

MINUTES

Members Present: Chair S. Ferrigno, C. Chukwuogor, L. Watson, M. Hirschorn, W. Okeson

Ex-Officio Member Present: A. Moran

Ex-Officio Member Absent: B. Shaiken

Members Absent: D. Fecho

Staff Present: C. van Zelm, Executive Director- Mansfield Downtown Partnership, L. Painter- Director of Planning and Zoning Department, and M. Ollennu- Administrative Assistant, Mansfield Downtown Partnership

Guests: R. Aylesworth (Town Manager) and John Prete, Agbotic Smart Farm

1. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

Chair Ferrigno called the meeting to order at 6:06 p.m.

2. OPPORTUNITY FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion to approve the November 17, 2020 and January 21, 2021 minutes respectively. Hirschorn MOVED, Watson seconded, motion PASSED unanimously.

4. DISCUSSION ITEMS AT MEETING

A. Presentation by John Prete-Agbotic Smart Farm

John Prete, a Connecticut lifelong resident, took members through a presentation on technological advancements in agriculture to enhance global food security sustainability. Agbotic, which is largely focused on organic farming, is applying for a special permit to create six greenhouses in Mansfield off of Browns Road. The greenhouses will be powered by robotics and artificial intelligence to produce vegetables. Prete said the greenhouses are expected to create 12 jobs. Agbotic has a facility in Sacketts Harbor, NY.

Prior to the pandemic, Agbotic was distributing almost 80% of their products directly to restaurants, but are now mainly distributing to grocery stores and educational institutions. In explaining the benefits of the proposal to members of the Economic Development Commission (EDC), Prete emphasized the unique educational value of the greenhouses to UConn, E.O Smith High School amongst others, opportunities for internship by locals, job creation and an increased tax base for Mansfield.

After the presentation, members asked questions about the impacts of the business on other farms and agricultural entities, particularly CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture); what percentage of distribution will be earmarked for local grocers; what arrangements have been made so far with local grocers and shops; the toll on the roads by large trucks; why Mansfield was chosen for this project; and whether the preexisting aesthetics of the land off Brown's Road will be marred by these structures.

In answering the above questions, Mr. Prete talked about the company's objective to include more local stores for the distribution of its products, his limited knowledge on CSA's and his plan to meet with them in the near future. On the toll of Mansfield's narrow roads by large trucks and ways to maintain the already existing aesthetics, he talked about reducing the axle load and using smaller box trucks to transport goods. He also stressed that the greenhouses will be located at the furthest part of the property and will not be visible from the road. On choosing Mansfield for this Smart Farm project, Mr. Prete praised the Town's overall attractiveness in having everything needed for the success of the project; significant size of space needed, a potential university to partner with, and the welcoming nature of residents. To conclude, he talked about continuing the existing partnership with the Stearns family and leaving the bulk of the land as is with no plans for any new developments in the foreseeable future.

In conclusion, Ferrigno asked Mr. Prete if he needs any support from the EDC. Mr. Prete thanked members of the EDC and commented on the help Painter and the staff at the Planning and Zoning Department have given to him so far. Aylesworth also thanked Mr. Prete for the presentation and wished him well. Mr. Prete left the meeting.

Chair Ferrigno suggested the drafting of a motion to the Planning and Zoning Commission on the EDC's position on the Smart Farm proposal and solicited comments and suggestions from members. Hirschorn suggested outreach to the CSAs in order to gauge their stance on the project and to include the thoughts of the Agriculture Committee. Chukwuogor opined that it is important to support investors who are proposing projects that meet the Town's economic development goals.

Chukwuogor MOVED, Hirschorn seconded to have Ferrigno draft a letter to the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) in support of the Smart Farm proposal. Motion PASSED unanimously.

B. Presentation to Town Council

Van Zelm updated members on the EDC's upcoming presentation to the Town Council. She touched briefly on some of the EDC's activities such as the Covid 19 support to businesses, ongoing work on the Opportunity Zone in partnership with AdvanceCT, and the continued efforts to meet with prospective developers and businesses throughout the year. She shared developments on the gateway signage project and signage for the entire Town, the Economic Vitality Action Plan, community events calendar, supporting other groups such as the Taste of Mansfield, and the proposed budget to support economic development in Mansfield. There were no suggested changes to the presentation.

C. Draft Letter on the EDC'S Position on Housing

Ferrigno asked for a motion to approve the presentation of a position letter from the EDC to the Planning and Zoning Commission on multi-family housing. Watson MOVED, Hirschorn seconded to approve the letter. Motion PASSED unanimously.

D. Review of DRAFT By-Laws - EDC Governance & By-Laws Subcommittee

Watson commented on edits proposed at the February meeting. He suggested including text that would allow for maintaining remote meetings into the future backed by State orders, and as

needed. Moran said a Town ordinance includes language that provide for removal of Committee or Commission members if they miss three consecutive meetings. Aylesworth suggested that the existing language be maintained as needed reviews can be done in future for subsequent By-Laws. Van Zelm will send a copy of the relevant ordinance to the EDC. Members agreed to vote on the draft at the next meeting.

5. OTHER BUSINESS

A. Member Updates- New EDC Members

Ferrigno updated members on his outreach to possible new members. He asked members to reach out to other people who will be valuable additions to the EDC.

B. STAFF UPDATES

Van Zelm noted that proposed wellness facility, discussed in the last meeting, is not moving forward at this time.

C. BUSINESS UPDATES (Closings/Opening)

None noted

D. Housing Updates

Painter briefed members on the Planning and Zoning Department's special permit application for the J. E Shepard Property. She pointed out that the application has been referred to various committees, commissions, and staff including the EDC with a public hearing schedule for April 19, 2021 at 6:30 p.m. Two other potential applications will also be forwarded to the EDC for comments.

E. EDC CALENDER

There was no discussion on the calendar.

6. COMMUNICATIONS

A. Chronicle Articles

All noted

7. FUTURE MEETINGS

A. Upcoming Meeting Schedule

Next regular meeting is scheduled for March 18, 2021 at 6:00 p.m.

B. Future Meeting Topics

Ferrigno informed members that the March 18, 2021 meeting will tentatively include a presentation on the J.E Shepard property.

8. ADJOURNMENT

Ferrigno adjourned the meeting at 7:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by:
Mary Ahima Ollenu
Administrative Assistant