

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

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**Meeting Minutes**

DATE: March 14, 2023

TIME: 6:30 pm

LOCATION: City Hall Room 204 and virtually on Zoom

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

**Elected Officials Attending:** City Councilor Pamela Wright (Ward 3)

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

**Approval of meeting minutes:** Postponed until next meeting.

**Discussion and vote on 2023 EDC priorities.**

The Chair asked for feedback on the 2023 priorities listed in the annual report. Mr. Plottel suggested the phrase “business-friendly” be replaced with “reasonable.” Mr. Freid suggested keeping the priorities a little broad for flexibility. Ms. Jackson moved that the 2023 priorities be approved, along with the annual report, and Ms. Adams seconded the motion as amended by Mr. Plottel. All members present voted in the affirmative.

**Confirmation of new meeting time**

Ms. Rahman discussed moving the meeting start time to 7pm, as the Commission discussed at the past meetings, and holding the meetings in hybrid format—both at City Hall and on Zoom. Ms. Adams asked a question about present and remote attendance as it relates to meeting quorum requirements.

## City updates & Commission discussion

Ms. Rahman explained a change to the meeting format, combining staff and EDC updates to engender more opportunities for questions and discussion of topics. Ms. Adams said it will be beneficial to move from brainstorming to identifying goals and actions. Mr. Sisson said staff will work to connect ongoing projects with the goals enumerated in the economic development strategy report. Mr. Segneri suggested structuring our meeting time to be productive, scoping the project work, and keeping ourselves accountable.

- **Village Center Zoning.** Mr. Heath said staff and consultants are working to evaluate the zoning proposal's potential compliance with the MBTA Communities legislation. Staff identified commercial areas in village center where the zoning would require mixed-use building forms, although residential units in those buildings will not be counted under the MBTA rules. Parking requirements may also be reduced or eliminated, he said. City Councilors also talked about incentivizing affordable housing up to 25% of the units created. Mr. Heath said the residential zones around village centers may be modified to reduce building footprints and facilitate easier conversion of existing buildings over teardowns. Mr. Adams asked about the goal of reducing parking requirements. Mr. Heath said it should lower the cost of development, allow for more residential units per acre, yield more attractive building forms, and better align with parking demand data from new mixed-use developments in the city. Mr. Leader said he's glad new buildings in Newtonville have demonstrated zoning was requiring too much parking.
- **Parking studies.** Mr. Sisson discussed engaging the EDC in parking studies, which are being proposed by Transportation Planner Josh Ostroff, and other projects that may be relevant to the EDC's strategy plan.
- **Outreach.** Mr. Sisson shared a flyer created to provide businesses with contacts in relevant city departments. This might be part of a larger communications effort to help small businesses and raise awareness of the EDC. Ms. Jackson expressed her support, and Ms. Adams agreed. Mr. Florent suggested getting feedback from some small businesses to ensure the content is helpful. Ms. Merino suggested increasing communication to the business community about events organized by the Office of Cultural Development. Mr. Tanowitz said businesses have expressed an interest coordinating marketing efforts with city-sponsored events. Ms. Merino and Mr. Tanowitz suggested making informational flyers available in multiple languages.
- **California Street Manufacturing District study.** Mr. Sisson invited Commissioners to participate in the community meeting scheduled for the week of April 24. The consultants will also be presenting to the EDC at a future meeting. Mr. Leader asked about the parcel where Stop & Shop is located and an earlier study performed by Boston College students,

which raised a lot of questions about infrastructure and utilities in that area. Ms. Rahman said this is an important study to evaluate whether Newton can attract value-add manufacturing or if the neighborhood will become more residential. Mr. Leader and Mr. Tanowitz said transportation options in that area are an issue worth of attention.

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).** Ms. Rahman mentioned earlier EDC discussions of organizing a roundtable for businesses. Ms. Jackson said the EDC could do a call to action and get input from minority-owned businesses to assess what barriers they are encountering. Ms. Rahman asked about what contact information we may have on those businesses. Ms. Merino suggested putting together a list of key resources for minority-owned businesses.

Ms. Rahman solicited comments from Commissioners about priorities for the year.

- Mr. Griglun asked whether EDC projects originate with city staff or if businesses raise issues that are then studied. Ms. Rahman said it may be push and pull, some of both.
- Mr. Mali said it might be helpful to review the EDC mission and the scope of different efforts.
- Mr. Knowlton suggested spending more time with business owners to get guidance about policy needs and be responsive.

### **Next meeting**

The next meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Tuesday, April 11, 2023, in Room 204 at City Hall and virtually on Zoom.

### **Adjournment**

Mr. Plottel moved to adjourn the meeting and was seconded by Ms. Jackson. The motion was approved by all members present. The meeting was adjourned at 8:02 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John Sisson

Director of Economic Development