



CHESTER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes - APPROVED

February 12, 2024 at 4:30pm

Location: Chester Town Hall Meeting Room - Fl 2 and Microsoft Teams

1. Seating of members

EDC Chair Pat Bandzes called the meeting to order at 4:36pm.

Commission members present: Pat Bandzes, Carlie Dailey, Rebecca Mead, Heather Amara-Miles, Douglas Mahana. Pat welcomed new member Heather Amara-Miles.

Tourism Representative: Bekah Wright (virtual).

Audience of Citizens: Aaron Page.

2. Approval of Meeting Minutes

Carlie motioned for approval of 1/08/24 Meeting DRAFT minutes with edits. Rebecca Mead seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

3. Audience of Citizens

Aaron Page of Chester Parks & Recreation (P&R) gave an update on the boardwalk project that will connect North Quarter Park to Laurel Hill Cemetery. He pointed out that Chester's current and past Plan of Conservation & Development (POCD) include imperatives for increased walkways, trails, and connectivity between various parts of town. John Williams, Christine Nelson, and Ed Meehan are assisting with the grant-writing efforts to secure 80% of the project funding from Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) grants. This boardwalk, which will be integrated into the Heritage Trail, will provide a unique way to view Chester's wetlands. Rebecca Mead shared her experience in visiting a similar boardwalk in Litchfield, and how it relates to the economic development of that area. Additionally, this project will open North Quarter Park parking to downtown and provide a safe off-road route to travel between the park and downtown.

Bekah Wright asked for Aaron Page's input on the EDC website update, which he agreed to provide after the meeting. Aaron pointed out the need to differentiate the parks around Cedar Lake since there are four different access points to the lake and suggested there was a need for better signage. Pelletier Park at Cedar Lake is home to the snack shack, and a different place from L'Hommedieu Park and Lakeview Park.

4. Commercial Listings and Transactions Update

9 Water Street

This property is currently on the market for lease. No additional information is available at this time.

20 Water Street

The town was approached by Moodus Mud Coffee Roasters as a storefront for buying beans, not ready to drink coffee.

59 Winthrop Rd (Kenyon Property)

There is a town meeting set for 2/13 (weather pending) to vote on the sale of this property to Engineered Septic formerly in Essex/Branford. Their main business is the design & installation of residential and commercial septic systems.

88 Winthrop Rd

The owner of this property is interested in selling and has approached the town to ask about any permitting that had been done. The property is nearly 34 acres and is zoned R2 for residential 2-acre parcels.

132 Main St. (Chesterfields)

This property is back on the market after the previously pending sale fell through. Rebecca Mead is coordinating a meeting with another potentially interested party this week.

List of town-owned properties

There are currently 52 properties owned by the town, which represent opportunities for development or use. The EDC will review the list and have conversations with key stakeholders to understand the possibilities. Among the list is a town-owned property near a waterfall on West Main Street, currently a small park for residents to enjoy. Bekah said that property is scheduled for a town crew to clean-up on Earth Day.

5. Business Outreach Update

EDC has met with the majority of businesses on Chester's top commercial taxpayer list. Efforts are underway to develop contacts at the outstanding businesses. Carlie is acting as liaison to the Harbor Commission in order to build relationships with the marinas. Common themes from these conversations have included: finding employees and local housing for them; power quality; and cell coverage. The businesses indicated they were largely back on their feet following the pandemic and some are even talking about expansions. Chester's Board of Selectmen (BOS) offered to host an energy-efficiency forum this spring through Eversource for these businesses. EDC plans to make touch-points with these businesses ongoing and regular. Since sourcing contacts at some businesses remains a challenge, there was discussion of alternate ways to connect with them. The town has several lists that could be compiled to build a main list that might be helpful.

6. Cell Tower Lease Agreement

This project is on hold. Other cell tower projects in the area might have made ours obsolete. One tower planned for the Tylerville section of Haddam may improve service for a northern section of Chester. Since village coverage would remain an issue, Pat is exploring other options this week. The congregational church has offered their steeple as another potential site, if we can find an interested developer.

7. Village Center Parking, Deliveries, Signage

Gregg Cook emailed First Selectman Cindy Lignar and Trooper Matt Warren to inform them that the parking lot at his 4 Water Street property will be closed to parking during town events going forward. Questions remain about the impact on Wheat Market or Thai Riverside customers on these days.

There were several updates on parking lots throughout Chester. Line striping will commence at Water Street and Maple Street lots this spring. The striping is expected to add additional parking spots through efficiency in both of these lots. A 17-space parking lot at Chester Hose Company is being examined with some urgency. The town, with the help of State Representative Christine Palm, is exploring a state grant to help with funding. Talks are occurring between the Town and the United Church of Chester to allow public parking on their lot. Additionally, the Norma Terris Theater is interested in working with the town on parking.

Deliveries to the businesses and restaurants downtown were discussed. Recently there have been issues with delivery trucks obstructing fire and/or emergency access. Town Fire and Police Chiefs are involved and remind drivers that parking in or blocking access areas can result in the loss of their CDL license. A meeting with the merchants and restaurant owners has been requested and potential options will be discussed. No easy solution is forthcoming - vendors have their own challenges related to driver turnover that make solutions from their side difficult.

Several signage needs throughout town were discussed. Laurel Hill Cemetery parking lot is available for public parking near downtown, however signage is needed to aid in routing traffic and parking issues at the site. Christine Nelson of the Chester Cemetery Board is working on a solution and will coordinate with EDC. Creation and installation of a wayfinding sign that points to downtown points of interest was discussed. Pat has reached out to the town engineers and is getting a quote for additional signage for the intersection of North Main Street and Route 148/Water Street. Mike King from the Harbor Commission and CTDOT talked to Carlie about marina signage. He pointed out that installing signage on state property is challenging, but there may be a path forward involving installation on adjacent private property. Carlie will connect with the Harbor Commission in March to gain alignment.

8. EDC Website Revisions and Links

A new introduction has been drafted and circulated for feedback. Lists of links and related documents were reviewed. A plan for phased updates was agreed upon.

9. FY 24-25 Draft Budget

Fiscal year 2024-2025 budgets were due last week and meetings on them will begin this week. EDC was asked to include the Tourism budget going forward. The Arts & Literary Weekend and Earth Day events were

included in the EDC's budget submission. Pat proposed a multi-year plan to fund the downtown wayfinding sign that utilizes 2023-2024 budget for design work and 2024-2025 budget for production and installation.

10. Middlesex County Revitalization Commission Grants

Rebecca Mead reported that the Middlesex County Revitalization Commission (MCRC) Revitalization Commission grants will open on March 1st for a full month. Grants up to \$25,000 are available to small businesses and nonprofits who have been in operation for at least 2 years, have fewer than 50 employees, and less than \$8 million in sales. These grants may be used for growth projects (signage, machines, software, leasehold improvements), or unexpected business impacts like from bridge or roundabout construction. The MCRC website has a simplified fully-online application and all the resources needed, including sample applications. Last time, the program funded 78 applications. This year MCRC anticipates double that number of applicants due to increased public relations and advertising. They hope every qualifying business gets the opportunity to apply. Information sessions are upcoming.

11. First Selectman Report

First Selectman Cindy Lignar was not available to attend this meeting. Pat covered some of the town updates in her report.

12. Commissioner/Tourism Updates

Rebecca Mead reported that a Merchants Group steering meeting is upcoming and the agenda will include identifying banking information for rack card funding, feedback on the Art & Literary Weekend, and parking/delivery issues outlined above.

Bekah Wright reported that Earth Day events will be held on Saturday, April 20th only, not the whole weekend as previously speculated. She gave the EDC a preview of her Arts & Literary Weekend report. Despite advertising with local schools, turnout of children to the event was lacking. Adults, however, joined in good numbers. Initial feedback from participating venues and businesses was very positive - Chester Historical Society noting they had many visitors from the event. The jam session held at the Meeting House was small, but generated lots of online engagement and requests for additional sessions. Storytelling and one-act play events also had good turnouts. A full report is forthcoming.

Chester continues to be named top places and was recently featured in an article on "top places to escape the rat race".

The Planning & Zoning (P&Z) Commission met last week regarding the new business that intends to move in at 35 Airport Industrial Park Rd. Further discussion at this contentious meeting was pushed to a March date, owing to notification issues - while abutters were notified, other neighbors across the street were not.

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13. Adjourn

The next meeting will be held on Monday, March 11 2024 at 4:30 pm. Pat will not be at this meeting; Carlie will chair the meeting.

Carlie motioned to adjourn. Douglas seconded. Motion passed unanimously. Meeting adjourned at 6:04 pm.

Respectfully submitted by
Douglas Mahana, Recording Secretary