

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: August 8, 2023

TIME: 7:00 pm

LOCATION: 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, Jane Obbagy, Florent Mali, Marcela Merino, Phil Plottel, and Chuck Tanowitz

Commissioners Not Attending:

Elected Officials and Residents Attending: Councilor Pam Wright, Rena Getz.

Staff Attending: Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Development; John Sisson, Director of Economic Development; Allan Cohen, Commercial Property Assessor.

Approval of meeting minutes: Ms. Rahman explained the approval of outstanding meeting minutes is scheduled for the September EDC meeting.

EDC letter of support for Village Center Overlay Zoning

Ms. Rahman displayed the third draft of the Commission's letter of support for Village Center zoning. Mr. Plottel pointed out a couple of typographical errors. Ms. Rahman read through some of the statistics on the City's commercial tax base. In addition to other examples cited in the letter, Mr. Tanowitz and Ms. Jackson pointed to Allston as a nearby mixed-use neighborhood similar to parts of Newton, which has demonstrated economic resilience.

Ms. Rahman read through a paragraph addressing parking policy and the need for parking analysis. Mr. Plottel and Ms. Obbagy suggested simplifying some language in that section. Ms. Jackson and Ms. Adams agreed and also made suggestions. Mr. Heath asked if the letter stated when the parking analysis might be performed. Ms. Rahman said it was a general

recommendation. She asked for any additional comments and moved to the next highlighted text on compliance with the State law.

Ms. Rahman read through the EDC recommendations, the final section highlighted for discussion. Mr. Plottel asked about phrasing, and Mr. Leader spoke up about the importance of being declarative in this context.

Mr. Leader moved that the Commission advance the letter subject to the officers making minor edits, spelling, and formatting corrections. Mr. Plottel suggested the verb approve. Mr. Leader agreed. Mr. Plottel seconded the motion. The motion was approved by all members present.

Mr. Tanowitz shared information about “save our villages” flyers and signs being distributed, especially in Nonantum, and concerns about misinformation in the materials. The Chamber and others have expressed a need for sharing factual information in response. Mr. Sisson said Planning staff have been creating materials for distribution and plan to do outreach and listen to the concerns of business owners. Mr. Heath said the village business owners typically want to avoid local politics and risk offending any of their customers. Mr. Leader said a handful of individuals always express opposition to City planning efforts. Mr. Tanowitz pointed to assertions about tall buildings and the loss of parking as important to address.

Ms. Rahman asked for any additional updates, and Mr. Heath mentioned two upcoming meetings of the Zoning and Planning Committee, on August 15 and 21, at which Councilors will review ordinance language and detailed maps.

As the meeting was running ahead of schedule, Ms. Rahman proposed taking an agenda item out of order and asked Ms. Sisson for an update on DEI.

DEI: Immigrant Entrepreneur Awards

Mr. Sisson said he has not made any progress on this front. The city really has very little business data that would aid staff in identifying companies founded by immigrants, or businesses owned by minorities, women, or veterans. Ms. Rahman suggested tapping existing immigrant networks to at least publicize the program.

Ms. Rahman noticed guest speaker Phil Dorman of Greatland Realty Partners joining the Zoom and turned the discussion back to that agenda item.

Guest Speaker: Phil Dorman of Greatland Realty Partners.

Ms. Rahman introduced Mr. Dorman, co-founder of the real estate company which recently purchased the office building complex at 275 Grove Street, adjacent to the Riverside MBTA

station in Auburndale. Mr. Dorman shared information about Greatland Realty Partners, which owns 20 office, lab, and workspace buildings across eight properties in its Boston-focused portfolio.

Mr. Dorman said company leadership considered purchasing the Newton office when it was on the market in 2020 and was excited when it became available earlier this year. The prior owner had planned lab conversion for one of the three buildings on site, and that building is vacant at this time.

Ms. Rahman asked about the lab conversion plans. Mr. Dorman said the company does not plan to proceed with those plans speculatively and will instead lease the building as office space. He said the complex offers desirable, high-quality office space which is not common in the Boston market.

Mr. Tanowitz asked about Greatland's Revolution Hall property in Lexington and whether the company was considering activating the large atrium at 275 Grove Street. Mr. Dorman said Revolution Hall has been very successful operating as a food and beer hall. He mentioned the newly opened Kendall Kitchen café in the Newton complex and wants to see it succeed and have the atrium be more active, perhaps with some retail stores. The atrium is open to the public during office hours.

Mr. Leader asked about the importance of transportation to the building. Mr. Dorman said the transportation access is an important decision point for potential tenants. Mr. Leader asked about Greatland's relationship with Mark Development and the proposed project on the MBTA's Riverside property.

Mr. Plottel asked about tenant interest in the space. Mr. Dorman said existing tenants have expressed satisfaction and an intent to stay, while Greatland is also receiving inquiries from potential tenants.

Mr. Sisson mentioned the special permit restriction on signage on the exterior of the building and asked how that restriction affects existing and potential tenants. Mr. Dorman said not being able to offer signage to potential tenants does put this complex at a competitive disadvantage.

California Street Study Findings

Mr. Sisson said Commissioners have seen much of the study materials in earlier meetings and turned to the latter part of the report to point out the zoning recommendations. He said it was worth noting that some of the assumptions included when the study scope was defined have been upended, as the real estate market changed considerably in the intervening time.

Mr. Griglun said it will be worthwhile to evaluate market conditions and ensure the zoning recommendations allow for some flexibility.

Ms. Rahman asked if the study provided other takeaways. Mr. Sisson said, yes, the consultants were somewhat surprised that some of the smaller building forms tested were as viable or perhaps more viable than taller ones. He said the California Street study findings may be considered for industrial sites in other areas of Newton.

Ms. Rahman asked what happens next. Mr. Sisson said the information will be disseminated and presented to the Administration and City Council.

Staff updates:

- Outdoor Dining: Mr. Sisson said staff are still working to address issues that arise because multiple departments have regulatory authority over the permitting of outdoor dining areas. In addition to those operational issues, he said staff are looking at policy questions as well. Mr. Tanowitz asked if the City has data on foot traffic generation and whether restaurants were benefiting from the added effort. Mr. Sisson said local data was not available, but national data provided positive indications on both.
- Bottling: Mr. Sisson said the Zoning & Planning Committee did discuss the zoning proposal at last night's meeting, but the meeting ran late, and he had not been able to get an update from other Planning staff.

Next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Tuesday, September 12, 2023, in Room 204 at City Hall and virtually on Zoom.

Adjournment

Mr. Tanowitz moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Ms. Jackson. The motion was approved by all members present. The meeting was adjourned at 8:32 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John Sisson

Director of Economic Development