

**CITY OF TORRINGTON  
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION  
MEETING MINUTES  
December 13, 2023**

Present: Greg Mele, Chair  
Greg Perosino, Vice Chair  
Donna Greco, Member  
Donovan Riley, Member  
Jim Bobinski, Member  
Starley Arias, Alternate  
Diane Carroll, Alternate

Also Present: Jeremy Leifert, AICP; City Planner  
Nate Nardi-Cyrus, Assistant City Planner

Not Present: Tom Telman, Alternate

**1. Call to Order:**

Chair Greg Mele called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Attendance is by Zoom or in-person at City Hall Auditorium, Room 218, 140 Main Street, Torrington, CT.

**2. Attendance/Announcement:**

Chair Greg Mele announced present this evening are Commissioners Jim Bobinski, Donna Greco, Donovan Riley, Greg Perosino and Greg Mele. Also present are Alternate Commissioners Starley Arias and Diane Carroll. Also present are Jeremy Leifert, City Planner and Nate Nardi-Cyrus, Assistant City Planner.

**3. Minutes for Approval:**

a. 11/29/23

MOTION by Mr. Perosino to approve the November 29, 2023 minutes, seconded by Ms. Greco, unanimously carried.

**4. Public Hearing beginning at 7:00 p.m., December 13, 2023 City Hall Auditorium, Room 218, 140 Main Street, Torrington, CT**

a. Special Exception 23-07 and Site Plan 1477  
Applicant: Northwest Hills Community Church  
Location: 342 Prospect Street  
Proposal: Cold weather shelter for unhoused individuals and families  
Section 3.1, Subsection 2.10

Chair Greg Mele announced seated Commission this evening are Commissioners Jim Bobinski, Donna Greco, Donovan Riley, Greg Perosino and Greg Mele. Also present are Alternate Commissioners Starley Arias and Diane Carroll. Also present are City Staff Jeremy Leifert, City Planner and Nate Nardi-Cyrus, Assistant City Planner.

Commissioner Greco read the legal notice of public hearing.

Chair Mele outlined the procedures for the public hearing and public comments this evening.

John Simoncelli of Greenwoods Counseling Referrals Inc., Litchfield, CT appeared representing the applicant, along with the support of Greg Brisco, Director of the YMCA and Pastor Michael Burgos of Northwest Hills Community Church, and Christine Tellier, Board President of Torrington Community Kitchen.

Mr. Simoncelli gave a presentation, reviewing the physical space available for unhoused individuals and families. The Gathering Place is merely one half mile away. This proposed shelter will be open nightly from 8:30 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. There will be no overlap of the shelter operations and nearby school operations. The community food service is also available for people in need. Other community assistance services are available nearby. Again this year the YMCA will operate the shelter, with staff members on site with established policies. An admission packet is received and a signature is required. This is a low barrier shelter, guests are not allowed to consumer drugs or alcohol in the shelter. Weapons are not allowed. Further details were provided, noting in 2020 due to the pandemic the operation of the shelter was no longer possible. 20% of shelter guests are employed.

Pastor Mike Burgos of Northwest Hills Community Church appeared and read their statement supporting sheltering the homeless. They have theological and religious motivations for hosting this shelter to help those in need. He read a statement to support religious exercise. This church is restricted from caring for the poor. He read portions of CT Statutes 57-57b. He asked this Commission not to hinder their ministry and faith.

Greg Brisco of the YMCA appeared and reviewed their shelters and apartments in Winsted. This is a continuum of care for people in need. He reviewed statistics from their 16 bed shelter. The admission packet was reviewed by Mr. Brisco. The State's HMI database was reviewed, the State's sex offender registry is checked. This is low barrier entry, and there is a sobering room for those who need that service. Weapons, drugs, and alcohol will be confiscated. Women and children are separated from men. He reviewed the YMCA low income units, who are regulars at the kitchen, and there are child care facilities, and there are no issues. Mr. Brisco reviewed other Connecticut towns that have a shelter near schools.

Mr. Leifert read a complete list of documents that are in the record file. Mr. Leifert read his memo to the Commission dated December 13, 2023.

Planning and Zoning Commission members read into the record letters and emails received from the public and the applicants and applicant's representatives (beginning at 7:32 p.m. to 8:20 p.m.). Mr. Mele read a memo from the Torrington Police Chief outlining the calls for service received at a shelter.

Commissioner Greco inquired how many individuals would be housed. Mr. Simoncelli responded 30 – 40 per evening. Three bathrooms are available. Mr. Perosino inquired regarding incidents of sexual assault, and the response was none against a minor. Mr. Perosino inquired if the assault was to other than a minor and Mr. Simoncelli responded not to his knowledge, he was addressing his answer to the Catholic School.

Discussion followed on proximity of other shelters to schools.

Mr. Perosino inquired where the designated smoking area would be, Mr. Brisco responded probably in front of the building, and it would be a roped off area.

Mr. Perosino noted the hours of operation. Mr. Brisco stated intake will be done at the soup kitchen nearby, where guests start the intake process at 6:00 p.m. there, and wait there until 8:30 p.m. and then travel to this shelter by walking or by vehicle. Mr. Perosino noted the sobering room, and there seems to be a conflict of information here, as the packet indicates no intoxicated persons are allowed. Mr. Brisco responded if there are no behavioral issues, then the person goes to the sobering room that has space for three people. Low barrier means if they are intoxicated they are allowed in if there are not behavior issues. The State guidelines all depends on behavior.

The 211 call line and procedures were discussed. Mr. Perosino referenced the issues raised by the Police Chief. Mr. Brisco responded most calls were medical calls, and some disturbance issues. (8:55 p.m.)

Mr. Bobinski inquired about the number of beds. Mr. Brisco responded 30 beds. He also inquired about sanitary conditions. Mr. Brisco responded linens are laundered every two to three weeks, most people return every night, and leave their belongings and use the same bed.

Ms. Carroll inquired about the operations of the sobering room. (inaudible) Donahue responded. At 7:00 a.m., guests are led to the soup kitchen and The Gathering Place on Prospect Place which offers showers and laundry. Mr. Donahue explained operations at the Winsted location. At this proposed location, most beds will be in view, different set ups will be tried. Monitoring of the sober room will be done. Most use of the sobering room is by males.

Mr. Arias asked for a rundown of nightly operations. Mr. Donahue reviewed the staffing, which will be higher initially, with lots of paperwork being done. After the initial opening days, hopefully the staff can be scaled back. Four staff for intake, and two staff for the hours of 12:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. Another staff member arrives for discharge.

Accountability was discussed regarding a past incident of an assault on a bus driver.

Mr. Bobinski inquired if plans were reviewed by the Building Department. Mr. Mele noted fire protection, safety, exits, and ADA compliance, and has any of this been looked at or addressed. Mr. Simoncelli personal went to the Building Department, and no comments were received. The Fire Marshal has walked through, and the applicant will continue to work with the Fire Marshal to determine how many people will be allowed there. The layout of the building was verbally reviewed.

Pastor Burgo reviewed the fire protection equipment on site and building layout. They have a plan and have done this before for twenty people. Pastor Burgos noted the bathroom locations.

Mr. Arias inquired if a floor plan layout was submitted for the Commission's review. Mr. Simoncelli responded it was not requested, but they can provide such a plan. Staffing numbers and scheduled supervised smoke breaks were reviewed.

Mr. Mele opened the public hearing for comments, both in favor of the proposal and in opposition to the proposal (beginning at 9:20 p.m. and ending at 11:18 p.m.). There were no public comments from the zoom platform.

Mr. Arias stated to the applicants this Commission is here to review and approve any site plans received. He has been homeless himself and understands. Now we are here at the eleventh hour reviewing this proposal. The applicants are professionals in the business, and are also volunteers at the same time on this proposal. The time to plan for next year's shelter is now, and to take that into consideration moving forward this year.

In response to Ms. Greco's question, Mr. Leifert stated this is a Special Exception application, which approval would be filed on the land records and continue with the property.

Mr. Perosino finds it amazing at this last moment there is plan, and now there is a great immediate pressure, which this Commission has responded to. This is not a normal meeting, this is a special meeting that was called to address this situation. He believes people's concerns are being dismissed by using fear mongering. People should be respectful of opposing views, and to not name call fear mongering.

Mr. Mele stated there is a petition in the file with 309 signatures on it to add to those who are in opposition to the proposal.

Mr. Simoncelli acknowledged this is a last minute effort. Folks working on this are volunteers. He outlined various obstacles in their search for a shelter location, one of which evaporated. They were unaware of Planning and Zoning Commission approval to get this done, as it was not necessary in the past. We are all concerned with public safety.

Discussion followed on handling of persons in the sobering room who cannot remain at the shelter, and emergency services would be called in such a case, the person would not be just let out the door without help. (11:27 pm.)

Mr. Arias recognized the volunteer work done thus far, and stated this conversation should have occurred this past Spring and not at this late hour. Per Greg Brisco, Pastor Burgos stepped forward with the availability of his facility, when no one else would.

State Representative Michelle Cook appeared. There is a group that has been working day in and day out and once people found out it was to be a homeless shelter, they closed their doors. This conversation started in the Summer. She speaks regularly with the Mayor regarding various empty buildings, and the answer is always no from the property owner. In response to a questions from Mr. Mele, she stated 79% of individuals needing the service are from Torrington. The 211 system was reviewed.

Mr. Leifert's comments regarding RLUPA in his memo was discussed by Pastor Burgos. Pastor Burgos stated this is a precarious position, and he is not a litigious person, but this might put the City of Torrington in a precarious place. His congregation is owed a public apology, and that Sacred Heart should put their money where their mouth is, and open up one of their properties tomorrow.

Mr. Brisco said the YMCA can put into place all the Police Chief's recommendations. Families and women are the priority.

Mr. Mele stated the finality of the number of beds needs to be determined. Mr. Simoncelli responded the Fire Marshal is involved in this, and they will abide by all the rules.

Mr. Simoncelli stated they commit to have a solution by September and they will not be in this position again.

At 11:43 p.m. Mr. Mele declared the public hearing closed. Deliberations will occur on the proposal.

**5. Public Hearings beginning at 7:00 p.m., January 17, 2024; City Hall Auditorium, Room 218, 140 Main Street, Torrington, CT**

- a. Proposed Change of Zoning Regulations  
Applicant: ECAD, Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities  
Proposal: Amendment to Section 3.0 Uses, 3.1 Tables of Uses, Section 10.00 Service & Business related to animals, Subsection 10.20 Kennel. Kennel shall be permitted in the I and IP Zone by Special Exception.
- b. Special Exception 23-06  
Applicant: AJK, LLC  
Location: 637 and 659 Winsted Road  
Proposal: Renewal of existing earth excavation permit, Section 6.4

Public hearings tabled until January 17, 2024.

**6. Public Hearing beginning at 7:00 p.m., February 14, 2024; City Hall Auditorium, Room 218, 140 Main Street, Torrington, CT**

- a. Zoning Regulation Modification  
Section 6.2, Automotive Location Approvals  
Applicant: Planning and Zoning Commission

Public hearing tabled until February 14, 2024.

**7. Old Business:**

- a. Site Plan 1473  
Applicant: Allied Engineering Assoc., Inc.  
Location: 93 Main Street and Maiden Lane  
Proposal: Renovation of Yankee Pedlar Inn  
(Lot #1 Building; Lot #9 Parking Lot)  
Tabled until January 17, 2024

**8. New Business:**

- a. Special Exception 23-08 and Site Plan 1481  
Applicant: Carrie A. Combs, Trinity Episcopal Church  
Location: 220 Prospect Street  
Proposal: Cold weather emergency homeless shelter,  
Section 3.1, Subsection 2.10  
(set public hearing date)

MOTION by Mr. Perosino to set a public hearing date of December 27, 2023, which will be a Special Meeting. Motion seconded by Ms. Greco. This application is also being fast tracked.

MOTION by Ms. Greco to set a Special Meeting date of December 20, 2023 at 7:00 p.m. for deliberations on:

- Special Exception 23-07 and Site Plan 1477  
Applicant: Northwest Hills Community Church  
Location: 342 Prospect Street  
Proposal: Cold weather shelter for unhoused individuals and families  
Section 3.1, Subsection 2.10

Motion seconded by Mr. Perosino, unanimously carried. The public hearing is closed, this Special Meeting is for deliberations.

**9. Correspondence:**

- a. Zoning and Blight Violation update

Mr. Nardi-Cyrus noted the Zoning violation update report that was distributed to Commission members.

**10. Adjournment:**

MOTION by 11:55 p.m. by Mr. Perosino to adjourn, seconded by Ms. Greco, unanimously carried.