

Economic Development Advisory Council

2.20.13 Meeting minutes

Americana Room – Hampshire Hills

Present:

Michael Brisebois, Hitchiner Mfg Co
Matt Ciardelli, Ciardelli Fuel Co
Chris Costantino, Conservation Commission
Rosie Deloge, Milford School System
Mark Fougere, Board of Selectmen
Tracy Hutchins, DO-IT
Heather Leach, Centrix Bank
John McCormack, TIFD
Penny Seaver, Bean Seaver & Smith
John Siergiewicz, Hollis Line Machine Co
Sean Trombly, Trombly Gardens
Dale White, Leighton A White, Inc.

Excused:

George Infanti, Milford Paint

Absent:

Janet Langdell, Planning Board

Bill Parker, Director Community Development
Gary Chabot, NH DRED
Dan Scanlon, Grubb & Ellis
Michael Bergeron, NH DRED (Out of State business recruitment, manager)
Shirley Wilson, Recording secretary

M. Ciardelli called the meeting to order at 7:30AM, welcomed today's guests and reviewed the minutes from the November meeting.

Minutes:

M. Brisebois made a motion to accept the minutes from 11/14/12. T. Hutchins seconded and all in favor.

Update on Current Work Efforts:

Policies and Procedures:

J. McCormack gave an overview of the sub-committee's past work and explained the current undertaking. We developed a survey to go out to customers with a focus on the planning, permitting and inspection process and spent a lot of time working with the internal departments regarding communication, timing, unnecessary overlap or redundancies and to spread the message that "time is money." This survey will obtain the customer's point of view to see if the inside work had an impact on the external customers. We developed the list from customers that had interaction with the various departments over the past two to three years. It is still early but we are hopeful to get more feedback. The reactions have been fairly positive overall but there is some reluctance to be too forthcoming. One comment was that the website was improved and there is more information on the process once you are on the website, unfortunately we still need to acquaint the customers with the website. Dale & I are to meet with Hitchiner and their general contractor next week so hopefully that will be productive and solicit additional feedback.

P. Seaver said she contacted the low lying fruit on her list and is waiting to hear back from the more complicated projects. Most were not reluctant to talk about their experiences, but they were reluctant to write about their issues. Overall the initial responses have been positive; people enjoy working with the folks downtown because their guidance is helpful and people don't always want to take the initiative themselves. The process is in place, they're aware of the general guidelines for the process, and the website is a resource that offers information without going downtown. Keeping in contact with the customers and sending gentle requests will improve their confidence in the process and with the departments.

M. Ciardelli agreed with Penny, in that the feedback on the forms is very vague and the challenge will be to differentiate between the process and the personalities or the process and the grievance. There has been progress and there is good information out there that people are willing to share, we just need to figure out how to get it out of them. It might be good to hold a task oriented discussion at the roundtable.

B. Parker said he looked at four of the surveys and also agreed that there was some good feedback. We go out of our way in the office to help people.

M. Brisebois asked if any of the projects needed something from the state and whether they were looking for that one-stop shop or were all the requirements local. M. Ciardelli said the early responses have pertained to smaller projects governed by local regulations.

M. Fougere asked how the surveys was sent out. J. McCormack replied they were sent out with the opportunity of face to face time. M. Fougere said there is a fear of backlash in the building community with specifics, which he's seen himself. J. McCormack said we were hoping for a collection of input, not just one or two, that way if we see a pattern, it could be addressed.

D. White said he contacted six people from his list and only two returns were received, but they had great, straightforward comments. The other four have been contacted several times by phone and email, but we still don't have the surveys back; however, when talking to those individuals they all said, in comparison to other towns, working in Milford is a good experience overall although there were some personality issues. They would not commit to putting their real feelings down on paper. There are issues out there, some of which may be based on selfish reasons, but we want our businesses to know that they are important; we will listen to them and will keep in contact. The common denominators in the negative responses so far have been the Building Inspector and Fire Department for unreasonable requests.

M. Ciardelli said this has been a good starting point, but asked where do we go from here. J. McCormack said we need some time to boil down the responses but we could finalize the data for the roundtable. M. Brisebois suggested some structured problem solving techniques to not make things so personal. Instead of a discussion, everyone in the room could go around and say one thing and after a while it exhausts the comments because everyone is saying the same thing. Another way is to use sticky notes where each participant writes their comment on a note and puts it on a board. They get to speak their opinion but the notes get moved around so it cuts the conversation off and you get to the point without the emotion. J. McCormack said as we continue with these surveys, we could ask who would be willing to participate in a roundtable. The next Policies & Procedures subcommittee meeting will tentatively be held on 3/6/13.

Economic Development Policy:

T. Hutchins said the group looked at various examples of economic development policies across the country and in New Hampshire for communities comparable in size to Milford. It's difficult to define, but there is a difference between a policy and goals, so we will need to clarify what we want. We are working on two surveys, one for residents and one for business owners to take the temperature of Milford before making any recommendations. We should be able to send the questions to the council within the next few weeks. We will send out the surveys, tally the results and come back with some recommendations. The distribution will be multi-faceted and we will try to get as many out as possible from our business database. We can send an email blast as well and will use social media. H. Leach said we want to know what kind of economic development people want to see, if any, and what would you be willing to pay for; things like infrastructure? What type of development and at what scale? T. Hutchins said we're really trying to make this broad to get a good sense of what Milford wants. There are numerous ways to attract and entice new business such as reduced impact fees, scale, post-secondary training, etc, but it's not free. B. Parker said those really are the basic questions; what do we want and how to get there. The Planning Board will then use that data for the Economic Development chapter of the Master Plan.

Update on Eecotech Partners/West Milford TIF District Advisory Board:

J. McCormack said he, Ryan and John will visit Jack Dugan tomorrow. The contract is up but the TIF Board voted to support renewal for another year for the purchase options of both the former Police Station site and the Brox properties. Development is still slow, but bringing Jack in may provide for some more creative opportunities. The Police Station site is adjacent to a contaminated site and they are optimistic about development with possible opportunity for a hotel or a retired living facility, but the greater challenge is the economic climate. The main focus for Brox continues to be improving access to the site and getting access off the NH 101 bypass. B. Parker added that the regional planning commission (NRPC) is going through the process of prioritizing regional projects and needs for inclusion in the 10 year plan. NH 101 access has been identified and will be included in the 10 year plan, but it may not be very high compared to some of the other regional projects.

The first step is to make the state aware which this will do. M. Fougere asked if the state will allow access and referenced back to the 1990's when they wouldn't. B. Parker said NH DOT still wants to keep NH 101 limited access, but both the DOT and state are becoming more economic development friendly. J. McCormack said the potential expansion of the TIF district could also further facilitate development.

**Community Development Office/Planning Board/MIT Update:
Pine Valley Mill Affordable Apartments**

The project is moving forward and the developer hopes to break ground this spring.

Development interest: Community Development Office

- There is renewed interest in the Lorden parcel off Nashua St for possible workforce/affordable housing.
- The 99 Restaurant site has had discussions for possible conversion to a gas station or an auto parts store.
- Pizzeria Roma is moving to the Shaw's Plaza.
- Hutchinson Point, at North River Rd and Mont Vernon St, is going through the Planning Board for design review for a 24 unit, 55+ housing development. The process has been long and complicated, sometimes, even when it didn't have to be; however, the developers are taking it cautiously and when the plan is done it will be very good.
- The Milford Medical Center is going before the Planning Board for discussion to replace the old buildings.
- There has been discussion on the Cutts' properties off South St which recently changed ownership.

Planning Board Housing Futures evaluation:

B. Parker said the Planning Board just completed a regulatory audit with NRPC to see how we support the Housing Chapter of our Master Plan. Ben Frost from New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority (NHHFA) sat in on the last meeting and he thought the effort was very good. He advised us to apply for round two of the grant which will be used to look at our open space conservation regulations and future housing needs by incorporating smart design and possible higher densities which are good incentives for both developers and for the town. Bill added that Matt was very kind to turn in a letter of support for this grant on behalf of EDAC.

Other Business:

Discussion pertaining to recent development in Rochester:

M. Bergeron said the French company, Safran, located in Rochester because they already had a partnership with Albany which was already situated in Rochester. There was a national search represented by a site consultant and the process was long and drawn out, but at the time there was federal money coming into the state for training so this was an opportunity to grab it. There is no state taxpayer money for incentives but the Governor was able to use this federal money for specific training which is not just for Safran, but for the entire region because that one company would not be enough to support the entire training program. They are the lead tenant and they will infill with other supplier companies. Again, it is an opportunity to attract other companies to the region. In real estate it really comes down to the lead tenant, and if you don't have that, you just have to be prepared by doing as much as you can to be able to move forward when the opportunities arrive. The economy is better, but still weak and there is activity, but that doesn't necessarily mean closed deals. We are starting to see more residential construction as the baby boomers reposition themselves but there is still high vacancy in office space. There is activity the industrial market but that is mainly in the corridor areas such as Manchester, Hooksett and Nashua. For long term growth, the outlying areas like Milford will just have to be ready when the market picks up. What you're doing is very good and it is important that Milford actually calls its taxpayers "customers" when many towns consider them the adversary. Short term growth comes from within and by treating your current customer base in a positive manner; expansion will happen. The survey is a good start and the next step would be to speak with your current customers confidentially, one on one and not identify them. You will never get hard core information on a survey, but you need to do the surveys as a demonstration for the decision makers. Then as you have new people coming to the Planning Board, you can use a simple, brief assessment to have them rate their experience. That's when you really get the information; right after the process. He referenced a consulting company in Salem that has every customer fill out a colorful, simple survey so they can score where they are in terms of customer service. That is a long term way to get people to be more involved in the process. It's a relationship thing. The town needs to communicate with customers in a way that's convincing. It could be a quick electronic survey or a brief phone call to all applicants; however, you need to have the support of the town or this information won't have any value. You will need to come up with a game plan to disseminate all this information and also to gain the allegiance of the stakeholders.

J. McCormack said that Guy is onboard so there will be a willingness to accept these results. The confidentiality is also a good point and he reiterated that we will have to separate the personality from the process to understand the real issues. Maybe we could use a streamlined version of this survey as an ongoing exit interview for C/O's and Planning Board applications. M. Brisebois added that doing the work now and preparing for the future is good because when the economy turns around development will happen quickly. Right now though, do we know the answer to the big box question or what EDAC's initial reaction would be if a Wal-Mart wanted to come in? M. Bergeron said there should be a plan, but sometimes it is just plain luck where you take the opportunity and run with it. Towns sometimes think that they can affect what is going to happen when the reality can be very different. If your vision is too narrow and you only want specific development, you may lose out and companies will pass you by. You need to look at reality and figure out how to make that work.

H. Leach said we've been talking about bringing in manufacturing to the Brox, but could we really support that use with the workforce? M. Bergeron said the workforce is supported by the region, not by town. You explain the attributes of your town by the regional attributes, so you have a large catchment base from Nashua to Bedford. Knowing that the big one will probably not come, you will be attracting small to medium size companies and in that case it wouldn't be an issue. H. Leach said training is an issue and some of our manufacturers are shipping labor up from Lowell. G. Chabot said that the number one problem facing this area is the workforce and finding the right set of skillsets so that is where it becomes beneficial to work with the local technical schools. It is a combination of having the land, the infrastructure, the workers and a place for them to live. M. Bergeron reiterated that first you need the tenant which creates the opportunity to bring forces together, so you have to be ready and then you have to get really creative.

M. Brisebois inquired as to why Marmon/Hendrix moved to Amherst. J. McCormack said we've been working closely with them for a number of years and in this case it was cheap, available space, already built. M. Bergeron said that building was a perfect fit for the type of product they produce the value was in the cost to occupy it. M. McCormack credited Hendrix's local management for keeping most of their development in town with past expansion projects. G. Chabot added that the move to Amherst was a regional win because they could have moved the facility to Connecticut and also credited them for initiating the town's push to create the ERZ program. Collectively that was a big win for the town.

H. Leach inquired about the Permatlach site. B. Parker said there has been discussion in the office with Tom Rolfes of Connecticut Plastics, but the water pipes burst in the building this winter, so the Fire Department is now dealing with the situation. This is a 60,000SF vacant manufacturing facility and we have wondered if an ERZ district could be created from only one single parcel?

D. Scanlon said no matter what kind of business or organization you are, it is important to tell a story and good things have been happening in Milford. He referenced the big story in the Union Leader about Airmar who is doubling its capacity and its workforce and said stories like that are important because it sends the message that a company of that size feels strongly enough about the town to stay here and expand. We are also going to start to see more adaptive reuse of properties and referenced the Pine Valley Mill. We will see more non-traditional uses filter into retail plazas and referenced the new dialysis clinic at the Lorden Plaza. We are about to bring Granite Town Plaza to the market as a redevelopment opportunity. There are some very strong anchors but there is room for expansion on that site. The days of the big boxes are ending and we will learn a lot about the interest from other uses out there; technical, medical or specialty food businesses. There is activity out there but it is a slow and laborious process and everybody is experiencing the same thing. Site selectors find you, you can't put the magnet out and have developers come. People will find this community and the EDAC Council is a very important interface between the developers and the community. M. Ciardelli said it is reassuring to hear that other towns are facing the same issues that we are. M. Fougere said being ready and being prepared is the key.

Next meeting:

The next regular EDAC meeting will be scheduled for Wednesday, April 3, 2013.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:45AM.