

Westbrook Council of Beaches

Draft Minutes of the July 6, 2015 Meeting

Barbara Wolf called the meeting to order at 7:05 PM and postponed the Treasurer's report and a review of the prior meeting's minutes until the August 3rd meeting.

Joe Marino introduced Lili Dickey, 2015 WCOB scholarship recipient as being the most improved student in Westbrook High's class of 2016. She was a scholar athlete, a member of the National Honor Society and will be attending Connecticut College in the fall. She lives in Grove Beach Point Association, hopes to become a history teacher and to coach field hockey.

Note: Given the River COG Route 1 Plan on the Agenda and a separate notification that it included plans for a controversial boardwalk from Route 1 to the Town Beach, there was a large turnout of approximately 150 residents, with many from West Beach, Coral Sands and Island View Beach Associations.

Barbara introduced speakers Town Planner Meg Parulis, First Selectman Noel Bishop and Sam Gold, Executive Director of the River Council of Governments (River COG). She provided background information on the composition of River COG, that it is composed of 17 towns which are represented by their elected leaders. The Route 1 Corridor Plan was funded in part by CT DOT, and covers Westbrook, Old Saybrook and Clinton. Consultants produced the Plan, which will be voted on by the 17 town leaders. Barbara said that the Route 1 Plan was defective due to a lack of input by the WCOB, whose residences constitute @35% of Town's assessed value. The Advisory Group to the Plan had three members from Westbrook, including one representative from the Chamber of Commerce and two from the marinas. Barbara said the WCOB was never made aware of the Rte 1 Study having an impact on the beaches, even when she asked if there was an impact.

Two workshops were held, one in June 2014 and the WCOB was never included in either of them. Barbara said that she wanted to respond to the belief that no one can ever build a boardwalk, or anything, on wetlands, explaining that the Town may build on wetlands even if an individual may not. She referred to boardwalks having been built recently on wetlands elsewhere in CT, including in Sherman and Glastonbury. She also was not satisfied by the claim of the planners that the boardwalk and other projects of the Study were just ideas, and that the boardwalk would have to be approved by many commissions and by the town before it could be built. She said that she believed that including the boardwalk in the Study approved by RiverCOG would be very powerful and persuasive and that it would be fast-tracked through Westbrook's Planning & Zoning, especially since the enhancement of public access to the beaches is a goal of the Town's Plan of Conservation and Development.

Meg Parulis explained that the Route 1 Corridor Plan was started before the formation of the River COG. A focus is on improving federal funding administration by the CT DOT.

She participated in the Plan Advisory Group, as did a local transportation agency. Harry Ruppenicker was chosen for his focus on improving sidewalks, and whose residence is south of Route 1. Eve Barakos, a former transportation engineer and a biking advocate, was also a participant. Meg acknowledged that the Plan should have had broader input, and was now glad to have the input of the WCOB. She posited that nothing would happen without Town and public support.

Meg mentioned that the Grove Beach - Route 1 intersection was one area of the Plan, along with marinas, the Town center, sidewalks and bikeways. In response to a question, she noted that if an element of the Plan was objectionable, it could be amended.

Sam Gold of River COG was attending, he said, because the principal planner was ill. He explained that River COG is a regional land use and transportation planning entity. This is a draft Plan, which is still in a public comment period. He asked that written comments be sent to info@rivercog.org, and that one can access their website at www.rivercog.org, which has a link in the WCOB web site. The main purpose of the Route 1 Plan is to look at transportation issues, and the boardwalk was not part of the core Plan. The River COG has no ability to implement recommendations within a Plan, only the towns or the State. Route 1 is State-owned, and any boardwalk would go through regulatory processes. He noted that River COG has no stake in the Route 1 Plan. Sam gave his own email address as sgold@rivercog.org, but noted written comments to above info@rivercog.org were preferable.

In response to several questions about how to provide input, including a possible petition, Barbara pointed out that this meeting was the venue for the WCOB to do so. She then introduced three members of beach associations that would be impacted by the proposed boardwalk to make presentations.

Pat Marcarelli, President of West Beach Association said he was alerted to the Route 1 Corridor Plan a few weeks ago, had formed a task force, and noted Representative Carney was in attendance. He met with Meg and Sam earlier this week. Transportation issues have been long-standing issues, as well as parking and pedestrians along West Beach. He noted that the boardwalk would cost \$1.3 million, that he spoke about it with Reeves Potts, who had recently repaired the gates at both ends of Pilots Point Marina to control traffic through the marina.

Jack Callahan, who lives in West Beach Association, presented on neighborhood impacts. No abutting marsh property owner he contacted was aware of the plans for the boardwalk. Pollution will not be localized near the proposed boardwalk, and will potentially end up in the marsh. He walked the boardwalk at Hammonasset State Park, and noted that pilings would have to be driven and concrete poured, which would impact the marsh. He said that the marsh currently thrives, and should be preserved.

Mr. Callahan said five to six years ago residents noted people unloading equipment on Seaside Avenue to go the beach, and then park elsewhere. Some 20% of the time, beachgoers leave broken or used beach paraphernalia. The town will be responsible for additional cleanup. He mentioned the liability potential with kids riding bikes on the boardwalk, and said injuries could lead to suits.

Tony Cozza, President of Island View Beach Association, said the Plan was flawed, and contained mistakes, including the location of the Town's boundary with Clinton and areas on Route 1. The financial cost will result in a tax increase, detract from other needed projects, and he noted any improvements would require maintenance, with ongoing costs. He questioned whether narrowing Route 1 would slow traffic. He asked Representative Devin Carney, who is a member of the Legislature's Transportation Committee, to look into the funding of such projects.

Barbara also noted that residents of West Beach and other area Associations have taken on responsibility for cleaning up around Town Beach,

Noel Bishop then spoke, emphasizing that the document was the final draft of the Plan. He has a vote on the Route 1 Corridor Plan, he will vote against the boardwalk, and would think it highly unlikely that other Towns' leaders would approve it if Westbrook does not. He stated that there has never been a vote at River COG when a Town's position has been overridden. He noted traffic is an ongoing issue, and when the Town hired a new trooper, the trooper was asked to monitor traffic on Seaside Ave and Route 1. He encouraged input on traffic from the WCOB.

Sam Gold of River COG stated that if the Town of Westbrook wants the boardwalk removed, as per the First Selectman's statement, then it will be removed from the Plan.

In response to a question from the audience about who would pay the remaining \$4 million in costs of proposed projects in Town, Sam pointed out that the State owned Route 1. The Route 1 Plan is overseen by federal and state elected officials, as well as those of local governments. The town pays dues to River COG, and did not fund the Route 1 Plan. 17 elected officials are involved, along with Middletown Transit District, the 9-town Estuary Transit District and the Chamber of Commerce, for a total of 20 votes.

At this point, Noel took over the handling of audience Q&A from Barbara. A question was raised about the \$35 million cost of the Route 1 Plan, and who would pay, since the "State is broke". Devin Carney agreed regarding the State's poor fiscal condition, and noted that the Governor has proposed a separate initiative to raise funds for transportation infrastructure. He added that he is a member of the General Assembly's Transportation Committee, and that no discussion of this Plan has taken place there.

Meg Parulis was asked if there was any provision in the plan to provide parking on Route 1, with access to the beach. She responded that there were some public access points included, but the Town has not included rights-of-way in its plan of Conservation and Development. The Route 1 Plan is provided to the Town to pursue, which would then have to be included in the next Plan of Conservation and Development. This was last done in 2011, will be updated by 2021, and may be accessed via the Town's web site.

Another questioner asked if it was legal for people to park in the Town Hall parking lot and walk to the beach. Noel responded that it is a municipal lot, is considered public parking, and anyone can park at any time. Many times parkers are guests of residents. He noted that an ordinance could be passed at a Town meeting to restrict parking, and to charge a fee and to have it monitored. As an aside to encourage citizen involvement, he said the Town had some 4,000 registered voters, but that only 275 voted on the \$26 million budget this spring.

When another in the audience pointed out that the Pilots Point condominiums were being marketed as having a short walk to beach, the response was that the condos were approved prior to the River COG Route 1 process, and that there was also sidewalk access via the marina.

A question was raised about bus access as part of Route 1 Plan. Bus stops are already part of the 9-town Transit District routes. The Plan, as part of an economic development initiative, suggested that (with a zoning regulation change) food trucks or mobile retailers could be located at storage yards on Route 1 which boats vacate in the summer. The Plan's graphics may have indicated bus stops at these areas.

It was asked whether abutting property owners were notified where the proposed boardwalk would end. The answer was no, and that consultant Geraldine Holiday included a boardwalk in the Plan based on a workshop held in June 2014. Westbrook had input, along with Old Saybrook and Clinton.

Meg pointed out that attendees at that night's WCOB meeting now knew more about the Plan report released on June 22 than do Westbrook's Town Commissions (Planning, Zoning, Inland Wetlands & Watercourses, etc.). She also noted that Jean Davies, the Principal Planner and Deputy Director of River COG, was in charge of the Route 1 Plan, not Sam Gold.

Barbara asked Sam about who were the competing interests on the boardwalk. He responded people who want to access the beaches who are not residents or who do not live near beach. In response to another question, he said he would provide the sign-in sheet of attendees at the prior workshop when the boardwalk was first discussed.

A final audience point was raised regarding traffic, in that if the main problem is during the summer months, why spend the money for seasonal issues.

Noel then concluded the meeting by summarizing: He would vote no on the boardwalk; the next information meeting on the Route 1 Plan will be in Westbrook, with the consultant and COG staff. This will be communicated through the Town's and the Council's web sites. The presentation will include other aspects of the Rt. 1 Corridor Plan, and he will request that a Town employee review the final River COG Rt. 1 Plan for accuracy and flaws before it goes to a vote.

Barbara thanked Noel for taking the boardwalk off the table, and the meeting was adjourned at 9:06 PM.