

Vernon Township Economic Development Advisory Committee

Special Meeting Minutes

March 7, 2023

The meeting was called to order at 7:03 PM.

The Statement of Compliance was read.

Salute to the Flag

Roll Call:

Sally Rinker, Chairperson - P
Jennifer Lubliner, Vice Chairperson - P
Michael Gelfand - P
Susan Berkley - P
Mary Beth Ziba - P
Carl Contino - A
Keren Gonen - P
Nick Pirro - A
Jason Pierce - P
Peter Knipe - P
Heidi LeBris - P

Sally Rinker opened the meeting welcoming the invited guests and members of the public in attendance, including Mayor Burrell, Chamber of Commerce President Stephanie Scillingo and Chamber members, Board of Education member Ray Zimmerman, Council member Peg Distasi, and resident Sean Clarkin.

Sally Rinker stated the mission of the EDAC is to foster and encourage meaningful business growth in Vernon and the EDAC looks forward to the input of the attendees. She announced the meeting is being recorded.

Sally Rinker introduced Dr. Michael Lahr, the guest speaker. Dr. Lahr is the former Director of Rutgers Economic Advisory Service. As Distinguished Research Professor, Emeritus of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, he holds a Ph.D. in Regional Science for the University of Pennsylvania. At the Bloustein School, Dr. Lahr taught courses on Global Analytics. Since 1995, Dr. Lahr supervised R/ECON TM

research on a broad array of public policy issues in the fields of housing, economic development, program evaluation, and fiscal and economic impact analysis. He has published over 50 articles in journals and edited volumes on economic modeling techniques; development economics; and the economics of various planning and fiscal issues.

Sally Rinker asked everyone in attendance to join her in welcoming Dr. Lahr to Vernon.

(Applause)

Dr. Lahr further introduced himself and then began his power point presentation. The presentation was an example of work done in Union County to show us the steps of targeted assessments and implementations taken to plan for progress and growth in an area. The power point depicted, studies, statistics, demographics, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats - all of the components taken into consideration for appropriate planning for growth.

Sally Rinker asked for a motion to open the floor for public participation. Keren Gonan made the motion, Michael Gelfand seconded it, all were in favor.

Dr. Lahr then responded to questions from the public as well as questions from members of the EDAC.

Theresa Markham asked if there would be a broad recommendation to increase GDP, to increase population, to increase attractiveness to business and should that be defined ahead of time.

Dr. Lahr responded yes. You should refer to your professionals to work with that and to come to those decisions. You have natural resources. You need recruiting of businesses.

Sean Clarkin commented that this is a long process that could take 10 years.

Dr. Lahr responded that hiring a consultant would take time and time to obtain financing. It could be 6 months to 1 year for a completion of Phase 1. You don't need public buy-in but that would be preferred. You need developers engaged in the process.

Council member Peg Distasi stated that Vernon's Master Plan is specific so how would that fit with the plan because we need ratables.

Dr. Lahr responded we would pick industry that complies with environmental impacts and pays high taxes. It would depend on who you recruit.

Mayor Burrell thanked the Chairwoman and the Committee for this creative approach. He stated none of us have the answers and on behalf of the Township he expressed his gratitude to the Committee and to Dr. Lahr for coming to Vernon Township.

Sally Rinker stated there are those who have differing opinions on population growth. Units aren't in demand. She stated main focus should be to increase commercial ratables and sewerage usage should be our highest focuses.

Sean Clark stated that we need condos.

Sally Rinker interjected that condos taxes are not a 1 to 1 ratio for covering the cost of a student at more than \$20,000 per student.

Ray Zimmerman, BOE member, confirmed her statement on the cost of educating 1 student.

Peter Knipe stated the issue of density is a problem as is the geography. The Highlands Act ties our hands. He commented that Dr. Lahr made some good points and destinations is the key here.

Michael Gelfand thanked Dr. Lahr and questioned how long do the phases take him to do.

Dr. Lahr responded 6 months or 500 hours. A consulting group could do it in 3 months.

Michael Gelfand asked Dr. Lahr if he could do the analysis with County data.

Dr. Lahr responded that the State produces statistics and that data is used for jobs. He added that whoever does the project should get the 2022 data which comes out in May.

Michael Gelfand stated things take a while and any step in the right direction is better than standing still.

Susan Berkely asked if Dr. Lahr had any metrics demonstrating what a town had done with his recommendations and demonstrating success or change.

Dr. Lahr responded that he had not been back in touch with them.

Jen Lubliner stated she wanted to summarize to see if her understanding was correct. She asked Dr. Lahr if he would suggest a study of existing businesses to target.

Dr. Lahr responded that the RFP would consist of that information.

Jen Lubliner asked if we should identify our issues.

Dr. Lahr responded you have fiscal issues and sewer over capacity that could be fulfilled by targeting goals using a ranking list.

Sally Rinker stated that prior to the meeting she drove Dr. Lahr around town to view Legends, the commercial corridors, schools, and differing levels of housing to get a flavor of our town.

Dr. Lahr commented that there is affordable housing as Chairwoman Rinker advised him of the approximate house values as they toured the areas.

Stephanie Scillingo questioned Dr. Lahr if more liquor licenses will attract more businesses.

Dr. Lahr stated that would be helpful for more restaurants.

Council member Peg Distasi asked if there was grant money for this type of analysis.

Dr. Lahr responded that your planner or County resources may have that information.

Sally Rinker interjected that was a good question.

Sean Clarkin stated we need more liquor licenses and those being held need to be released. Mt. Creek gets a hundred thousand visitors a year we need to capture those.

Peter Knipe stated the State is now considering licenses being held for 2 years or more can be released back to the towns.

Heidi LeBris stated when visiting Vernon years ago she spent a great day in Vernon but had no good choice for a quality dinner here and after living here 10 years she still feels there are not enough good restaurants and liquor licenses are important for that.

Sally Rinker added that an increase in the number of liquor licenses for towns in NJ is being discussed at the legislative level with Governor Murphy.

Sally Rinker asked for a motion to close the meeting to the public. Jen Lubliner made a motion, Michael seconded it, all were in favor.

Sally Rinker thanked Dr. Lahr for coming tonight mentioning he had a 2 hour drive each way and for his big dedication of time. She thanked him for all the information, insight for opening our eyes, and for his thought provoking presentation, showing us that targeted assessments are a necessary exercise for the planning and growth of a town. She also thanked Dr. Lahr for enlightening us on perspectives and a path forward to developing our town to be a more prosperous and successful place for business and residents.

(Applause)

Sally Rinker thanked all in attendance.

A motion was made by Jen Lubliner to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by Michael Geldfand. All were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 8:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted by:

Sally Rinker
EDAC Chair