

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: Sept. 12, 2023

TIME: 7:00 pm

LOCATION: City Hall Room 204 and virtually on Zoom

Commissioners Attending: Sarah Rahman (Chair), Jim Griglun, Debora Jackson, Zach Knowlton, Jack Leader, Marcela Merino, Jane Obbagy, Phil Plottel, Chuck Tanowitz.

Commissioners Not Attending: Lisa Adams (Vice-Chair), Matt Segneri (Secretary), Jeremy Freid, Florent Mali.

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

Approval of meeting minutes: The Commission reviewed minutes from the February meeting and made one correction. Mr. Plottel moved to approve the minutes as edited, seconded by Mr. Leader, with all members present voting to approve.

1. City updates & EDC discussion

- a. **Guest Speaker:** Jeff Cournoyer, managing director of the Mount Ida Campus of UMass Amherst, shared a presentation about the university system and its economic impacts statewide, as well as details on the Mount Ida Campus, including updates, challenges, and opportunities. Mr. Cournoyer talked about strategic priorities, academic programs, internships, co-ops, and community engagement. Mr. Cournoyer also spoke about the geographic location of the campus and its proximity to the Wells Avenue office park. He explained that the existing student housing on campus requires updating.
 - Mr. Plottel asked about opportunities for UMass students to intern with the City. He also asked about the potential for the campus to be involved in conversations about a second means of egress for the office park. Mr. Cournoyer said they are having

internship discussions at multiple levels of local government and that the transportation needs of both the campus and the office park are ongoing.

- Ms. Obbagy asked about pedestrian and vehicular access to the campus. Mr. Cournoyer said both are serviceable but limited.
- Mr. Tanowitz asked about student access to transportation. Mr. Cournoyer said the university had been relying on NewMo and ride-sharing services to connect students with the MBTA Green Line. It also runs a shuttle between the Mount Ida and Amherst campuses.
- Mr. Tanowitz asked about the student body and local commerce. Mr. Cournoyer said the students do access restaurants on Needham Street and also use Uber Eats and GrubHub.
- Ms. Merino asked about apprenticeships, and Mr. Cournoyer explained they do offer a limited number of contract positions and residential educator positions.
- Mr. Tanowitz asked about the demographics of the student body and where the students are from. Mr. Cournoyer said the student body varies fall, spring, and summer. The campus has a lot of international students, especially during the summer. Some students are from the Boston area.
- Ms. Rahman asked if Mount Ida is looking at existing educational models to emulate. Mr. Cournoyer said there are many exemplars of professional development models, such as the co-op program at Northeastern. The proximity to Boston employers enables many more student employment and research opportunities, and UMass is working to ramp up these programs.
- Mr. Heath mentioned a housing event just hosted by the Mount Ida Campus, sponsored by the Charles River Chamber, and featuring speakers from the Healy Administration. More than 150 people attended, and the campus provided a great venue for that meeting, he said.

b. Strengthen Village Centers:

- i. EDC letter of Support for Village Center Overlay District
 - Ms. Rahman mentioned the Sept. 26 public hearing and encouraged any Commissioners who are interested to speak at that meeting. Individuals may draw on the EDC support letter or present their own thoughts, she said.
 - She also pointed to a forum on housing and social justice on Sept. 21 at the First Unitarian Universalist Society in Newton, which is being organized by ZAP Chair Deborah Crossley.

- Ms. Rahman said she noticed many of the talking points on the zoning effort focus on housing. She asked Commissioners to discuss some of the potential economic development benefits and solicited comments.
 - Mr. Sisson talked about an internal analysis of historic village center buildings and the amount of property tax revenue they generate per square foot of land. As commercial land is finite, he said, it's important fiscally to enable a larger amount of tax revenue per square foot of developed land.
 - Mr. Tanowitz said a lot of public discussion has raise questions about the resources increased density will draw from the City, so some attention should be paid to the community benefits, fiscal and otherwise, generated by the development of additional taxable property.
- Mr. Heath brought some printed maps to the meeting and spoke about recent discussions between Councilors, property owners, and staff about each village center and amendments. Version 3.0 is available online, he said. The changes will be presented at the Sept. 26 hearing.
- Ms. Rahman asked if there was new information about the priority mixed-use streets and requiring first-floor commercial uses. Mr. Heath explained that the new DHCD guidance provides the City with greater flexibility in counting units.
- Ms. Obbagy said she has been bombarded by emails from residents who have concerns about increased housing and demands on city services.
 - Mr. Heath said the predominant concern voiced at public meetings has been about traffic. Those impacts are difficult to predict, as a great deal of traffic generation is created by motorists passing through Newton from neighboring communities. New housing near transit nodes would create less traffic than it would in other areas of the city, he said.
 - The other concern voiced at public meetings has been about school enrollment, he said, but case studies have shown the impacts of recent mixed-use developments have been minimal.
- Mr. Plottel asked about a question the EDC raised in its support letter about parking in the proposed MRT district, especially on roadways lacking on-street parking. Mr. Heath said that question is difficult to answer and proposed an analysis of past development at the proposed density might provide more insight than an attempt to forecast parking demand. Mr. Plottel said developers have suggested they rely on an amount of on-street parking available for residents and would like some analysis.
- Ms. Rahman said she wanted to go back to Mr. Tanowitz's comments on transportation options and how they improve quality of life. She also said much of

the discourse about parking for small businesses has been louder than the comments about the creation of new foot traffic.

- Ms. Merino said she has also heard people raising questions about the effect zoning may have on property values and tax. Mr. Sisson pointed to historical development along a transit line in Arlington, Va., and the corollary benefits to the surrounding neighborhoods. She said the messaging needs to address people's concerns.
- Mr. Tanowitz pointed to the dry cleaner in Newton Centre closing recently because of declining business and compared it to the increased density in Newtonville and the restaurants and retailers now populating once-empty storefronts on Washington Street.
- Ms. Obbagy said people aren't hearing the positives and need to. On a recent visit to Newtonville, she observed crowds of young people gathering in the village center.
- Ms. Jackson asked if the EDC might be able to write a short opinion piece about these issues for local media.
- Mr. Heath said some people are suggesting a great deal of development will happen quickly, but the inverse is true, given the current economy and costs related to construction. The zoning proposal has also been designed to favor smaller, incremental development projects.
- Ms. Rahman said some are concerned about the City losing the leverage of the special permitting process. Mr. Tanowitz said the special permit process leads to mega-developments.

c. Facilitate Owning & Operating Businesses

As time was running short, the Chair asked Mr. Sisson for any City updates.

- Mr. Sisson shared information about recent troubles small businesses and landowners have had with the special permit process, which have delayed a restaurant opening and caused a potential tenant for a Newton Highlands space to move instead to Wellesley, which does not require the months-long process.
- The next public meeting on the Newton Highlands Improvement Project is scheduled for Oct. 12.
- Mr. Sisson said he's working on outdoor dining policy and process for 2024.
- The craft brewing zoning proposal was unanimously approved by ZAP after the public hearing on Sept. 11, he said.

New Business

- The Chair said the EDC would be interested in working with the Planning Department to schedule a discussion about the stalled development at Riverside. Mr. Leader said the development has hinged on the construction of a parking garage, and the development may continue to be deferred until that question is addressed.

Next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Tuesday, October 10, 2023, in Room 204 at City Hall and virtually on Zoom.

Adjournment

Mr. Leader moved to adjourn the meeting and was seconded by Mr. Plottel. The motion was approved by all members present. The meeting was adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John Sisson
Director of Economic Development