

**CITY OF NORWALK
COMMON COUNCIL ORDINANCE COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2023
VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE/TELECONFERENCE**

ATTENDANCE: Lisa Shanahan; Chair, Nora Niedzielski-Eichner, Johan Lopez, Josh Goldstein, Melissa Murry, Jalen Sead, Sr., Heather Dunn (7:13 p.m.)

STAFF: Brian Candela, Esq., Steve Mednick, Esq.,

OTHER: Stuart Wells; Democratic Registrar of Voters, Jessica Vonashek; Chief of Community and Economic Development, (7:15 p.m.)

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 7:03 p.m.

ROLL CALL

The Chair called the roll.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Wells commented that the committee would be discussing redistricting and that he was available to answer any questions about accomplishing those goals.

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

• October 30, 2023 – special meeting of the ordinance committee

**** MS. NIEDZIELSKI-EICHNER MOVED TO ACCEPT THE
MINUTES AS SUBMITTED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED TWO IN FAVOR, 5 ABSTENTIONS (JOHAN
LOPEZ, JOSH GOLDSTEIN, MELISSA MURRY, JALEN SAED,
SR., HEATHER DUNN)**

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PUBLIC HEARING (possible action on)

There was no public hearing.

PUBLIC HEARING DISCUSSION

There was no public hearing discussion.

OLD BUSINESS

• Discuss Chapter 58A – Blight Prevention.

Mr. Candela presented a slide of a draft that was shared in the agenda. He described the blight ordinance that has been in effect since 2015. He remarked that recently the legislature had approved new amendments concerning blight and the amounts people can be fined for blighted properties. He included in the document both the current and the new ordinances for comparison. Mr. Candela stated that there would also be a redefinition of blight and looked to cities like Stamford and Bridgeport for examples.

Mr. Candela explained as per the draft who would be involved in the process of a property being blighted and who would be considered exempt.

Mr. Candela stated the only real changes were in the definitional and numerical fine value sections of the draft.

Ms. Shanahan discussed the need for a redefinition of what constituted blight. She also felt it was time to address the issue of people with the intentional desire to add a meadow/s.

Heather Dunn joined the meeting at 7:13 p.m.

Jessica Vonashek joined the meeting at 7:15 p.m.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner commented on complaints about blighted businesses and put up for a later discussion on how to ensure and help those businesses meet their obligation.

Ms. Vonashek stated that they were adding additional resources to their Neighborhood Improvement Team. She discussed additional personnel being brought on board. She also indicated they would be hiring a Neighborhood Improvement Manager who would act as a conduit between City Hall and all the community groups. She also talked about committing to attend community and district meetings.

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Ms. Vonashek discussed the creation of a Compliance Committee that meets once a month for all departments that have to deal with any type of code violation.

NEW BUSINESS

• Discuss drafting a new redistricting ordinance with Attorney Steve Mednick.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner discussed the revision of the city's Charter and the process of updating ordinances to be in line with the new Charter. She stated the first thing that needed to be done was the redistricting of the council districts A through E as required by the state statute. She discussed the need to develop the process for redistricting, do the redistricting, and give all involved substantial time to implement the changes.

Mr. Mednick explained that sections 3-4 A3 of the Charter require periodic revision of the Common Council District boundaries. He stated the charter reorganization process was a massive undertaking and the decision was made not to tackle the harder issues. He indicated there would be another Charter revision in 2025 to address them.

Mr. Mednick stated there was one issue that they needed to tackle, the voters understanding one of the items they were voting on was reapportionment. He noted Norwalk in previous charters had not operated under Baker vs. Carr, one person one vote. He stated they were now required to address that issue to ensure that districts have equal population distribution. Mr. Mednick suggested doing an RFP and making sure they comply with the Voting Rights Act. He stated the necessity for compactness and contiguity in all the districts.

Mr. Mednick outlined the process which included the formation of a commission to adopt a plan that would be approved by the Common Council. He stressed the need to get an ordinance in place that would form a commission and create the necessary process. He also stressed the importance of the formed commission to the process and the need to have redistricting completed by the 2025 election. Mr. Mednick recommended as they go into the 2025 charter process, that if they like what they've created by ordinance they should include it into the new charter to make sure it's institutionalized. He also made recommendations as to the size and make-up of the commission.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner wanted to know how far off the current districts are. Mr. Mednick lacked the necessary information. Mr. Wells indicated census data was not very helpful because it's done by block not district. Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner asked if some determination could be made by registered voters. Mr. Wells indicated that it would not be a good method either.

Mr. Wells described the previous districting methods and he discussed the effects of taxing districts. He also explained various issues with the creation of precincts. Mr. Mednick pointed

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out they were not talking about the taxing districts they were talking about the Council and BOE districts.

Mr. Sead had questions about all the new developments and how that might affect the districting issues. Mr. Mednick stated that he couldn't supply a definitive answer that the commission needed to be created and that the commission would then create the districts. He stated that the process would include public hearings, the drafting of an RFP to have a technical expert in place, and the weighing of the public comments vs. the data. Mr. Sead expressed his concerns that minority populations are less likely to take part in public hearings and wanted to make sure their interest would be addressed. Mr. Mednick indicated it should be the responsibility of the committee and commission to engage in public outreach.

Mr. Goldstein had questions about scheduling and everything required. Mr. Mednick said yes and indicated it was a tight but non-specific schedule. He also stated he wanted to sit down with the Secretary of State's office to figure out timing that would take into account potential litigation. He also stated he wanted to explore what the commission should look like and get it together as soon as possible in hopes of getting the full body approved in late February to early March of 2024.

Ms. Dunn asked if a taxing district was a community of interest. and whether they were looking at balancing the census or balancing the voters. Mr. Mednick said you look at the statistical data generated by the census and try for a district reflective of the population. Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner stated it had been litigated and she believed it was to include residents regardless of their citizenship status.

There was some discussion on voting places and low voter turnout. Mr. Wells explained how issues were handled concerning the placement of polling places. Ms. Dunn asked if the redistricting correlates with the census when it comes out. Mr. Wells stated within one year and explained the process by which the legislature decides on their districts, which are then broken up into the appropriate precincts, and then the plan is presented to the council. Mr. Mednick explained how the process is usually done.

Ms. Shanahan asked if this was a process they should be doing more frequently. She asked whether they should put into their ordinance a time frame for after the legislature picks their districts. Mr. Mednick stated it normally works off the legislative redistricting and would have been done a year ago. He indicated Norwalk would be two years behind in the redistricting process. Mr. Mednick said for the next meeting he provide all the committee members with four or five reapportionment processes for their consideration.

Mr. Sead asked if ultimately there had to be a change in the districts. Mr. Mednick said that unless the districts currently comply with the one person one vote standard and the Voting Rights Act the districts have to be changed.

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Mr. Mednick indicated for the meeting next week that he would try to have a draft or at least two or three different concepts. He said he wanted to show them the steps of the process, how they might want to configure the Charter and the commission, and methods of impasse resolution.

Ms. Shanahan pointed out this committee would be different in the level of work required. She stated it would be a quick process if they were going to get it done by March or early April. Mr. Mednick stated he would send five or six plans that are in charters around the state before next week's meeting to find the direction the committee would like to take. He stated this should help him facilitate the draft for January.

DISCUSSION ITEM

There were no discussion items.

ADJOURNMENT

**** MS. NIEDZIELSKI-EICHNER MOVED TO ADJOURN.
** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting ended at 8:09 p.m.

Respectfully submitted
China Mayhew
Telesco Secretarial Services

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