Minutes of the regular meeting of the Economic Development Commission held on August 10, 2010 in the Town Hall.

Present: Richard Wallace, Chair, Stephen Kops, Colleen Stratton, Tony Fappiano, Cathy Scherer, Commissioners
Jackie Belmonte Simonetti, Economic Development Specialist

Absent: Eric Steinmetz, Mark Matlosz, Nicholas Finkle, Deborah Nason

Guests: First Selectman Joseph Mazza, Selectman Charles Havarda, resident and GPA member Penny Colby

Mr. Wallace called the meeting to order at 6:34 p.m.

1. Approval of Minutes – July 13, 2010 meeting
  Cmsr. Kops reviewed grammatical changes, then upon motion by Cmsr. Kops and seconded by Cmsr. Stratton, it was unanimously voted to approve the minutes as amended.

2. Approval of Bills
   a. July Clerking Invoice -- $99.68
   b. Cell Phone Charges -- $29.99

3. New Business
  Cmsr. Kops talked about working with Cmsrs. Steinmetz and Fappiano regarding EDC’s response to Mr. Magby’s questions at the EDC Forum. EDC to send a letter of response to Mr. Magby and also send a Letter to the Editor to the Guilford Courier.

4. Old Business
   N/A

5. Cmsr. Stratton expressed that Howard Brown called her to complain that he wasn’t aware that Joe Montesano was going to be in attendance at July’s EDC meeting, and that he represented Costco. He went on to tell Cmsr. Stratton that the information Mr. Montesano presented at the meeting was flawed. Cmsr.
Stratton suggested Mr. Brown contact Economic development Specialist Jackie Belmonte Simonetti if he wants to make a presentation to EDC. Some discussion took place regarding EDC’s responsibilities to Mr. Brown’s comments. Both First Selectman Mazza and Selectman Havrda expressed that EDC has the right to either invite potential applicants or to accept a request from an applicant to appear before EDC to make a presentation about a new project. EDC are public, agendas are posted in the Town Clerk’s office and on the Town of Guilford web site, and EDC is not obligated further to post a notice of a monthly meeting. In addition, EDC is not obligated to hear from “opposing” groups; that is not the purpose of EDC meetings.

Discussion continued about the application/permit process in general.

As a footnote of sorts, Cmsr. Fappiano passed around original photographs and the real estate listing when the property was sold to Mr. Russo. Cmsr. Fappiano pointed out that the selling price was $225,000.

6. ED Specialist Report
   a. Meriano’s Bake Shop – Ms. Belmonte Simonetti informed the Commission that Meriano’s Bake Shop is looking for new space and that she is working with local commercial brokers to help them find a new home.
   b. C & C Pizza is for sale and Ms. Belmonte Simonetti received a call from the potential buyers. She offered assistance through the process of acquiring the business.
   c. “The Green” Filming – “The Green” begins filming on August 14 at the Guilford Police Station; Ms. Belmonte Simonetti informed the Commission that film crews will be located throughout town during the next several weeks.
   d. 66 High Street is under contract for sale. Ms. Belmonte Simonetti informed the Commission that the developer and the architect attended the Planning and Zoning staff meeting this morning to present their preliminary plans and to obtain guidance and information regarding any issues there may be with developing the property. The developer plans to create reasonably priced, 1 and 2 bedroom condos on the site. All departments in attendance expressed support for the project and feel that re-purposing 66 High Street for residential use is the highest and best use for the property. First Selectman Mazza was in attendance as well and expressed his support.

First Selectman Mazza went on to express support for the Planning and Zoning staff meetings, citing the knowledge present at the meetings is vast and valuable for potential applicants. Discussion continued about the property’s history and the thought that at one time the town of Guilford considered buying and using the property for municipal offices.

On another note, Cmsr. Fappiano informed the Commission that Ben Bloom, the owner of La Cuisine, has leased 65-67 Whitfield Street, the former Guilford
Traveler and Glee space. La Cuisine is going to retain the space in Branford and Guilford will be a second location, serving lunch and dinner.

Cmsr. Fappiano expressed that the Historic District Commission will have input on the new plans, which include taking off the front of the building to add door-like windows that can be opened so diners can have the advantage of dining outside. Plans also include moving the entrance to the side of the building in the alley. Cmsr. Scherer asked about the status of Michael’s Jewelers space. Cmsr. Fappiano responded that the owner, Larry Lupone, leases his own space.

7. Chairman’s Report
Chairman Wallace informed the Commission that he received a phone call from a Commission member in Essex asking how Guilford deals with municipal parking. Cmsr. Wallace relayed that parking in Guilford is limited.

Chairman Wallace went on to inform the Commission that George Page of Page Insurance called him to express his displeasure at the Costco e-mailing that many residents and business owners received. Apparently Mr. Page’s concern centered around the accessibility of email addresses. Cmsr. Wallace explained that Costco obtained voter registration files for mailing addresses and used publicly available email addresses such as those on the Chamber of Commerce website and/or on business websites. A brief discussion took place as everyone wasn’t aware that the Costco email was not received positively by all.

Cmsr. Stratton expressed her opinion that EDC should formulate a position regarding Costco. Chairman Wallace expressed that he wants to gather all of the data relative to Costco’s economic impact before an opinion is rendered.

Cmsr. Fappiano reminded the Commission that Northwest Atlantic Group is making a presentation to the Chamber of Commerce on August 17. This presentation is open to Chamber members only.

Cmsr. Kops expressed concern over misinformation being spread regarding the Costco zone change application. Cmsr. Scherer expressed her thought that when misinformation is made public, there should be some vehicle by which the truth can be expressed.

First Selectman Mazza and Selectman Havrda both cautioned the Commissioners against entering into “debates”, especially before a formal application has been filed in this case. Additionally, it is not EDC’s mission to rebut incorrect information. First Selectman Mazza went on to advise EDC to rate a project on its own merits relative to the benefits for the town and to always keep EDC’s mission in the forefront, which is to help retain or expand existing businesses as well as bring new businesses to town. First Selectman Mazza reiterated the need for economic development in Guilford because the town simply cannot balance the budget on residential taxes alone. He continued by saying that residents just
recently defeated a $400K referendum new school design plans to illustrate residents’ frustration about higher taxes. Currently on the books is an $18MM bond issue for the Goss property and various school improvements. First Selectman Mazza continued to cite various town expenses for which the town must absorb the costs and challenged EDC to find appropriate business for Guilford, if the Costco zone change is not approved. First Selectman Mazza mentioned a European trade show that occurs each year and suggested that we send promotional material to give Guilford some European exposure.

More discussion continued about the Costco zone change relative to information currently being spread. Selectman Havrda expressed the necessity for EDC and other Boards and Commissions to base decisions and positions on fact rather than fear and anxiety. First Selectman Mazza informed the Commission about the many letters and emails his office and the Economic Development office receives both in favor and in opposition of the Costco zone change and that when a resident calls him, he thanks them for their interest and encourages them to become involved by writing a letter, email or attending the public hearing.

Discussion ensued about the impact of a big box store on local businesses and how that can be measured. Ms. Belmonte Simonetti expressed that she is in the process of finding data that analyzes this issue. She went on to express that so far the available data is from CA and the Midwest and is hoping to find more relevant data, hopefully centered around the Northeast.

Discussion continued about “intangible” issues such as “character”. Cmsr. Fappiano raised the question, “How does one define character”?

Cmsr. Scherer shared a conversation she had with a commercial real estate developer on the West Side of town and the prospect that Costco could potentially bring more people to the West Side and help develop that end of town in the process.

Various Commissioners expressed disappointment over the “death” of Guilford Commons.

First Selectman Mazza urged the Commission to develop a back-up plan to present to DDR should the Costco zone change be defeated.

Chairman Wallace read into the record a letter from Guilford Fire Chief Charles Herrschaft which states that the Fire Department will see no increase in personnel or calls should Costco come to Guilford. He went on to state that although minimal, the Guilford Commons project would have created more calls for the Fire Department that a potential Costco.

First Selectman Mazza informed the Commission of his main concerns regarding this project: 1) that the local merchants will see no decrease in business, 2) that
Guilford does not open “Pandora’s Box” in terms of zoning, as some have stated, and 3) that traffic does not become an issue.

Cmsr. Kops shared an email he received from Jennifer Allcock, resident and member of the Conservation Commission in which she expressed her concerns about Costco relative to Financial Services. Discussion took place about Costco’s business model whereby they “partner” with service companies, travel agencies, etc. to provide services to their members. Cmsr. Scherer expressed that Costco does not offer banking services, nor is Guilford Savings Bank concerned about losing business to Costco. Ms. Belmonte Simonetti suggested that we ask Mr. Montesano for a breakdown of members that use the services available through Costco.

Cmsr. Scherer started a discussion regarding competition and the Commissioners talked about how competition is good for communities and can spawn other businesses, creating jobs in the process. Discussion continued about the application process in general.

8. Sub-Committee/Board Liaison Reports
   a. Land Acquisition Commission – N/A
   b. Planning Committee – N/A
   c. POCD Committee – N/A

8. Chamber Reports
   N/A

9. Public Forum
   Penny Colby, resident and GPA member, was asked if she wished to address the Commission. She declined.

10. Adjourn.
    Upon a motion made by Cmsr. Kops and seconded my Cmsr. Scherer, the meeting was adjourned at 7:55 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jacklyn Belmonte Simonetti
Economic Development Specialist