

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: April 11, 2023

TIME: 7:00 pm

LOCATION: City Hall Room 204 and virtually on Zoom

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

Commissioners Not Attending: Matt Segneri (Secretary), Zach Knowlton.

Elected Officials Attending: City Councilors Tarik Lucas (Ward 2), Pamela Wright (Ward 3).

Staff Attending: Barney Heath, Director, Planning and Development; John Sisson, Director of Economic Development, and Long-Range Planning Associate Joe Iadonisi.

Approval of meeting minutes: Postponed until next meeting.

City Updates & EDC Discussion

- Ms. Rahman introduced Jane Obaggi, a Newton resident and business owner who has expressed an interest in joining the EDC.
- **Bottling of alcoholic beverages.** Mr. Sisson introduced Mr. Iadonisi to discuss the zoning ordinance and its prohibition of the bottling of alcoholic beverages (EDC Goal: Facilitate Owning & Operating Businesses). Mr. Iadonisi explained staff has been drafting language that would allow businesses to manufacture and bottle alcoholic beverages. Three options being considered are (1) creating a new use for craft alcoholic beverage manufacturing, (2) updating the regulation of restaurants to enable them to bottle alcoholic beverages made on site for retail sale, (3) creating a “craft production” use for small-batch or artisanal product creation. The current ordinance prohibits manufacturing in village center business zones. It also prohibits retail and food service uses in manufacturing zones, he explained. So a solution would need to evaluate and

regulate a combination of food service, retail sales, and manufacturing within a single commercial location—in whatever commercial zone it is located. Mr. Tanowitz asked if the zoning issue was the manufacturing use or that alcohol was the product, as zoning does not regulate how bakeries package bread. Mr. Sisson explained that both “the what” and “the where” present hurdles. Ms. Rahman asked about the difference between the first approaches, and Mr. Iadonisi explained they are very similar. By defining craft brewing as separate from restaurant use, zoning could specify different allowable zones for each use. Mr. Plottel suggested keeping the zoning update simple and expedient and focused on current needs and saving the craft production zoning for further study. Mr. Tanowitz said the latter is related to earlier discussion on a “home business” ordinance. Mr. Heath summarized that the issues are (1) whether to enable restaurants to bottle alcoholic beverages and (2) whether to allow restaurant uses in manufacturing zones. Ms. Adams asked what path would be easiest procedurally. Mr. Iadonisi suggested bringing a proposal to the Zoning & Planning Committee for feedback. Ms. Jackson and Mr. Griglun asked about examples from other communities. Mr. Iadonisi listed several breweries and municipal regulations. Mr. Leader reminded Commissioners about the manufacturing plants of Royal Crown Cola, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi which were located in Newton and Boston along the MBTA’s Framingham train line.

- **Village Center Rezoning:** Mr. Heath discussed the zoning proposals and analyzing compliance with the MBTA Communities statute: size of districts, percentage of land proximate to commuter rail and T stations, and the 15-units-per-acre density requirement. He provided clarification of Special Permit requirements, how to incorporate mixed-use buildings, how historic districts are unchanged, and the inclusion of affordable housing. Mr. Heath shared original and revised maps, along with rough estimates of housing units and acreage. He shared potential compliance strategies City Councilors are debating: reduce or eliminate parking minimums, raise the Special Permit threshold, add more land area zoned VC1, remove City-owned properties that depress the density counts, and adjust rules on priority streets where mixed-use is desired. Mr. Plottel asked if the density of existing buildings like Avalon on Needham Street may count, and Mr. Heath said yes. A public hearing will be held in June, he said. Ms. Rahman asked if the State would consider updating the regulations to allow mixed-use.
- **California Street Manufacturing District study:** Mr. Sisson shared information about a community engagement meeting planned for April 27 at Post 440 in Nonantum and outreach efforts by staff to connect with residents, merchants, and landowners. Mr. Griglun asked about the relevance of Watertown’s removal of the dam on the Charles River. Mr. Sisson said that topic has not come up.

- **Economic Development Strategy:** (Camoin report from 2019). Ms. Rahman referenced the strategy document, saying she and the other officers thought it would be useful to review sections of the report at future EDC meetings. She asked Mr. Freid for some background on the mixed-use section of the report. He provided some context of the pre-pandemic real estate development landscape around Greater Boston. Mr. Plottel said the EDC worked to update the City's zoning to enable R&D uses. Mr. Tanowitz asked about office space in the suburbs. Mr. Freid said the demand is for smaller office spaces, under 5,000 square feet, not large floor-plate tenants. He said a lot of current office tenants are evaluating their space needs and may change their footprints when their leases are up. Mr. Freid said while many real estate market sectors have been cyclical, housing demand has remained constant. Ms. Adams asked how much we actually know about where the market is headed. Mr. Plottel said the work-from-home (WFH) trend did start prior to the pandemic and has accelerated since, but there are still questions. Ms. Adams said downtown Boston is relatively empty during weekdays. Mr. Heath said the demographics of Newton support WFH. Mr. Freid said there's a need for flex space that can pivot into different uses, that buildings and zoning need that flexibility.

Mr. Leader shared copies of a 1964 map of Newton, showing transportation and public schools that no longer exist. He and Mr. Sisson shared some of the large demographic shifts that occurred between that period and 1980.

Mr. Leader asked about acreage at UMass Mount Ida as a potential area of opportunity. Ms. Rahman suggested that topic be discussed at a future meeting.

Mr. Plottel asked how the EDC might participate in the discussion of the zoning changes.

Next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Tuesday, May 9, 2023, in Room 204 at City Hall and virtually on Zoom.

Adjournment

Mr. Tanowitz moved to adjourn the meeting and was seconded by Mr. Plottel. The motion was approved by all members present. The meeting was adjourned at 8:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John Sisson

Director of Economic Development