



## NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION ZONE ADVISORY BOARD MINUTES OF MEETING

June 23, 2021

The State Neighborhood Revitalization Advisory Board (advisory board) held a remote meeting on Wednesday, June 23, 2021, 9:30 AM. A [videorecording](#) is available.

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### **Board Members or Designees:**

Linda Brunza, [CT Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection](#)  
Scott Burns, [Black Rock NRZ \(Bridgeport\)](#)  
Jonathan Cabral, [CT Housing Finance Authority](#)  
Aimee Chambers, [City of Hartford, Dept. of Development Services](#)  
Kathy Crees, [City of Norwich, Office of Community Development](#)  
Susan Decina, [CT Dept. of Economic & Community Development](#)  
Steve Dombrowski, [CT Dept. of Labor](#)  
Jennifer Edwards, [City of Bridgeport, Office of Planning & Economic Development](#)  
Mike Gilmore, [Waterbury Development Corporation](#)  
Marion Griffin, [Hartford NEXT](#)  
Bob Hannon, [CT Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection](#)  
Tabitha Harkin, [Town of Groton, Office of Planning and Development Services](#)  
Martin Heft (Chair), [CT Office of Policy & Management](#)  
Sheila Hummel, [CT Dept. of Economic & Community Development](#)  
Jonathan Kinney, [CT State Historic Preservation Office](#)  
Thomas Madden, [City of Stamford, Office of Economic Development](#)  
Margaret Malinowski, [City of New Britain, Neighborhood Preservation Program](#)  
Marlon Pena, [CT Dept. of Transportation](#)  
Jim Vannoy, [CT Dept. of Public Health](#)  
Aicha Woods, [City of New Haven, City Plan Department](#)

### **Others:**

Matt Straub, [Local Initiatives Support Collaborative – CT Statewide](#)  
Bruce Wittchen, [CT Office of Policy & Management](#)

### **1. Welcome, Introductions, Adoption of Minutes**

Martin Heft, Chair of the [Neighborhood Revitalization Zone](#) (NRZ) Advisory Board, called the meeting to order at 9:32 and everyone introduced themselves.

Bruce Wittchen pointed out that the board's previous meeting had been in 2016 and, because so few of the people attending today had attended that meeting, suggested that the board might choose to not approve the [draft minutes](#) of that meeting and they will remain available as a draft. There was no opposition and no one made a motion to adopt those minutes. It was pointed out that the recording had not started yet and it began at this time.

### **2. LISC and Neighborhood Planning in Hartford**

Matt Straub explained that he is with [Local Initiatives Support Collaborative – CT Statewide](#) (LISC) and is filling in for LISC’s Debi Martin, who is unable to join this meeting. He pointed out that was not yet being recorded, so the recording began at this time. Matt showed the Slide 2 of [LISC’s presentation](#) and provided an overview of LISC’s history, which dates back 36 years in Hartford and 20 years statewide and outlined its funding approach. Referring to the Slide 3, he described LISC’s national approach at the national level and, with the 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> slides, described funding and programs specific to CT.

Matt outlined the [Building for Health](#) pilot program in Hartford as shown on Slide 7 and explained the goal of providing connections between programs. With the 8<sup>th</sup> slide, Matt explained LISC’s national system of financial opportunity centers. Matt also mentioned LISC work with [Americorps](#) and the [Hartford Neighborhood Development Support Collaborative](#). The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> slides provide further details regarding the ongoing Hartford neighborhood planning effort and its broad community engagement process. LISC is coordinating partners in this process.

Bob Hannon asked about LISC and NRZ involvement in development proposed in the Capitol Ave area. Matt Straub said LISC has not been directly involved and Jonathan Cabral said there have been presentations and discussions at recent [South Downtown NRZ](#) meetings. Aimee Chambers added that the city is involved in the planning process and noted the role of the [Capital Region Development Authority](#) (CRDA). Margaret Malinowski asked if LISC is interested in expanding its work outside Hartford. Matt mentioned LISC’s involvement with [New Britain Neighborhood Housing Services](#). Margaret mentioned New Britain NRZs’ interest in forming an umbrella organization like those in other cities and she and Matt discussed a possible role for LISC.

Martin Heft thanked Matt for the presentation and said it will be distributed to everyone.

### **3. NRZs and the Role of the State Advisory Board**

Martin Heft asked Bruce Wittchen to introduce the next section of the agenda and Bruce explained that the intent is to briefly discuss NRZ requirements. He said the track record of complying with the statutes varies, highlighting that OPM has not convened a meeting of this group for a number of years and that many NRZs are not submitting annual reports.

Bruce mentioned that Bridgeport’s NRZs have been most reliable about producing annual reports. He also mentioned that draft NRZ strategic plans must be submitted to OPM, which distributes them to state agencies for comments. He provided examples of agency comments. He asked if there are any questions about NRZ requirements or suggestions for things to add.

Marlon Pena asked about the relationship between New Haven’s Community Management Teams and NRZs. Aicha Woods described the differences, highlighting that CMTs developed from community policing districts. They are the city’s primary community outreach mechanism and city staffing is provided from the city’s [Livable City Initiative](#). Aicha added that CMTs do not have a regulatory or fiscal role, they are there for communication and coordination. Bruce said the role of New Haven’s CMTs is a role of NRZs in some other cities and said this group might consider looking into the various roles filled by NRZs. He said that each municipality and its NRZs has followed its own path, which is not a bad thing.

#### 4. NRZs in Bridgeport

Jennifer Edwards began her [presentation on Bridgeport's NRZs](#) by describing her background and role with the program and the history of the city's eight NRZs, as listed on Slide 4 and with meeting information on Slide 5. Jennifer noted that she tries to attend their meetings to help new presidents learn the process. She added that she likes them to attend zoning and other city meetings. As listed on Slide 6, she described the city's expectations for NRZs' annual reports. Jennifer proceeded through Slides 7-13, illustrating recent plan implementation and development in each NRZ.

William Coleman, Deputy Director of Bridgeport's Office of Planning & Economic Development, outlined the city's perspective on the use of eminent domain in the context of NRZs. He highlighted that eminent domain has historically been a hostile tool but is being used better now. He said some absentee landlords hold onto blighted properties that can be a drag on the neighborhood.

Bridgeport works with NRZs to have a more community-based approach to benefit neighborhoods. He highlighted the city's use of NRZs' strategic plans to understand neighborhood interests and noted that chronic blight is prioritized by means of a new or updated NRZ strategic plan. He outlined the process for bringing proposed actions to the city council and said they are proceeding with four plan updates.

Jennifer explained Bridgeport's decision to provide a citywide NRZ academy in 2019 and showed the agenda on Slide 15. She recommended that the state begin to hold an annual workshop for all of the state's NRZs and said Bridgeport can host the first. Jennifer Edwards concluded the presentation by playing the city video linked on the final slide.

Bruce Wittchen noted the level of detail requested of Bridgeport's NRZ plans and said he has told NRZs that a report can be anything they want to provide, even just a couple paragraphs. The key is to identify the people and what the NRZ is doing. It's great when an NRZ has the capacity to prepare a detailed report, but they are free to submit less. He added that the state will build up the state website so that, in the future, people will have access to all NRZ reports.

#### 5. Next Steps

Bruce Wittchen explained that he had listed "Update [Guidelines for developing an NRZ strategic plan](#)" in this section of the agenda because he considers it a priority, but he thinks it will take some effort to do that. He said we just heard about how Bridgeport uses the eminent domain section of the NRZ statutes and added that New Britain uses the building & fire code section. It could be worthwhile for some members of this advisory board to begin preliminary work on what should be update in the guide. He added that the guide should also address strategic plan updates and mentioned Bridgeport NRZ plans being updated to show what the neighborhood currently wants.

He asked where members would like to begin, such working on as the strategic plan guidelines or the workshop Jennifer had proposed. Jim Vannoy said training on the use of eminent domain would be beneficial because it can be such a powerful tool. He highlighted concerns about lead paint, sometimes due to old rental units where the problem is not being addressed. He pointed out the interest of health departments in prevention.

Jim Vannoy also said he would like to learn more about what is in the statutes. He said the NRZs are doing good work and it is important to hear about it and that resources are available. Bruce Wittchen offered to write an outline of the NRZ statutes this summer and will circulate it to this group for feedback before making it available to people organizing or running an NRZ. Regarding Jim's request for further information about the use of eminent domain, Bruce said future meetings will likely include two presentations like today's, with one focusing on an NRZ and the other focusing on a broader topic such as eminent.

Bob Hannon said we have an advantage in that different NRZs and municipalities have developed approaches that work for them and the state can compile them and enable people to choose from options that have been tested by others. Some impressive things have been discussed today and the various options should be brought into the guidelines to enable people to build on what has been done before. Bruce Wittchen said that is a good approach and agreed the current guidelines are too limiting. NRZs are doing much more.

Scott Burns said the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) is an immediate matter that NRZs are looking at. Bruce Wittchen said municipalities with NRZs will hopefully consider how to work with NRZs for neighborhood-oriented efforts and NRZs will reach out to their municipalities. Martin Heft provided an overview of how funding is being distributed to municipalities, with larger cities receiving federal funds directly and others receiving the first allotment indirectly through the state yesterday. He highlighted that funds must be spent in accordance with federal treasury guidelines.

Jennifer Edwards asked if ARPA funding can be used for NRZ administration. Martin said that would not be eligible, but funds could be used for a community center to provide a safe meeting space. Margaret Malinowski listed other possible sources of capacity building funds, including the [Mott Foundation](#) and [Community Development Block Grants](#).

William Coleman said it will be beneficial to bring everyone together for the NRZ conference in Bridgeport that Jennifer mentioned previously. It is an opportunity for people to see what is happening in tother NRZs, to brainstorm, finding commonality. It will help energize the NRZ movement. He noted that he and people from the state's other large cities get together periodically for a conversation. They thought the focus would be on specific topics, but instead they discuss best practices and the improved relationships have provided many unexpected benefits. He suggested a community college as a possible venue. Bruce pointed out that the state advisory board used to meet in a different municipality each year and then tour an NRZ. He noted that CCSU hosted the group a few years ago and two meetings were in Meriden. Bob Hannon provided further background regarding the approach for earlier meetings.

Margaret Malinowski asked Bruce if he was aware of the rent receivership provision of the NRZ statutes being exercised. Bruce said he is unaware of it being used, but that does not mean it has never been used. He has asked some people and they did not know of any examples, but it is something to explore. He added that, in addition to looking what different NRZs are doing now, it will be helpful to inquire into what NRZs have done in the past.

Bruce Wittchen noted that the agenda mentions the meeting schedule. He said there has been some discussion of meeting more frequently to do things such as we have been

discussing. He suggested the group meet quarterly and begin by looking at the strategic plan guidelines and at NRZ reporting but can decide that at the next meeting.

Bruce thanked everyone who was able to attend and noted that others are also interested in this but were unavailable today. He invited people to send suggestions and reminders about what was discussed today. Marion Griffin said she has been unable to find contact information for people involved with NRZs in other cities and recommended that be available on the OPM website. Bruce said he will do that and added that one of the goals is to improve communications so people can learn what each other is doing without having to wait for the state to schedule a meeting. Long-term, the intention is to make the website a repository for all NRZ reports and plans.

## **6. Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 10:59.