
CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: January 10, 2023

TIME: 6:30 pm via Zoom

Commissioners Attending: Phil Plottel (Chair), Sarah Rahman (Vice Chair), Chuck Tanowitz (Secretary), Lisa Adams, Jim Griglun, Debora Jackson, Jack Leader, Florent Mali, Marcella Merino, and Matt Segneri.

Commissioners Not Attending:, Jeremy Freid, and Zach Knowlton

Staff Attending: Barney Heath, Director, Planning and Development; John Sisson, Director of Economic Development; and Josh Ostroff, Director of Transportation Planning.

Approval of December meeting minutes: Mr. Mali moved to approve the December minutes, seconded by Ms. Rahman, and all members present voted in the affirmative.

City Staff Updates

- The newly hired Director of Transportation Planning Josh Ostroff introduced himself and some of the initiatives he's undertaking. Chuck Tanowitz offered his congratulations.
- Mr. Ostroff offered a brief update on the MBTA Commuter Rail funding for the Newtonville, West Newton, and Auburndale stations. The city missed out on a federal grant in December, but funding of the accessibility improvements remains a high priority for the Fuller administration. Mr. Plottel asked when news about funding might be

available. Mr. Ostroff 2024-28 funding schedule should be announced in March, but he expects to have news in February. Mr. Ostroff hopes to come back before the EDC to discuss NewMo and multimodal transportation.

- 1314 Washington Street project. Mr. Plottel did provide public testimony at the Land Use Committee's public hearing. Mr. Sisson explained the City Council did approve the special permit for the redevelopment project with some lingering questions about parking demand in the area. Mr. Mali asked about the commercial space and whether it would be a restaurant or another use.
- Outdoor dining 2023. Mr. Sisson described an interdepartmental meeting to amend the City ordinance and are staff working to update the guidance for operators. He explained that staff may work over the summer to provide additional policy recommendations to the City Council. Martina Jackson of Fig City News asked about the outdoor dining start date. Mr. Sisson said the season will start on April 1 unless a blizzard hits the city then.
- Pop-up Retail grant. Newton joined with Melrose, Needham, and Wellesley obtained grant funding to work with What's Up Next to create pop-up retail shops in vacant commercial spaces. Ms. Jackson asked if the EDC might have any say in suggesting which vacant retail spaces might be activated. Mr. Sisson said the EDC can certainly make recommendations.
- Life Sciences permitting process. Mr. Sisson explained that Health and Human Services (HHS) will be working in 2023 to streamline the process for permitting rDNA research use, an effort to which the EDC may be able to contribute, which will benefit existing life science companies in Newton and perhaps serve to attract new ones.
- Building Permits. Mr. Sisson described some of the available reports in NewGov that will enable the EDC to better track new businesses opening in Newton.
- Liquor licenses. Mr. Plottel explained the scarcity of liquor licenses for new restaurants and stores in Newton has been an issue in the past, and the EDC can play a role in ensuring their availability. Mr. Sisson said current numbers show 97 restaurants serving alcoholic beverages, with 17 licenses available. Newton has 35 package store licenses in use and only one available for a wine/malt retailer.

- Burke's Alewerks. Mr. Sisson said the new brewpub, which had a soft opening this week, may need a retail liquor license in order to sell its beer in cans for takeaway. Mr. Plottel wanted to offer his congratulations to Mr. Burke and would like to invite him to discuss his experience opening a restaurant in Newton.

Village Center Zoning: Mr. Heath said the Zoning and Planning (ZAP) Committee on January 9 held its first meeting with Newton organizations to gather input. He said the meeting went well and will help inform version 2.0, the next iteration of the zoning language and the mapping of the areas. Planning and Development Department staff hope to release version 2.0 in March. The EDC is scheduled to speak on village center zoning at ZAP's meeting on January 23. Mr. Heath also addressed efforts to analyze the recently released MBTA Communities compliance model and how the village center zoning may meet those requirements. Mr. Plottel said a lot of people who are unfamiliar with zoning and real estate development have assumptions and fears about the potential changes. Mr. Leader pointed commissioners to read some of the online discussion forum <https://village14.com/> and the exchange of comments. Ms. Getz of the Waban Area Neighborhood Council said volunteers have been creating 3D renderings of the village based on the proposed zoning and will be posting those to the council's website soon. Mr. Heath talked about some of the zoning proposal details and changes that will be proposed in version 2.0. Mr. Plottel spoke on the importance of commercial property, both for fiscal health and economic vitality. Councilor Wright agreed on the need for commercial space. Mr. Plottel said he will be presenting the framework supported by the EDC at the Jan. 23 ZAP Committee meeting. He also stressed the importance of compliance with the MBTA Communities Act. Mr. Heath stressed this effort will carefully consider people's property values and quality of life.

Working group updates

Ms. Merino gave an update on a recent meeting of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) working group:

- Amplify LatinX shared its list of MBEs, and that information was forwarded to Purchasing and can be added to the proposed business database.

- The DEI consultant will be connecting with City groups and will be contacting the EDC's DEI group to schedule a meeting.
- The group is looking into hosting an 2023 event for MBEs in Newton. The first step will be to identify them.

EDC self-assessment and 2023 goals

Mr. Tanowitz described the online survey for Commissioners and feedback on the EDC's work in 2022. Ms. Jackson and Mr. Leader spoke pointed to the amount of time needed to advance goals and the frustration about the years needed to achieve good outcomes. Mr. Plottel said the Commissioners' comments appear to be an accurate assessment. Mr. Tanowitz said the key issues identified by the survey included development, land use, zoning in village centers, DEI, transportation, and parking. He said one other category people suggested was conducting research on economic development issues—and the resources necessary to accomplish that. Mr. Plottel said this annual exercise is valuable in that it can help the EDC be more effective in its mission and prioritize our time. Mr. Plottel explained the Commissioner Joyce Plotkin, former chair, had resigned. She was very effective in making the EDC more active, and Mr. Plottel wished to extend the EDC's thanks for her service. The EDC is thus down to 12 members.

2022 Annual Report: Mr. Plottel said the draft report was emailed to Commissioners the day before tonight's meeting and asked for comments to be submitted to him or Mr. Sisson prior to the February meeting.

Nomination of officers: Mr. Plottel explained the EDC will need to elect new officers for 2023, including a new chair, vice chair, and secretary. He then nominated Ms. Rahman as chair, which was seconded by Mr. Leader. Ms. Rahman nominated Ms. Adams as vice chair, which was seconded by Mr. Tanowitz. Mr. Plottel explained that the nominations will remain open for the next month and voting will occur at the next meeting.

Next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, February 14, 2023, and will be held remotely on Zoom. Mr. Plottel asked Mr. Sisson to check to see if the voting could be in executive session. Members discussed hosting the EDC meeting remotely, in-person, or both. Mr. Plottel said this topic can be discussed at the next meeting.

Adjournment

Mr. Leader moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Ms. Adams. The motion was approved by all members present. The meeting was adjourned at 8:03 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John Sisson, Director of Economic Development