

she was upset when she got a ticket for on street parking and was now more inclined to go to Stamford rather than SoNo. She said that she felt that charging for on street parking until 12 midnight was wrong. She asked if they were planning on changing the hours.

Mr. Brescia said that all the rates would be reviewed after six months and the Authority would try to compare the activity on a month by month basis. This should give the Authority a clear idea of what the impact is. Discussion followed.

Mr. Igneri asked what would happen if the parking rates study showed that the businesses lost customers. Mr. Brescia said that they would reconsider the issue.

Ms. Bowman said that Stamford charges \$97.50 for a monthly parking pass, which is only .50¢ higher than Norwalk. However, Stamford only charges \$1.00 an hour for various places and the parking is free after 7 p.m.

Ms. O'Toole-Giandurco said that some of her friends were on the wait list for commuter parking lot and she suggested that there was a very high demand for those spaces. When a friend recently was assigned a commuter parking space, Ms. O'Toole-Giandurco said her friend felt like she had won the lottery. She suggested that they work on finding spaces for those on the waiting lists.

Mr. Brescia said that they were doing a six month comparison from year to year and they will be considering this.

Mr. Kimmel stated that the Authority was financially independent and they cannot run deficits. However, there are times when independent entities must run a deficit. Previously there was not a good rapport between the parking authority and the public. Mr. Kimmel said that he was in SoNo and there were cars parked all over the area but the restaurants were not filled. Something is not right with that scenario.

Mr. Sheehan said that the Parking Authority was set up as an enterprise account of the City. In 2002, the Maritime Garage was coming on line and the City did not want to have that debt in their budget because it would severely affect the bond rating. That was when the Parking Authority was set up. Since then, the Parking Authority has been working on a break even or better premise, which has caused problems. Most of the expense has been borne by the businesses and the visitors to South Norwalk. Discussion about the details followed.

Mr. Harden said that the Authority felt that they had been reaching out to the business owners. One of the things that drives the Authority are the finances. He said that the Authority wants to work for the businesses to have a strong South Norwalk and Norwalk. The Authority needs the support not only of the Council but also the businesses.

Ms. Bowman said that there had been complaints about the parking rate when it was at a dollar an hour. Mr. Harden said that one of the reasons they had raised the rates was to get the cars to turn over more frequently. Discussion followed.

Mr. Brescia said that one of the things that they had hoped to do was to establish a fund to help the local businesses. He said that he had started reaching out to the various businesses in 2014.

Mr. Igneri asked if there was any possibility of adding another level to the Haviland parking deck. Mr. Sheehan said that he did not think it could structurally support another level. He added that he did not want the Council Members to think that the Parking Authority was a cash cow. Their net reserves have been fairly miniscule.

Mr. Kydes thanked Mr. Brescia and Mr. Harden for their input.

B. Wall Street Redevelopment Plan Area

Update regarding Wall Street Theater Construction.

Ms. Strauss reported that a building permit has been issued for the theater. She indicated that there were copies of some photos included in the backup information packet. Mr. Sheehan said that it was beautiful.

Update regarding underwriting of Agency's anticipated \$1,666,000 HUD Section 108 loan to the Wall Street Theater Company, Inc.

The Redevelopment Agency was approved as an underwriter for the HUD loan. Contact has been made with High Impact Analysis, a firm in Albany, NY, regarding a comprehensive credit analysis for the theater. Their final report will be presented to the Committee for review and advancement to the full Council.

Mr. Sheehan said that insomuch as the agency is signing up for the \$1.6 million, the market analysis will be done on the Agency side of the equation. The underwriter has been asking very in depth questions that have not been previously asked of the developers. Mr. Sheehan said that the Agency was assuming the risk and the marketing analysis will help with this.

Ms. Bowman asked if the Council Members could edit and amend the contract. Mr. Sheehan reviewed the details of how the loan agreement was structured. Ms. Bowman said that she was looking to see if there were some provisions in case a school wanted to use it for a play. Ms. Strauss said that because there were Federal funds, there is a public use aspect in the loan agreement.

Update regarding the Master Plan for Freese Park

Ms. Strauss reported that the RFP has been sent out. Five responses were received and three responses will be meeting with the Interview Committee. The Committee will consist of Agency staff members, the Director of Recreation and Parks, the Chairman or designer of the Recreation and Parks Committee and local property owners. Ms. Strauss said that she believed that the Agency could present a recommended consultant at the September 2016 meeting.

Mr. Kimmel asked if there were any discussions about the tax abatement for Washington Village and the blight finding for the area. Mr. Sheehan said that he did not think that Atty. Beltz-Jacobson was aware that there was a blight finding. A brief discussion followed about the details.

ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. IGNERI MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:43 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services