

Planning, Zoning and Housing Committee
of the Darien, Connecticut RTM

Special Meeting Minutes

Date: December 15, 2009
Place: Darien Town Hall, Room 119
Present: Adelman, Bayne, Bishko, Cleary, Conologue, Fead, Guimond, Hennessy,
Marston, Ness, Olvany, van der Kieft, Young
Absent: Bacon, Magida, Miller, Sini
Guests: David Campbell, First Selectman

This was a Special Meeting of the Planning, Zoning and Housing Committee chaired by John van der Kieft and called to order at 7:33 PM.

van der Kieft opened the meeting and introduced First Selectman David Campbell. The first item after acceptance of the Agenda was a presentation and discussion regarding a study and possible use of 35 Leroy and related town owned facilities.

Campbell outlined his thought process on the use of facilities and took questions on this. Campbell had visited the Senior Center several weeks ago and also reviewed 3 studies, which indicated the various costs associated with different approaches to this facility. Approximate costs ranged from a “bandage” repair to the existing facility costing \$2.5 million, a rebuilding costing \$5.0 million, and a new facility costing \$6.6 million.

Jeff Marston joined the meeting.

Campbell said he had looked at other town assets and came to the idea that the Board of Ed facilities at Town Hall could be a possible location for the Senior Center if it was time to let the existing facility go due to its physical condition and its location, which is “out of sight, out of mind.” The Board of Ed facility could provide a central location, which is close to town services and might encourage more volunteerism for the Senior Center.

Considering all of the town’s assets a move of the Board of Ed from Town Hall to 35 Leroy could be evaluated as a possibility. Alternatively a move to another location could be also considered if the Board of Ed moved from Town Hall.

During the ensuing discussion a number of comments were made concerning the possibilities. Regarding the Board of Ed it was noted that it uses facilities outside the Town Hall (specifically there is use of the portables at Royle School), there are 30 employees in the Town Hall facility and another 5 elsewhere. The Town does not control the Board of Education as it is responsible to the State, The Town is the landlord, but is not paid for the use of its facilities.

The Board of Ed currently uses approximately 13.6 thousand square feet at Town Hall and there is another 9.7 thousand square feet in the Town Hall gym for a total of approximately 23 thousand square feet. The current senior center has approximately 17.0 thousand square feet of which 4.0 thousand square feet is the gym. The Town Hall location does have elevator and handicapped access and age appropriate bathrooms. The current senior center does not have adequate accessibility, bathrooms, and is in need of repair. The current senior center has both repair and safety issues: it has leaks, rotting windows, and a 35 year old heating system which has limited controls. The cost of providing a ramp for access could cost of \$23,000, which could be wasted if the center is then moved. There was also concern regarding insurance and safety issues.

Beth Paris has been hired as the new Senior Center director, coming from Stratford, and it was suggested that members of our Committee visit the Senior Center and meet Beth.

While no conclusion was suggested, Campbell is considering that a study be made on the feasibility of moving the Senior Center, relocating the Board of Ed to either 35 Leroy or another location, tearing down the current Senior Center to make room for more playing fields, and considering the possibility of eventually putting a town swimming pool at the town hall location that would be private/public funded.

The costs, space requirements, and timing would all need to be studied, as would the staging of other town funds uses possibilities such as the Police station and Weed Beach. The senior Center move could be a 2 to 3 year project and spread capital costs over that timeframe.

Further discussion centered on affordable housing as a town priority and the possible use of 35 Leroy for that purpose. Campbell thought that the main thrust should be the Senior Center but that affordable housing, and the Board of Ed facilities should be considered in the same study. Regarding 8-30g Campbell said there are currently several towns in CT with issues in meeting the requirement and this may make this a state issue, and not just a Fairfield County issue. There is also the possibility that another project with affordable housing as a component and Campbell also mentioned the use of accessory apartments. It was mentioned that there is presently a proposal from a developer (MHA) for affordable housing at 35 Leroy and we need to include this in the study, September was mentioned as the date to bond 35 Leroy.

At the conclusion of Campbell's participation in the meeting he said he would be putting together a study group on this and would involve various town parties including our Committee in this small group of approximately 7 members.

Olvany left the meeting.

Guimond mentioned that when the neighbors had initially been contacted regarding the use of 35 Leroy their initial preference had been for a municipal use and then secondly for affordable housing for seniors.

Fead mentioned the possibility of using a part of 35 Leroy for the Darien Arts Center, which is currently at the Town Hall and is heavily booked for all of its available times.

This use of town funds can be “leapfrogged” over use for the Police Station or Weed Beach, which are currently on hold. The Senior Center is currently under the Parks and Rec Department, having been moved from Public Works

The issue of whether we should have a PZ&H Study group or work in integration with the study group put together by the Board of Selectmen was raised. Campbell assumed that the Board of Selectmen would [put together a group of around 7 individuals from the BOS, Board of Finance, PZ&H, and the community. Our committee would be included in this group. After discussion it was the consensus of our committee to wait until after the next BOS meeting on January 4 to see what they had to say and what their direction was on this.

David Campbell left the meeting.

van der Kieft raised the issue that our committee will also have tax abatement as an issue in our area and will need to provide a point of view for the RTM. This issue was initially brought up in connection with Allen-O’Neill, but as it affects the town’s tax base it should be considered in a broader context. Any abatement would be in connection with low and moderate housing. Allen-O’Neill wants to put an ordinance on this into effect for their next submission in March. The town’s only involvement with this submission will be from a tax perspective. It was agreed that van der Kieft would tell Armour that we are not ready for this to be put on the agenda for the January 13 RTM meeting.

Adelman volunteered to put in place a system to collect and then disseminate information from the various town meetings that members of our committee attend. After consideration it was decided that in the interest of time that members attending meetings would send the relevant information directly to the committee members.

There was a brief discussion of the 2 existing Study groups, both will be on our next agenda for an update on their studies.

Our next Regular meeting is on January 13 and the agenda will include the study updates, approval of 2 meeting minutes, Guimond requested that a 35 Leroy/Senior Center Study group consideration also be on our next agenda.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:24 PM.
Respectfully submitted by Mary K. Ness, Clerk