

**CITY OF NORWALK
NORWALK COMMON COUNCIL
AD HOC AFFORDABLE HOUSING COMMITTEE MEETING
FEBRUARY 20TH, 2025
ZOOM conferencing**

ATTENDANCE: Nora Niedzielski-Eichner, Chairperson; Nicole' Eaddy, Jalin Sead, Heather Dunn, Darlene Young, Johan Lopez

STAFF: Michelle Andrzejewski, Steve Kleppin

I. CALL TO ORDER

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner called the meeting to order at 6:00PM.

II. ROLL CALL

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner called the roll call. A quorum was present.

III. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

A. Regular January 23rd, 2025

**** COUNCILPERSON DUNN MOVED TO APPROVE THE JANUARY 23RD, 2025 MINUTES.**

****THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

B. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Diane Lauricella, 21 Little Fox Lane- She likes the affordable housing plan and would like to see a targeted approach of where to build housing. For example, converting commercial properties to residential. She would like to see a more aggressive approach to build and promote accessory dwelling units.

No other person wanted to speak. Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner closed public participation.

C. OLD BUSINESS

None.

D. NEW BUSINESS

A. Norwalk's Affordable Housing Action Plan – Next Steps

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner opened this item indicating that the plan is not formally adopted however, the committee should treat it as near final and start breaking down some of the action items to start tackling. However, there are minimal action items the Common Council is directly responsible for. That said the committees responsible is to keep the plan on track and help monitor and push some of these action item along. This could include guest speakers and other tasks to support affordable housing even though they may not be responsible for some of the actions. As a part of the process the committee needs to select which action are going to be priority. Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner opened it up to the committee to discuss the interested of the committee for a priority.

Councilperson Young brought up the point of what does this timeline look like. Land is sparse within the City to build but how will we tackle this. Ms. Young agrees to the points Ms. Lauricella made with

convert commercial property. The other part is how are we going to move on the affordable housing trust. She is curious how we will be able to help people with those funds and what it will look like. She concluded that there are so many options being discussed that she hopes things will be able to move forward and we don't miss any opportunities as land values increase.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner followed up saying at 6:45PM she wanted to transition into the topic of the affordable housing account and talk about those objectives. Which next steps are to form the committee for that ordinance and get working. The second part to respond to Ms. Young's points is that a lot of these action items in this plan are dependent on designated staff time and the question is should the committee put forth a recommendation of an additional staff member to help push forward these action items. So, this is something the committee needs to weight in on tonight.

Councilperson Young responded saying and if there isn't another staff person what happens.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner followed by saying we can invite certain people who are responsible for certain action items to a committee to address how they will be tackling these action items. Like the folk at the Housing Authority or Redevelopment Agency. Including what Planning and Zoning is looking to do which we can hear from Steve and Michelle tonight. We have also spoken about putting a community forum for May on affordable housing that could display resources, funding opportunities, identifying advocates and public private partnerships to help bring everything together. Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner agrees with Ms. Young that some of these bigger action items are hard to vision like the future of Columbus School.

Councilperson Young responded asking who the group would be to make these decisions and who is a part of the planning process when these projects go to the Planning and Zoning Department.

Councilperson Dunn asked what is the goal? For instance, she is aware there is data and a percent of cost burdened people in Norwalk but what percent of the population do we want to get down to not be cost burdened? She spoke about other options like going after the Education Cost Sharing (ECD) funding. She spoke about the needs to 2- and 3-bedrooms units how section 8 is a bigger driver of these needs because a male and female siblings cannot be roomed together. She would like to see how we can support the school more and how it ties into housing.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner, said that there is a whole section in the plan on federal and state advocacy. Its up to this committee to decide on what we want to commit to and advocate. Including giving testimony at the state house and taking to our legislators.

Councilperson Dunn, reiterated the increased demand for reduced lunch and how much money the City has to put up to cover this. So in a perfect world what percent of the City's population would we want get down to?

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said she does not think the plan stated a certain goal articulated in that way. But rather the plan gave solutions to open up different market of units to relieve the demand to help the cost of housing to decline.

Councilperson Dunn asked Mr. Kleppin if there is somewhere we can access that has statistical data of what creates a healthy city. For instance, like what percent is ownership vs percent rental.

Mr. Kleppin indicated he did not have the answer off the top of his head but we can certainly research it.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner, said that the plan says we need 8,000 units to be able to meet the housing need of Norwalk.

Mr. Kleppin responded saying that the plan also hints at the regional need and what other town could be doing to lessen the high demand.

Councilperson Dunn reinforced that we need a goal to work towards. She also believes there is a mismatch in vacancies verse demand.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said she thought that 250 vacant units was actually a pretty low number.

Councilperson Lopez said after reviewing the plan and seeing the next steps would be to review these actions and principles and see where there are the top priorities. Then he asked if there was a central repository that has current vacancies and does that include wait times.

Mr. Kleppin said that folk seeking unit we typically instruct them to reach out to each individual administrator of a development with units. That we have spoken about tracker vacancies before but the process become to cumbersome for staff having to update spread sheet monthly and reaching out to 30-40 administrators and getting them to respond.

Councilperson Lopez said he understood but if we could find a type of solution to be able to have this would be really helpful for folks.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said there is an action item to help streamline the workforce housing process that includes a joint waitlist. Which hurdle is staff time allocated to this and this committee could consider recommending another staff person to help with affordable housing.

Councilperson Sead said we have to analyze and consider the financial impacts of some of the action because we do not want an inverse impact by raising the taxes which in turn can increase the cost of housing. He acknowledged that this plan isn't a one size fits all solution there are several solutions to push forward but we have to be mindful of the financial impacts of some. He commented on the proposed recommendation of an additional staff person that he feel like it is kind of rushed that we only have 5 days to decide.

Councilperson Lopez said he agrees with Councilperson Sead that we are late in the game to be recommending a staff person however, he thinks conversations with the Mayor's Office other department are needed to see what they think.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said maybe we are not ready for a proposal right now but perhaps something for later in the year but maybe a interim person for next year's budget.

Mr. Kleppin said it wouldn't hurt to put in now because it at least can put it on people's radars in the future. He continued on giving the committee a synopsis of what Planning and Zoning is currently working on modification the zoning regulation for 2 family bedrooms. Another item is trying to make homeowner more affordable more specifically for the hurdle on condominiums construction. Another item that Massachusetts has done is allowing the Housing Authority body have the first right of refusal of houses on the tax sale. Another legislation push the Planning and Zoning Department is looking food desert solution similar to what New York City has done that has tax incentives. Lastly, he mentioned

housing forum for this year that will host a group of entities like Norwalk Housing Authority and Open Doors to come speak and share resources.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said in addition to all these helpful tasks staff was going to also look at the 80% SMI regulation and seeing how that could be tweaked.

Mr. Kleppin responding saying staff is taking a look at how we can tweak the regulations to allow a certain percent over the 80% SMI allowance. However, a policy decision will have to be made by the City whether we allow tenants to remain in the workforce unit that would be over the allowed 80% SMI would no longer count toward the reporting to the State for the affordability calculation. So our citywide percent affordability will slowly decrease overtime.

Councilperson Eaddy believes the City should put the request of a staff person in since there are so many action items seems like it would be effective. She also pointed out that there are a lot of housing need at different level and that doesn't have to look like apartments. She spoke in favor of townhomes. She also pointed out the need for affordable housing in Rowayton and what those options could look like.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said with the city owned parcel the city is limited on what we can do since so many are park land. But this is a conversation to be had on what we want to do. She did not believe there is currently any City owned parcels in Rowayton. She also read an article recently where in NYC has building public housing on top of libraries. She indicated Norwalk is looking to do renovations to the main branch library so why not build housing on top of it. She realizes that many departments are responsible for different parts of affordable housing and this committee can help drive idea to the right people within the city.

Councilperson Dunn said the plan indicated that the price of rental units on the open market are not serving household making less than 83% SMI. If the developer building all these apartments and only the upper 17% can afford them and providing tax abatement to developers. She asked if there is something the city could do to allow rent control for the duration of the abatement?

Mr. Kleppin said this would probably require changes to the workforce housing regulations. That the zoning regulation use 80% SMI and it actually is incrementally goes up every year.

Councilperson Dunn followed up by saying she isn't for using all these tax abatement for developers if we are only getting 10% affordability and it is not serving our housing needs.

Mr. Kleppin responded saying he believe this is a State issue not a local one.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said we are not permitted to do rent control in CT. That new legislation would have to pass in order for the City to adopt a local ordinance. It would be something the city would have to advocate for.

Councilperson Eaddy asked if instead of using the term rent control couldn't be use a type of incentive to build more affordable housing?

Councilperson Dunn said that if the affordable units are only offer for 2 years and the tax abatement is for 7 they are not paying into the city. Which is not meeting our needs.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner clarified the workforce housing unit are not only for two year but would let Mr. Kleppin explain further.

Mr. Kleppin stated that the workforce units are in perpetuity

Councilperson Dunn asked what about the other 80-90% of the units built

Mr. Kleppin said the rest of the units are market rate. He said the plan indicates an option where we can adjust the affordable percent higher than the 80% SMI to address an action item laid on in the plan but the unit wouldn't be counted toward the workforce housing calculation.

Councilperson Dunn asked if that looked like tax abatements or how do you do that.

Mr. Kleppin said I could be tax abatements but we were thinking of it more on a zoning level.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner believed that there were three separate issues occurring. Tax abatements piece like the enterprise zone. Which common council is in charge of investigate a tax incentive program and this could be specifically tailored to a type of housing the city would like to see. The last item is whether the required 10% workforce housing is enough which many folks have agree this is what the market could bear. However, she is skeptical of this and more research needs to be done.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said the top objectives of the committee is the 12-65b with the tax incentives, invite the Housing Authority and Norwalk Redevelopment Agency to come to talk about their tasks. The last item she wondered what might be the consensus about the staff position because the committee would have to move quickly on this item.

Councilperson Dunn would like to see what potential grant opportunities are out there and what Community Service Department is doing and where there might be over laps.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner believe this position wouldn't be for Community Services that the focus would be on policy and data collection. But there is an action item in the plan to coordinate with social services on task items.

Councilperson Dunn said what would the job description be?

Councilperson Lopez, agree with Councilperson Dunn. He asked just in general what are we thinking for this position.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said that it would be taking the priority items from the action items list and recommending those as the basis of the position. She will work on putting a description together and distribute. She asked for the next few months is there anything else people want to see or start tackling?

B. Affordable Housing Account – Next Steps.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner state this committee passed an ordinance to house the fund from the inclusionary zoning fees. Next steps are to appoint a committee and asked Mr. Kleppin to do an overview.

Mr. Kleppin said the balance of the account is about two million dollars and its to be use to rehabilitate, construction, and build affordable housing. He has a memo drafted that he will send to the committee before the next meeting that outlines the application process for that ordinance. It explains how someone can apply and who can apply.

Councilperson Young commented that she wished they knew the exact figure when doing the MLK corridor initiative because they would be much father along on façade improvement but is glad the money is still going to a good use.

Mr. Kleppin did clarify the fund had to be spent on affordable housing.

Councilperson Young said there could have been a conversation had the include this initiative.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said the funds could be used to rehab property to be maintained affordable.

Mr. Kleppin said yes however, he believes they would have to be deed restricted affordable.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said that the next step is for common council to put together the committee for the ordinance. The ordinance state would is to be apart of it. Mostly importantly is the 3 members from the public if people can make recommendations to the chair before the next meeting.

Councilperson Lopez asked how many people are on the committee.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner said seven people.

Councilperson Dunn recommended reaching out to AnaVivian from Community Services for recommendation or serving on the committee.

Chairperson Niedzielski-Eichner agreed she would reach out to Lamond and AnaVivian. And asked if Councilperson Young generated an name from the MLK group that would be good candidates.

E. ADJOURNMENT

****COUNCILPERSON DUNN MADE THE MOTION TO ADJOURN.**

****THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

Sincerely,

Michelle Andrzejewski