

MEETING NOTES
COLUMBIA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (EDC)
Monday, March 28, 2016 @ 6pm
Adella G. Urban Administrative Offices Conference Room

No quorum present.

Those present: Tom Currier; Vera Englert; Jeanne Crum; Christopher Crum.
Also Present: Town Administrator Natasha Nau; Rebecca Stearns; Ioannis (Nikki) Zarbutis

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** 6:10 pm.
 2. **AUDIENCE OF CITIZENS:** None.
 3. **APPROVAL OF MINUTES:** N/A Previous Meeting minutes were reviewed as a refresher of the EDC activity from 20016-2010.
 4. **OLD BUSINESS**
 - 4.1 Review of old minutes/recap of prior work done: V. Englert detailed what was done in past years:
 - Updated business list.
 - Scheduled guest speaker events one of which included Roberta Dwyer who spoke about how to expand businesses and the programs available to help do so.
 - Held breakfast meet and greets with Land Use/Building Department Staff to help put names to faces and provide any help and instruction needed on permit application process. V. Englert pointed out that the Commission used sponsors for the food provided to avoid cost to the town. Commission members physically called all businesses on the town business list to invite them instead of spending money on a town mailer.
 - In the past the EDC had joined the Hartford Alliance however, V. Englert did not feel the EDC benefited much from this membership.
 - The Commission was also a member of the Windham and Tolland Chamber of Commerce. J. Crum commented that her business is part of Tolland Chamber of Commerce and doesn't feel it benefits her company much. The Town of Columbia felt the same and is no longer a member of the Tolland COC but is still a member of Windham. However, she would like to discuss with the EDC in the near future if this membership is worth the cost because most of the benefits are not transferable to Columbia businesses. The businesses must purchase these benefits. They did a survey of all residents. V. Englert still has results. Some requested additional help from the Town for in-home businesses individuals and some individuals voiced complaints and asking "how can Columbia help me??" However, some information provided was helpful.
- J. Crum asked if we have communicated with other towns in the area regarding what their EDC's are responsible for. V. Englert responded that Lebanon has a lot of economic development going on and has a good word of mouth system. However, there was a changeover in the Committee Chair and things changed. Hebron did not seem interested in partnering with Columbia in holding joint speaker and or other economic development events. J. Crum suggested re-approaching Hebron to see if things have changed.

V. Englert stated she feels this is the appropriate time for the two prior business owners in town to share some of their experiences dealing with the town of Columbia when their businesses were active in town. N. Zarbutis who was the owner of “Z Restaurant” stated she had a number of issues with the town of Columbia in trying to open and operate her business. These issues are as follows: the Bldg and Land Use Department could not locate prior owner’s liquor license, the PZC disagreed with her when she applied for a sign permit arguing that she was changing the originally proposed sign when all she was doing was changing the color of the background, the Deputy Fire Marshall delayed an application for additional requests required for permit approval that she felt were unnecessary, she was denied her request by the ZEO to have live music even though the prior owner had this approved.

In addition to Bldg and Land Use issues, she stated she had issues with the Plaza Owner, Howard Jaffe. These issues include: she asked repetitively for insulation in the building because she was paying large electric heat bills and also requested he paint exterior of the building to make it more aesthetically pleasing. Also, she asked to do some landscaping to help the physical appearance but H. Jaffe denied this and N. Zarbutis spent \$3,000 to purchase and sod. Due to all of these trials and tribulations, N. Zarbutis decided to close. Afterward, she even brought in 4 different potential tenants to replace her upon her departure but H. Jaffe denied all potential tenants.

R. Stearns provided a summary of her book store and café business that she operated in town. She wanted to open this business in the center of town (intersection of Route 87 and Route 66) where other businesses have been grandfathered into the residential zone. She worked with the Town Planner and ZEO to see if they could restructure the town zoning and discussed the historic district. Those efforts were unsuccessful and so that is how she ended up one of the vacant units in Columbia Plaza. This also worked to her advantage financially due to the tax incentive given by being a volunteer firefighter in town. Unfortunately, R. Stearns was not aware of all the issues with this plaza prior to moving in or she may not have chosen the location. For example, she did not know that the well had not been inspected in 3 years and there were issues regarding septic. Shortly after moving in, septic overflowed into the parking lot because the grease trap had apparently not been cleaned in 10 years. R. Stearns really wanted to stay in Columbia to operate her business but due to these problems and offers from nearby towns to move in there, she decided to relocate.

In addition, N. Zarbutis stated that she has support from the town of Chaplin staff where she currently owns and operates “Z Best Pizza” but did not have that support from Columbia. V. Englert suggested for those businesses coming into Columbia go where the intended use is currently zoned, thereby making the process easier. R. Stearns agreed and mentioned that Hebron has something called “pre-zones.” V. Englert stated that PZC is currently discussing re-zoning.

5. NEW BUSINESS

- 5.1** Approval of Meeting Calendar - Tabled
- 5.2** Appointment of Secretary - Tabled

- 5.3 Update Columbia Business Directory – Tabled
 - 5.4 Brainstorm ways to make Columbia more “business-friendly” – Discussion incorporated in Item 4.1 above
 - 5.5 Develop Business Page on Town website – N. Nau explained that she has created a Businesses page on the Town website that is accessible from the homepage. She explained that she is trying to make Windham Chamber of Commerce events/resources, business contact information and permit/license FAQ information available here in an efficient manner
 - 5.6 Town-wide survey – N. Nau discussed the potential of creating a town-wide survey with a few questions in order to determine what type of businesses residents would like to have in town (for existing vacancies and new construction). V. Englert commented that the EDC did such a survey years ago and she still has the results. V. Englert also suggested using the recent POCD survey results.
6. **COMMISSION MEMBER COMMENTS:** In the future, the EDC wishes to discuss other program potential ideas, continue the membership drive, decide on being a part of the farmer’s market and consider doing a business fair/exposition.
7. **ADJOURNMENT:** MOTION to ADJOURN at 6:55 pm CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

*Next Meeting is scheduled for Monday April 25, 2016