

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
CITY OF STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT
URBAN REDEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
TUESDAY, MARCH 21, 2005

1. At 8:30AM, Chairman Stephen C. Osman called the Special Meeting to order. The following were in attendance:

Commissioners:

Stephen C. Osman, Chairman
James I. Nixon, Vice Chairman
Joel P. Mellis, Secretary/Treasurer
Edward J. Fuhrman
Neal M. Jewell (arrived at 8:35AM)

Staff:

Laszlo Papp, Executive Director
Rachel Goldberg, General Counsel
Durelle Alexander

2. Mill River Corridor

- (a) **Presentation by Mill River Collaborative Chairman Arthur Selkowitz** – Chairman Osman welcomed Mill River Collaborative Chairman Arthur Selkowitz, Mill River Project Director Milton Puryear, and City of Stamford Land Use Bureau Chief Robin Stein. He said, “About two years ago, I came to the Commission and asked for your support in appointing Arthur Selkowitz as our Mill River representative. Subsequently, a group involving Mr. Selkowitz and myself, along with representatives from the City, the Stamford Downtown Special Services District, Friends of Mill River, The Stamford Partnership, the West Side Community Action Group, Mutual Housing of SW Connecticut, and The Trust for Public Land began meeting on a regular basis. This group, with representation from both the public and private sectors of Stamford, envisioned establishing a not-for-profit group that would raise its own money and advocate for the Mill River Park.” Chairman Osman continued, “These meetings resulted in formation of the ‘Mill River Collaborative,’ a group formed specifically to (i) oversee and advocate for the implementation of the Mill River Corridor Plan, and (ii) oversee the development of the Mill River Park on a continuing basis. Arthur Selkowitz was part of the first group that met, has been part of what we later called the Collaborative because we were all really operating in a collaborative way, and he was unanimously chosen as its Chairman.” Prior to introducing the Collaborative Chairman, Mr. Osman noted that Mr. Selkowitz had been in advertising for most of his career and been president of one of the largest advertising companies in the United States.

Mr. Selkowitz gave a brief overview of the Collaborative’s formation and noted that one of its most important actions was to hire Milton Puryear as its staff person in the capacity of Mill River Project Director. Chairman Selkowitz said, “I have served on various other charitable boards but this personally has been the most satisfying for me because here, for 76 years people have talked about creating a park along the Mill River in the heart of Stamford and finally, we have a confluence of factors and individuals who are actually going to make it happen. Also, when you think about what this green space can achieve in terms of being a catalyst for the revitalization of the Mill River Corridor, I think it’s very exciting.”

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Chairman Selkowitz said, “What I’d like to do this morning is take you through what our goals and ambitions are for this Corridor. One of the first things we did was come to grips with what our mission and what our vision was. We have a very simple mission: to provide collaborative leadership to create and sustain a successful Mill River Park. The key words here are ‘create and sustain.’ One of the things we’ve learned in studying parks of this nature is that nowadays, it is not enough to create a nice park. If you cannot maintain it, if you cannot make sure it’s secure, if you cannot program that park, it will not succeed. So while we envision our Collaborative as a catalyst to create this park, we know it is as important to see that it is sustained. Our vision for this park is to have a world-class urban park in the Mill River Corridor that will serve as both an oasis in City life and a vibrant and diverse green space to the Stamford community. We want this to be a diverse meeting area...to be used...to be enjoyed.... We want to create the ability for people to walk, jog, ride bikes or whatever, all the way from the mouth of the harbor up through Scalzi and out.”

Chairman Selkowitz continued, “One of the things we agreed upon pretty quickly was that you can’t have a world class park without a world class design. We issued an RFP and ultimately interviewed four candidates. Our final choice was the Olin Partnership. The Olin Partnership, based in Philadelphia, truly delivers on our goal. What was most impressive to us was the depth of research and the thoroughness with which they approached this from a presentation standpoint. However, what we also realized was that world class is not cheap, so the Collaborative undertook a fund-raising effort to raise one-third of the money to contribute to the cost of the design contract.” It was noted that, in a relatively short period of time, the Collaborative raised \$240,000 from the community. The overall budget for the design work is \$694,000.

City of Stamford Land Use Bureau Chief Robin Stein said, “I think one of the reasons it’s taken seventy plus years to get to where we are is because the concept has either been in the eyes of the planners such as Herbert Swan in the 1929 Master Plan for Stamford or sort of top down from people in the City, but we’ve never had the grass roots, collaborative support that will give the project sustainability. Also, I was overwhelmed by the extent of the support the Collaborative received in its fund raising efforts, and I wasn’t the only one overwhelmed because we received unanimous votes from both the Board of Finance and the Board of Representatives to approve the Olin contract.”

Mr. Stein continued, “Back when the Sasaski study was done in 1997, one of the questions that was asked was ‘what about the river?’ The City, with a lot of help from Senators Lieberman, Dodd and Congressman Chris Shays and also the Mayor who made a number of trips to Washington, got funds earmarked from the Army Corps of Engineers for them to basically do a Feasibility Study from an environmental standpoint. The Army Corp is apparently very interested in the restoration of rivers so they came up with a 300-page study that recommends the removal of the dam, the removal of the walls around the pond, and the restoration of the river.”

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Mr. Stein concluded, "This is a high priority for the Army Corps. They've received additional funds to do the next phase, which is really the engineering and preparing the specifications for the actual work and, if all goes well, could start next year with the removal of the dam." Mr. Stein added that the Army Corps "is very supportive of us getting Olin and having someone to work with. They have a lot of engineers but they don't have landscape architects ... I think it's going to be a very exciting collaboration."

Commissioner Mellis asked, "Do you anticipate any disruption in the downtown area as the efforts go forward?" Mr. Stein responded, "I don't think so. The work can be accessed from a number of places, either West Park Place where the City owns property at the end and we can open that up, the Main Street Bridge area, or through the northern part of the park, so I don't see any reason for this to have any negative impact on the downtown."

Mr. Stein briefly reviewed land acquisitions/property exchanges and parcels to be conveyed, noting that on the West Side, all of the area for the trail system had been acquired. He added, "We have been working with another design consultant firm and now have a contract to construct, starting in a month and finishing this fall, the first phase of the trail which will go from Broad Street along the edge and down past Main Street to Tresser Boulevard, along the periphery of the park. One thing we really wanted to do this year was the playground, but in thinking about where to put the playground, we decided to wait for Olin to make that decision."

When questioned about the status of the West Main Street Bridge, Mr. Stein responded, "That is still in limbo. This Commission agreed that it was a significant change in the overall Mill River Corridor Plan, so it is now before the Board of Representatives. It is my understanding that there is still opposition to having a 'pedestrian only' bridge even though it has been closed for two years with little or no disruption to my knowledge." Milton Puryear, Mill River Project Director, added, "The main thing I would note about the pedestrian bridge is the importance of the avoidance of traffic crossings. We have found that if people have to cross traffic lights, then the use goes down significantly. And in Stamford, where traffic really has won and cars basically have won the battle in the downtown and we are trying to regain some ground for pedestrians, achieving a totally 'off-street network' for people to get exercise, ride their bikes, jog, walk their dogs, etc. is a very high priority. We think that this is going to have a significant impact in terms of activating the Park. In this regard, we've challenged Olin to come up with ways we can achieve a network so that people can get from Scalzi Park all the way down to the sound without having to stop. This, to me, is my biggest argument for the pedestrian bridge because I think having two-way traffic coming across there undermines our objectives. The other issue is that the West Side Community has asked for better pedestrian access to downtown. A lot of people in that area don't have cars, they walk into downtown, and they would like to see the creation of one quiet, calm pedestrian-friendly route into downtown Stamford."

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Commissioner Mellis asked, "Moving forward with the development of the Park, how does this impact the economic cost for an owner as it becomes a more attractive area?" Mr. Selkowitz responded, "A point I'd like to make is that the prospect and the realization of the Park will be an enormous catalyst for this area. We have been facilitating contacts between developers and property owners and, if we are able to realize our dream, there is no doubt in my mind that the Park will be an engine for economic stimulation and growth."

The Commission congratulated Mr. Selkowitz on his impressive work with the Collaborative and asked about plans for moving forward. He listed the following four objectives:

- (i) Develop a fund-raising plan;
- (ii) Raise additional operating funds for the Collaborative;
- (iii) Establish an operating budget to maintain the Park; and
- (iv) Become a formal Conservancy, a 501.C.3 tax-exempt non-profit organization.

Speaking on behalf of the Commission, Chairman Osman thanked Mr. Selkowitz, Mr. Puryear and Mr. Stein for their presentations and noted that "this is the time for the URC to get closer to and more involved in what's going on with the Mill River Corridor." He said, "This Park is one of the things that will be the URC's legacy."

At 9:45AM, the Chairman called for a brief recess. The meeting was resumed at 10:00AM.

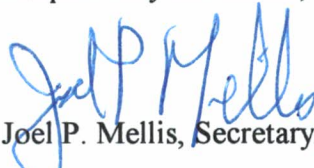
3. Agency Administration

- (a) **Personnel** – At 10:05AM, Commissioner Fuhrman made a motion to go into Executive Session to address personnel matters. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Jewell and carried by unanimous vote. Attorney Goldberg and Executive Director Papp participated in the discussion. No motions were made and no votes were taken. At 11:35AM, Commissioner Mellis made a motion to return to Open Session. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Fuhrman and carried by unanimous vote.

4. Adjournment

There will be a Special Meeting on Tuesday, March 29, 2005 at 8:30AM. The next Regular Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 14, 2005 at 6:00PM. There being no further business before the Board, Commissioner Nixon made a motion to adjourn. The motion was carried and the meeting was adjourned at 11:36AM.

Respectfully submitted,



Joel P. Mellis, Secretary/Treasurer