

**CITY OF TORRINGTON
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
December 20, 2023**

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

Also Present: Jeremy Leifert, AICP; City Planner

Not Present: Starley Arias, Alternate

1. Call to Order:

Chair Greg Mele called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m. Attendance by Zoom or in-person at City Hall Auditorium, Room 218, 140 Main Street, Torrington, CT.

Instructions for Zoom are available online at:

www.torringtonct.org/zoom

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/7959507035?pwd=MXAwcVIEenhIQUhtSXFsSGhYUnI0QT09>

1-646-558-8656

Meeting ID: 795-950-7035

Passcode: 907148

2. Attendance/Announcement:

Chair Mele stated seated and serving on the Commission this evening are Commissioners Greg Perosino, Donna Greco, Donovan Riley, Jim Bobinski and Greg Mele. Alternates tonight, with no comment or vote, are Alternate Commissioners Diane Carroll and Tom Telman. Also present is Jeremy Leifert, City Planner. Not present this evening is Alternate Starley Arias.

3. Old Business:

- 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
Planning and Zoning Commission Deliberation –
Public Hearing Closed on December 13, 2023

Chair Mele outlined the procedures for the meeting this evening. The public hearing has been closed, and no further materials or public comment will be taken. This is a Special Exception application, for a low barrier shelter meaning everyone is accepted.

Correspondence was submitted from Police Chief Baldwin outlining police activities at the shelter. There is a petition with 309 signatures from St. Paul The Great School submitted into the file. The application is for 39 beds, and women and children are considered first according to the applicant. Mr. Mele believes this a discriminatory and who should go first should not be considered.

Mr. Perosino spoke of the 211 system provided assistance to those needing shelter, and what is offered through that system. Mr. Perosino noted Greg Brisco (YMCA) comments regarding four other locations near schools, he reviewed businesses, streets, highways, residences near such shelters. Mr. Perosino noted the volume of information brought forward by the public. There is so much data out there on homelessness and there is much controversy surrounding the subject, and opposing views are supported by statistics.

Mr. Bobinski noted a question brought up about 39 beds in the shelter, and it was stated by the applicant there was plenty of room. He wished the applicants had taken the time and effort to do a floor plan to show where the beds would go, where the sober room is, where the restrooms are, and where beds would be set up. Mr. Bobinski went to American Institute of Architects design criteria and ADA and calculated, on average, each bed or cot would take 80 square feet. The City's assessor card shows 11,000 square feet for this facility and he is unsure where that is located or what it includes. The beds themselves would need 3,000 to 3,200 square feet of space and that may or may not work. The Fire Marshal is inspecting looking at fire exits. The other item is the smoking area open until midnight in front of the church. He drove by this area, and it is located right next to the side entrance to the school cafeteria, and lighting outside in this area is not great.

Ms. Greco stated the main concern is about the closeness of this shelter to the school, and the clientele involved that will be there. She is concerned about the 40 people leaving the shelter at the same time, and the timing and vicinity of the children going to school. Ms. Greco also recognized the 309 signatures from the school petition showing people's concerns. She recognizes the need, however, there is a concern with extreme closeness to the school.

Mr. Riley understand that if it were not for the interruption of COVID, a shelter would still be running out of this site with half as many people. His concern is with the consolidations, can the shelter handle this many people. If there were incidences over the 16 years this shelter was operational, those incidents would have been presented to the Commission. There were no incidents involving children. Mr. Riley noted the same number of beds are being run in Winsted by the same folks. He appreciates points made by his fellow Commissioners and wished they had a plan to look at. Not a lot of the usual documentation was presented, as noted by Commissioner Arias at the last meeting.

Mr. Mele noted the expert testimony presented by the Torrington Police Chief, 66 calls for service at one location. At 12 Daycoeton Place 2022-2023 seasons, there were over 240 calls for service, directly correlating to bus transportation. The Trinity Church soup kitchen at 220 Prospect Street had 205 calls for service.

Mr. Mele brought up the health, safety, and welfare aspect, his position is looking at the health, safety and welfare of over 700 students plus faculty versus 39 bed positions in a shelter, leading him toward a denial. The Commission recognizes a need, and this is not a correct location.

Mr. Perosino stated he prefers to seek compromise and presented a question for Mr. Leifert, can this application be conditioned? Mr. Leifert responded typically a Special Exception can only be conditioned from business uses, such as hours of operation.

Mr. Perosino referred to the family operation shelter in another part of the State, Holy Homes Family Shelter. Reasons for family homelessness are uniquely different and risk levels are lower, there are children involved. There could be two to three children, a mother or husband and wife and children. We are talking about risk levels. How do we lower the risk, and get good use out of the property to address homelessness. There is an organization Holy Home Family Shelter that works through 211, and they restrict use to families, and he can see how that works.

Mr. Leifert would caution in this area, as he does not believe we can place conditions on people and who attends. We can only condition on hours of operation and physical conditions of the property, we can't place conditions on to let some people in the shelter, and others not.

Mr. Perosino noted we are stuck with the application as presented, which is a low barrier operation. A compromise then is not applicable. Mr. Leifert said we can narrow things such as hours, and time of year for operations.

Mr. Riley inquired about the time of police calls, is it in the morning. The police report did not note time of calls. If people get into a dispute in the middle of the night, how does that affect the school? Mr. Perosino said this is unpredictable risk management.

Mr. Leifert noted the bottom line is this Commission is here to regulate uses and conditions of uses, and that is our only aim on this Commission.

MOTION by Ms. Greco to DENY 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

1. The Commission finds that, based on testimony and evidence in the record and comments from the public, City Staff and commissioners that the location of the proposed shelter use is not consistent with the uses in the general vicinity of the subject property and is likely to have a detrimental effect upon churches, schools, libraries, playgrounds, or similar facilities found in **Section 2.00 - 2.60** of the Table of Permitted Uses
2. The granting of the Special Exception use will likely be detrimental to the public health, safety and welfare of the area of the proposal.

Motion seconded by Mr. Perosino. Mr. Mele interjected to include an amendment to the motion:

Amendment: The review of religious uses, the law on the subject is clear that the shelter use is a regulated use as a compelling government interest.

Motion to second with amendment by Mr. Perosino.

Vote: Commissioner Riley – Nay
Commissioner Bobinski – in favor of motion
Commissioner Greco – in favor of motion
Commissioner Mele – in favor of motion
Commissioner Perosino – in favor of motion

Motion to DENY passed with four votes in favor, one against.

4. **Adjournment:**

Meeting adjourned at 7:34 p.m.