

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: June 13, 2023

TIME: 7:00 pm

LOCATION: City Hall Room 204 and virtually on Zoom

Commissioners Attending: Sarah Rahman (Chair), Lisa Adams (Vice-Chair), Matt Segneri (Secretary), Jim Griglun, Jack Leader, Florent Mali, Marcela Merino.

Commissioners Not Attending: Jeremy Freid, Debora Jackson, Zach Knowlton, Phil Plottel, Chuck Tanowitz.

Elected Officials and Residents Attending: City Councilors Pamela Wright and Julia Malakie (Ward 3); EDC appointee Jane Obbagy, resident Amy Sangiolo.

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

Approval of meeting minutes: The EDC did not have quorum.

A. Strengthen village centers:

1. Village Center Overlay District V. 2.0.

Ms. Rahman provided an update on the previous evening's public discussion of the rezoning effort. The public hearing opens June 26 and will remain open for several months. The Commission may compose a letter of support, although a quorum was not in attendance tonight, but individuals from the EDC are free to speak as individual residents. Mr. Heath confirmed this information and said there would be additional opportunities to speak in the fall. Ms. Rahman asked Mr. Sisson to display the working draft of the letter on screen to solicit comments from Commissioners.

Ms. Adams discussed recent development at the state level regarding compliance with MBTA Communities. Ms. Rahman said the EDC may want to dig into the details to better understand the parking minimums and allowable commercial uses in the newer Multi-Residence Transit (MRT) zone. Mr. Heath explained the choice to require first-floor commercial uses along priority streets in village centers, although that requirement disqualifies housing units on those parcels from counting towards the MBTA goal. However, he said, the proposed areas zone will meet the minimum criteria for the state. Mr. Mali asked if Mr. Heath's comments could be included in the letter to provide background on the choice.

Ms. Rahman said a lot of Commissioners had questions about the proposed parking minimums. She said some have want more information on the difference between the parking required in VC1 and MRT zones. Mr. Heath explained the rationale for creating the MRT overlay, which was to provide alternatives to teardowns of existing residential structures. First, a homeowner could add up to 50% of square footage to the existing home and up to 6 residential units, with some limitations. Second, the homeowner could raze the existing house and build a new structure with a limited footprint and only four residential units. The third option would be to utilize the underlying zoning. The zoning consultants showed estimates suggesting the first option presents an attractive alternative to teardowns that destroy traditional architecture residents value.

Mr. Heath said the cost of providing parking with units drives up housing costs. Parking management is part of the equation, he said, and said Mr. Sisson and Transportation Planner Josh Ostroff will be defining a parking study scope later this year. The next section of the draft letter raises questions about what commercial uses might be welcome in MRT districts. Mr. Sisson brought up the concept of "neighborhood retail" that has historically served more walkable, residential neighborhoods. Ms. Merino asked about how the proposal may affect small businesses and the need to reflect on that. Ms. Adams asked about walkability measures, and Mr. Heath explained most of the zones were created considering quarter mile or half-mile distances.

Ms. Merino asked about ridesharing and NewMo impacts on parking demand. Mr. Sisson explained some data is available but that it presents an incomplete picture.

Ms. Rahman asked Mr. Heath whether MRT zones would allow more home-based businesses compared to traditional residential zoning. Mr. Heath explained MRT would allow the same commercial uses, but VC1 overlay zones would place some limits on those first-floor uses.

Ms. Rahman asked about the timeline. The deadline is the end of this year, Mr. Heath said, and that the village center zoning proposal is aligned with MBTA Communities to enable Newton to comply with state requirements. Ms. Rahman welcomed individual Commissioners to speak at the June 26 meeting.

2. Newton Highlands Enhancement Project

Mr. Sisson shared some of the presentation slides from the public meeting on May 25. He talked about the project scope being expanded to focus on gateways into the village center, different concepts the consulting team had evaluated. The presentation has 50 slides, so he shared only a portion of the document, saying he would make it available.

B. Increase Newton's commercial tax base:

California Street Study Update

Mr. Sisson talked about the June 8 public meeting and shared some of the presentation slides. Mr. Griglun said he was somewhat surprised by the scale of the proposed building forms and wondered how much assemblage would be required to enable the envisioned forms. A representative of the Stop-and-Shop property talked about the strong market for residential development, and Mr. Griglun talked about the potential pitfall of zoning for lab buildings when that market has cooled, that market demand may be completely different in two years, and the zoning proposal might include some flexibility.

Mr. Heath said the City works closely with neighboring municipalities, especially for public works and vehicular traffic. The California-Bridge intersection has been a topic of discussion and the solution will require the collaboration of Watertown and Newton.

To keep the meeting on schedule, Ms. Rahman said the EDC might examine the presentation slides more closely later.

C. Advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI):

Underrepresented Vendor List

Mr. Sisson shared information from Nicholas Read, the City's Chief Procurement Officer, about a list of underrepresented vendors (URV) in 10 common supply/service provider types within a 50-mile radius of Boston. Unfortunately, he shared, none of the URVs are located in Newton. Ms. Merino asked about other provider types, like catering and construction, and whether the City efforts include requirements for subcontractors. She also asked about marketing efforts that might promote procurement by URVs.

D. Facilitate owning & operating of businesses:

1. Commercial cardboard recycling

Mr. Sisson presented information about the commercial recycling mandate, which bans cardboard from the trash. Public Works is conducting outreach about the mandate and enforcement, and he said he's also distributing flyers to village center businesses. All recyclable materials will be banned from the trash starting July 1, 2024.

2. Update: Brewpubs & Bottling

The Zoning & Planning Committee (ZAP) did start discussion of the proposed amendments at its meeting the preceding evening (June 12). The changes would enable alcohol bottling and create definitions for "craft brewing" operations in the use table. Most of ZAP's meeting was focused on village center zoning, he said, so this topic was briefly introduced, and discussion held for a future meeting. The process takes 2-3 months.

Ms. Adams asked if anyone voiced opposition to the proposal. Mr. Heath said the Committee was generally supportive, but the effort will need to address some details about size and locations.

Next meeting

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

Adjournment

Mr. Griglun moved to adjourn the meeting and was seconded by Mr. Mali. 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