

~AD HOC REPORT~

First Night Danbury
Thursday, March 8, 2007

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Hon. Mark D. Boughton, Mayor
Common Council Members

Chairwoman Jane Diggs called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, March 8, 2007, in the Caucus Room, 3rd Floor, Danbury City Hall, 155 Deer Hill Avenue. Present were Committee members Ted Cutsumpas and Paul Rotello. Also present were Assistant Finance Director Dan Garrick; City Center Representative Andrea Gartner Jabara; Betsy McIlvaine, Treasurer of First Night Danbury; Nick Hoffman, Board Member of First Night Danbury; Debbie Pacific, Volunteer Coordinator of First Night Danbury; Petitioners: Duane Perkins, John Esposito, Paul Rotello, Lynn Taborsak and interested citizens.

Chairwoman Diggs explained that the charge of the Committee was to review and to make recommendations concerning First Night Danbury and other issues that may arise during these discussions. In doing some research on her own, Chairwoman Diggs found that the City of Stamford had not had First Night for many years as a result of the lack of funding and volunteers. While the City of Hartford has had First Night for many years, there was a possibility it might be disbanded due to the lack of volunteers and funding. Chairwoman Diggs was under the impression that City Center of Danbury planned the event, however, discovered that First Night was its own entity—a 501(c)(3) entity—with its own Board.

Chairwoman Diggs opened the meeting up for discussion, comments and/or questions. Ms. McIlvaine gave the Committee some background of First Night. She explained that there is an organization, First Night International, whereby a license fee of \$350.00 is paid yearly in order to use the name First Night. She pointed out that the changes in the City have put a strain on the event, attendance has declined through the years and the Board has decided to disband the event. Ms. McIlvaine explained that First Night was not conducted for 2007 due to lack of volunteers and funding. The perception is that the energy has gone out of the First Night event. Ms. Pacific noted the extensive effort she put forth to try and acquire volunteers for the event and, in the end, only fifteen volunteers had been secured. Ms. McIlvaine pointed out that a minimum of 40 volunteers are needed to run a First Night event. Mr. Hoffman noted that the 2006 event was put together as a result of last minute efforts but ended up being an abbreviated version of previous First Night events. He reminded everyone of the snow storm that occurred which also hindered the success of the event.

Chairwoman Diggs asked the petitioners why they signed the petition to preserve First Night. Mr. Perkins did not feel the failure of First Night was primarily caused by lack of funding or lack of volunteers and desired to explore the situation further. Councilman Rotello noted that while the interest in First Night seemed to dwindle, he desired to see First Night continue and urged patience as he felt once the first generational cycle of First Night passed, the generations to follow would continue the First Night tradition and become a stronger presence in the community for many years to come. An example he used was Fourth of July celebrations. Councilman Rotello commended all those involved with First Night for the more than 14 years of dedication to the event. Ms. Taborsak pointed out that Danbury's economy has benefited as a result of various towns not having a First Night celebration as it draws those desiring to

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participate in a First Night celebration to Danbury. She expressed a desire for First Night to continue and suggested involving the Office of Economic Development and City Center in helping to promote the event. Ms. McIlvaine pointed out that while First Night has been a separate organization, the Executive Director of City Center has been a member of the Board of First Night and the Board has been allowed to use City Center as their headquarters. She pointed out that \$50,000.00 is needed in order to properly run the event and as a result of the declining interest, it has proven to not be a wise investment for businesses.

City Center Representative Andrea Gartner Jabara entered the meeting at this point.

Chairwoman Diggs asked Ms. Jabara to comment on First Night. Ms. Jabara felt that anything that draws people to downtown Danbury is worth pursuing. Ms. McIlvaine informed the Committee that at a recent Board meeting, there was a vote to disband the organization, First Night Danbury International, as of April 1st. As there is interest in retaining the First Night event, Ms. Jabara suggested not disbanding the 501(c)(3) because it would take two years in order to re-establish a 501(c)(3) and be eligible for any state funding. Councilman Cutsumpas asked the First Night representatives why they thought First Night failed. They all agreed it was lack of funding, volunteers and participants. Ms. McIlvaine pointed out that there is a perception that it is dangerous to be in downtown Danbury after dark and the event just was not attracting enough people to participate. Councilman Cutsumpas asked the petitioners what they desired from the City. Mr. Perkins desired putting in place a new Board to fill in with the existing 501(c)(3) and felt the City could assist by continuing the Ad Hoc meetings which would afford the time needed to find new members. Chairwoman Diggs pointed out that First Night is a private entity and the City does not have jurisdiction over it and cannot find new members to fill the seats on the Board. While Councilman Cutsumpas agrees with the First Night event continuing and noted the interest in First Night, he did not believe it was a function of the City of Danbury to run First Night nor could the City of Danbury do a better job of facilitating the event than the First Night organization. Councilman Cutsumpas, Chairwoman Diggs and Ms. Taborsak all volunteered to help the petitioners with their quest of keeping alive the First Night tradition in Danbury. Ms. Jabara suggested charging the citizens of Danbury with the task of preserving the event as well. Councilman Rotello suggested continuing the meeting as the issue was complex and time was a major concern as well. He did not wish to see the 501(c)(3) dissolve. He asked that a consultation with Corporation Counsel take place in order to ascertain whether or not the permit can be transferred to a new Board. Ms. McIlvaine informed him that the yearly fee merely needed to be paid to First Night International. However, in order to preserve the 501(c)(3), three officers are needed to exist.

A motion was made by Councilman Rotello to continue the Ad Hoc Committee to explore with Corporation Counsel the transference of the shell organization, the 501(c)(3). The motion died due to a lack of a second.

Chairwoman Diggs expressed concern that the event would become an undertaking of City and did not support continuing the Committee. While there were money and attendance issues, the lack of interest in First Night might be a sign that new event ideas are needed. Chairman Cutsumpas agreed that First Night, as it presently stands, will not be successful but desired it to succeed.

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A motion was made by Councilman Cutsumpas and seconded by Chairwoman Diggs to take no action on the petitioners' request at this time.

Councilman Rotello felt it was premature to table the Committee with no action. He felt if no action was taken at the meeting, then First Night would cease to exist. Councilman Rotello noted the City had many resources to assist with facilitating the event. Councilman Cutsumpas asked Ms. Pacific, Mr. Hoffman and Ms. McIlvaine, through the Chair, if they felt First Night could be successful and viable in Danbury. All three agreed it could not.

The motion carried. (2-1-0) (NO: Councilman Rotello)

A motion to adjourn was made by Councilman Cutsumpas and seconded by Councilman Rotello. The motion carried unanimously at 7:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jane Diggs, Chairwoman

Ted Cutsumpas

Paul Rotello