Town of Stonington

Monthly Newsletter

June 2022

Dodge Paddock; Photo Credit: The Stonington Borough Merchants Association
-Getting to Know Us-

A look at the people behind our Departments and Boards.

By Morgan Browning

Learning about the Chair of Planning and Zoning, Ben Philbrick

Ben Philbrick has always been interested in community service and helping our town progress. He has been a resident of the town since 1980. Since then, Mr. Philbrick has served on the COMO board and a local firehouse board. In the summer of 2017, he was approached by the former chair of Planning and Zoning. Mr. Philbrick assumed the commission would prefer a younger perspective, but he agreed to fill the position. His rank grew very quickly. He started as an alternate, then became a regular member within a month. David Rathbun, the former Chair, stepped off last summer and Mr. Philbrick stepped in as the new Chair of Planning and Zoning in September. When Mr. Philbrick is not working, he enjoys spending time outdoors. He has a fiberglass kayak, which he enjoys paddling around in the summer. He also has a dog who he spends much of his time with. Something that people might be surprised to know about Mr. Philbrick is that he has spent the past five seasons volunteering with Connecticut Audubon to monitor osprey nests. He does weekly reports of the bird's activity and if the parents are returning back to the nests. A fun fact about our state- In CT there are over 600 osprey nests. They spend their summer months in CT and travel down to Venezuela for the winter. Who knew!

Learning more about the Planning and Zoning Commission

The thing that Mr. Philbrick said surprised him the most about his position on the board was how much work the planning department does for someone to get a project completed. Leg work, reviewing, filing, helping residents. The next to last step is getting approval, the applicant has already gone through plenty of work Mr. Philbrick says that by the time they get to the final step, the majority of the time projects are approved. Properties that don’t meet certain requirements come to the department for approval. There are also public hearings for certain types of proposals that community members can attend and participate in the process. An example is altering a gas station to a hotel.
Mr. Philbrick feels that the Commission takes its work quite seriously. They understand the importance of being fair and following all the legal rules and regulations. The department has money in the budget to start rewriting regulations that in some cases have gone untouched since 1968. The current regulations can be very bureaucratic, hard to read, and the commission wants to streamline it. A company was hired to will work with the Department staff, and will be reviewed by the Planning and Zoning commission. Workshops for writing certain parts of regulations will also be public. Philbrick says that people often think the commission has more power than they do. They do not have the authority to stop Short-Term Rentals, that issue has to become a town wide discussion and decision on possible regulation.

Mr. Philbrick wanted to thank Gale Phoenix and Keith Brynes in particular, as those are the two members of the Department that he works the closes with. He feels that the work they do is remarkable. He noted in particular how grateful he is for Keith’s amazing staff reports. They meet on Tuesdays, then by Thursday or Friday a staff report comes through on what the agenda will be for the next meeting. Drawing pros, cons, and insights on a range of issues. Mr. Philbrick says it is extremely well put together. He can't imagine doing his job without it.

**Learning about our Towns Tax Assessor, Jennifer Lineaweaver**

Ms. Lineaweaver went to Georgetown University and studied international relations. She then took a year off and worked a part-time function between another town’s tax collector and tax assessor offices. She said she enjoyed the job and decided to stay full time. Within a year she was promoted to tax assessor full time. Ms. Lineaweaver had worked in two different towns and felt that she wanted to move to a commercial based town. This led her to taking an assistant position with the Town of Groton. Only a few years later did she fortunately move to our Town. Ms. Lineaweaver says she loves music. She has four kids and spends time hanging out with them, playing music, or being outside. They have instruments in the house from guitars, flutes, electric keyboards, saxophones, and ukuleles. All of her kids love to be musically involved as well. I asked her what is something that someone might be surprised to know, and she felt it was the fact that she actually has four kids.

**Learning more about the Department of Assessment**

Ms. Lineaweaver felt that until a citizen has some cause to be associated with the assessor’s department, they do not realize how much that they do. I asked her “What do you wish other people knew about the department of assessment or your job?” and she said that the department is tasked with valuing all property in town. Organizing taxable properties, as well as
tax exempt properties, motor vehicles, assets for personal property, and restaurants. Something I learned that I feel many other people may not know is when restaurants are valued, they have to include all tables, chairs, and kitchen equipment. The Department also spends a lot of time on land conservations, farms, and forests in our town. Ms. Lineaweaver says they deal with a lot of exemptions involving veterans, elderly and the blind, the department has their hands in a little bit of everything. Businesses in our town operate by self-declaration, documenting their own assets. If needed the department will go out and perform inspections, this helps businesses get a handle on what they are looking for.

When people think of taxes, they think of the Assessor's office. But they actually do not deal with taxes, only with value. The Department of Assessment determines market value. The price of taxes is determined off of the budget, every year an annual grand list is made, this is made up of the value of all the assets in the entire town. Then that number is turned over to the Board of Finance. They look at the money the town has, and then how they need to fill the gap in services. All residents are allowed to vote on the town budget. Ms. Lineaweaver says that the budgetary meeting is the time to be heard and learn where the town money is going.

The next big thing the Department of Assessment is working on is revaluation. The State of Connecticut requires revaluation of real estate every 5 years. Last time it was done was 2017. They are in the process of updating all estates for October of 2022. In these past few years, property values have been rising 25-45%. There is a noticeable shift, and people may pay less or more depending on where those shifts are. Evaluations are done according to fair market value.

Ms. Lineaweaver says that the department tries to do a lot of publicity and public outreach. They offer programs for veterans, active-duty military, elderly, the blind, and people involved in agriculture. They have a lot of great things that can be seen on their website!

Town Department Updates

Tax Collector

We moved this update to the top this month! Stonington tax bills are due July 1st, and are considered delinquent after August first. Taxpayers have the entire month of July to pay without penalty. Tax payments can be made by credit card (there is a fee for credit card payments) on
www.stonington-ct.gov or mailed to: Tax Collector, 152 Elm Street, Stonington, CT 06378. You can also come and pay in-person. We very much appreciate everyone’s support in providing timely payments, as our tax dollars pay for most services provided by the town – schools, police, roads, etc. Stonington has one of the lowest mill rates in the state of CT, which means every dollar really counts!

**Assessment Department**

The Department of Assessment wants to be sure all taxpayers know about the programs available through this office, ranging from programs for veterans, the elderly or disabled, active-duty military, as well as geothermal and solar. If you would like to learn more, please visit our website or contact the Assessor’s Office at (860) 535-5098.

**First Selectman’s Office**

**Town Meeting**- Thanks to the efforts of multiple different departments, all five items up for consideration at the Town Meeting passed. Topics included a tax payment ordinance, updates to the retirement plan’s cost of living payments, a new demolition delay ordinance for historic structures, and ordinances that will allow better enforcement of existing Town policies regarding smoking and hours for Town-owned recreation areas.

**STONINGTON COVID RESPONSE GRANTS**- Stonington is delighted to have the opportunity to partner with the Cultural Coalition to offer this one-time allocation of funds to help our arts and culture community, who are all part of what makes Stonington so special. In mid-June, the fantastic team at the Cultural Coalition were able to award nine grants, totaling $46,280. Grants included funding for both individual artists, organizations and ranged from funds to help market to joining local artist co-ops. One project you will be able to read more about later this year, is for a series of community painting workshops for Stonington children, which will result in art instillations in Donahue Park this Winter for a new ‘Starry Lights’ project being put together by the Ocean Community Chamber. Thanks to the Board of Selectmen, Board of Finance, the CT Cultural Coalition and voters who engaged in our ARPA funding process for making this possible. To read more please visit: [http://culturesect.org/arpa-grants-for-arts-culture-announced/](http://culturesect.org/arpa-grants-for-arts-culture-announced/)

**Town Dock Infrastructure Updates**- Thanks to support from Congressman Courtney’s office, Stonington has once again been successful in pursuing support for funding as part of the Federal Government’s ‘Congressionally Directed Spending’. Funds would go towards much needed
infrastructure for the Town Dock, specifically the North Pier. There are still additional hurdles to overcome, but this was an important step. As part of this effort to identify funding to support the long-term health of this important Town asset, the First Selectman will also be putting forward a grant application to the CT Port Authority for design and engineering work for the North Pier. A representative from the Port Authority came down to visit the Town Dock in-person just last week and discuss the grant process. Stay tuned for more updates on this important project-and don’t forget about the upcoming Blessing of Fleet later in July (road race on the 28th and Blessing itself on the 31st).

**Boathouse Updates** - The Board of Selectman held a special meeting so that the various contractors who will be working on the Boathouse Park property could meet together for the first time. This was an important step for moving forward this exciting project. More updates will follow in the next newsletter.

**Short Term Rental Community Engagement** - On Monday, June 20, 2022, we held an event to get input from residents on the issues surrounding Short-Term Rentals (STRs) in Stonington. While this is a challenging issue, community members deserve to be further engaged so that the diverse views on this topic can be better understood by all. This meeting was the first community engagement on this topic in over five years. To re-engage, Monday’s meeting posed five questions to attendees and input was captured through participants’ written responses. A summary from both in-person attendees and those that shared their input ahead of the meeting can be found on the Town [website](#). We continue to welcome input ahead of the next meeting, and that can come in the form of emails, phone calls or in-person meetings. The next meeting will be on July 20th from 5:30pm to 7:30 pm, at the Velvet Mill.

**Additional events and meetings of note:**

To ensure we are as prepared as possible for extreme weather events, ranging from heat waves to hurricanes we held an [Emergency Management Preparation Meeting](#) with representatives from DPW, Human Services, WPCA, Solid Waste, the Police, and Selectman’s office. As part of this work, we continue to encourage all residents to visit our [Emergency Management page](#). Here
you can sign up for emergency alerts, a special needs registry, and find tips for preparedness. Please know we welcome feedback on how we can improve this page and our resources for residents.

As First Selectman it was a true honor being invited to help welcome over 50 new US Citizens on Flag Day at the Naturalization Ceremony at Mystic Seaport Museum.

We were so happy to help the team from Sustainable CT for a visit to Stonington. We were able to discuss both existing and potential projects in Stonington, as well as learn about what other Towns and Cities around the State are doing across a range of areas.

It was such a treat getting to meet the team who put so much effort into opening the new Visitors Center at the James Merrill House, and to learn more about this fantastic local treasure. To learn more about the work of this local organization visit here: www.jamesmerrillhouse.org/about

It was a pleasure hosting Congressman Courtney for a tour, showcasing the different ways the Town is spending our ARPA allocation. We chose a few projects to highlight, ranging from our new housing rehabilitation program to addressing stormwater/drainage issues and winter storms.
Human Services

Our mission is to foster a more collaborative community by connecting residents with resources, support and facilities that provide the framework for a healthy, fulfilling life in the Town of Stonington. Four Department Divisions exist to work collaboratively to move our efforts forward: Recreation; Social Services; Youth & Family Services; Senior Services. For more information or any assistance: Leanne Theodore, Director:

L.Theodore@stonington-ct.gov

As temperatures start to rise, it is important to remember that extreme heat is the most dangerous type of severe-weather event in the U.S., but we can take action to prepare our loved ones and communities for extreme heat events and related power outages. Learn what to do before, during, and after to help keep everyone safe and healthy. For more information: www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/heat-wave-safety.html

How can we help you? General paperwork assistance; one-time financial assistance; help in meeting basic needs; ongoing case management – we are HERE for you! For more information or to make an appointment with a case manager, please call (860) 535-5015 or email mbanks@stonington-ct.gov.

Stonington Rec News – GOT CAMP?! We had a GREAT start to summer with our ever-popular Rec Camp and Preschool Summer Fun programs both kicking off June 23rd! Openings for certain Rec Camp weeks still remain. Contact Stonington Human Services for availability (860) 535-5015.

Information on all of the summer programs and events can be found at https://stonington.recdesk.com – including but not limited to: Basketball; Tennis; Soccer; Field Hockey; Track & Field Youth Clinics/Meets; Summer Horseback Riding Camp; Stonington Cross County 5K & Fun Run.

Thanks to efforts from a number of different Town Staff and volunteers, we were able to dedicate a new trail to longtime Stonington coach Tom McCoy. A special thank you as well to Christian Cullen for his Eagle Scout Project clearing the Trail Loop dedicated to honor Tom McCoy. If you haven’t already, please come walk or run the new trail in the Spellman Park Complex, just behind the High School.
Planning Department

Zoning Regulations Comprehensive Update

A request for proposals was advertised in early autumn and proposals were received and ranked by a selection panel. The Town is excited to work with the chosen firm, FHI Studios, on this effort. This is expected to be a two-year process so please stay engaged with us on this exciting journey. This project will be divided into 2 phases with the 1st phase focusing on general reorganization of the regulations and the 2nd phase focusing on more substantive changes. Extensive public input will be sought along the way.

Development and Zoning Regulation Proposals

Recent land use approvals include the following:

• Approval of Special Permit application for construction of a 100-unit mixed income, Affordable Housing development at 111 S. Broad St., Pawcatuck, in front of the existing Brookside residential development.
• Approval of 9 lot (including open space parcel) residential Subdivision located on S. Anguilla Rd.
• Approval of Special Use Permit application for redevelopment of the existing Odd Fellows building on 11 Cottrell St. into a 5-room hotel.

The Department and the Town’s various land use boards are currently reviewing several development applications including the following:

• Special Permit application for a proposed gas station and convenience store at 54 South Broad St., Pawcatuck. Planning and Zoning Commission Public Hearing continued to 7/19/22.
• Subdivision application for an 11 lot (including open space parcel) residential development located on School House & Cormorant Roads, Mystic.
• Subdivision and Special Use Permit applications for the modification of the previously approved Crescent Club residential development at Mary Hall & Greenhaven Roads.

The Commission will also hold a public hearing on 8/2/22 on a Zoning Regulation Amendment to adopt regulations for cannabis establishments in the community. During an earlier Town referendum, voters approved of the concept of such businesses in Stonington as allowed per State law.
**Board and Commission Updates**

**Beautification Committee**

The Beautification Committee continues to seek volunteers to help with projects, weeding, watering and town cleanups. Interested residents can email stoningtonbeautification@stonington-ct.gov

**Climate Change Task Force**

Each month the CCTF will share one 'Do you Know' facts. This series will highlight town actions and/or present a different idea each month that can be adopted by residents and businesses alike. To learn more or get involved please contact us or attend a CCTF meeting!

**Do You Know- Reading Options for Climate Change ...**

... Do you know that not all books on the climate crisis are doom and gloom? Here are 3 books that may be of interest (and if reading isn’t your thing, all three authors have numerous on-line talks, webinars, Ted talks etc.):

**Saving Us - A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World** - Katherine Hayhoe. Dr. Hayhoe believes that the one of the most important things individuals can do to address climate change is to talk about it. Talk to your friends, family, co-workers and try to find common ground. “The bottom line is this. To care about climate change, you only need to be one thing, and that’s a person living on the planet Earth who wants a better future. Chances are, you’re already that person - and so is everyone else you know.”

**Nature’s Best Hope - A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard** - Douglas W. Tallamy. People often are overwhelmed by the climate crisis thinking that they, as an individual, can’t do much to have much of an effect on the climate. Read this book - it’ll change your mind. Tallamy shows how homeowners can take positive environmental action into their own hands, one yard at a time. “One of central messages is that effective conservation is not beyond the reach of the individual; indeed, it is your efforts as an individual that will determine whether we succeed or fail, and whether we live in a world thriving with life or in one in which little stirs.”

**How to Prepare for Climate Change - A Practical Guide to Surviving the Chaos** - David Pogue. This book is full of practical advice and tips, even if you are one of the few who believes the climate crisis is a hoax. The author correctly states that the world is getting hotter and even if we stopped burning fossil fuels today, it will continue to get hotter. This is a book about adaptation - “It’s about where to
live, how to invest, what to eat, how to build, what insurance you’ll need, how to talk to your kids. It’s also about how to prepare for the extremes that are coming soon to weather near you: floods, fires, heat waves, droughts, superstorms, water shortages, food shortages, power failures, and social disruption.” You will learn a lot from reading this book.

**Economic Development Commission**

The EDC is making progress on these exciting initiatives!

- "Stuck" property analysis: The EDC is undertaking a census of historically “stuck” properties. These properties include those that have been on the real estate market for a lengthy period of time and/or have unrealized economic opportunity. The goal of this census activity is to better understand barriers that prevent greater economic value realization from these underutilized assets and identify potential solutions.

- "Calling Creatives": Artists and creative businesses are invited to join the Cultural District Committee, a subcommittee of the EDC pending formal recognition of a District(s). Let us know you are here and please tell us about your business. Community members will be gathering information to create a Cultural Asset Inventory, compiling a list and map of locations of artists and businesses related to the creative economy. Whether it be an historical site or a co-op of artists, educational or tourism related, including businesses related to enriching our lives; each one is important to this effort. We meet once a month to share ideas as we plan for State designation, assisted by the Southeastern CT Cultural Coalition. Contact Elsie Bisset, Economic Development Commission, elsieberis@yahoo.com.

See the EDC's Stonington 1649 website for our latest news, and subscribe to alerts for EDC Agendas and Minutes as they are posted on the Town website.

*The EDC is an energetic, committed team of 12 volunteers striving to grow the tax base while preserving the residential character of the Town as described by the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD). We are an advisory body, and make recommendations to our key partners the Board of Selectmen, Department of Planning, and the Planning & Zoning Commission. The EDC focuses on initiatives that support economic growth: table of our initiatives and progress is included on all Regular Meeting Agendas and Minutes available on the EDC page of the Town website.*

**Stonington Housing Authority**

The Stonington Housing Authority has focused on strengthening connections between residents and the community through engagement and referrals. We're thankful for Officer Joe Saunders for coming to the community to host a discussion about common scams and crimes against the
elderly. This event was well-attended by the residents and we all learned about how to take precautions to prevent being a victim of fraud. Additionally, the Department of Human Services continues to be a strong partner to the Stonington Housing Authority. Human Services and the Housing Authority have worked collaboratively to get the residents registered for the Renters’ Rebate Program and Energy Assistance. These programs are instrumental in providing financial stability to the residents and to help ease the burden of the higher cost of living.

Thank you for reading our update and we are looking forward to another productive month.

Thank you, Stonington!