

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

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**Meeting Minutes**

DATE: October 10, 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), Jeremy Freid, Jim Griglun, Debora Jackson, Jack Leader, Jane Obbagy, Florent Mali, Marcela Merino, Chuck Tanowitz

**Commissioners Not Attending:** Zach Knowlton, Phil Plottel.

**Elected Officials and Residents Attending:** Fran Yerardi, Harry Sanders, David Donahue, Janet Serman, R. Palmer.

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

**Guest Speaker:** Ms. Rahman explained that retail consultant Allison Yee, founder and CEO of UpNext, was not able to attend tonight but was scheduled to come to November's meeting.

**Approval of meeting minutes:** Ms. Rahman said the Commission would be reviewing minutes from June, July, and September EDC meetings.

In the review of June's minutes, Ms. Obbagy pointed out her first name was listed incorrectly. Mr. Sisson made the correction. Ms. Rahman asked for any additional comments. Ms. Adams moved to approve the June minutes, seconded by Mr. Mali. The motion was approved by all members present.

In the review of July's minutes, Ms. Jackson noted she was shown as both attending and not attending, and she suggested an additional edit to the text. Mr. Sisson made the corrections. Ms.

Rahman asked for any additional comments. Mr. Mali moved to approve the June minutes, seconded by Ms. Merino. The motion was approved by all members present.

In the review of September's minutes, Mr. Jackson pointed out Ms. Obbagy's first name was listed incorrectly again. Her last name was misspelled later in the text. Mr. Sisson made the corrections. Ms. Rahman asked for any additional comments. Ms. Jackson moved to approve the June minutes, seconded by Mr. Obbagy. The motion was approved by all members present.

Ms. Rahman thanked everyone for getting caught up on the minutes and outlined the remainder of the meeting.

## **City Updates & EDC Discussion**

### **A. Strengthen Village Centers**

#### **1. Village Center Overlay Zoning.**

Ms. Rahman provided some updates on Version 3 of the zoning proposal. Mr. Sisson mentioned a Zoning & Planning Committee memo detailing the updated zoning proposal that he could distribute to Commissioners. ZAP was also meeting that evening across the hall. Ms. Obbagy mentioned a public meeting on zoning at Newton North High School. Mr. Tanowitz said the meeting was organized by Councilors Wright, Malakie, and Norton. Ms. Rahman pointed to flyers that had been delivered to the EDC meeting by different groups, both in opposition and in support of the zoning effort. Mr. Tanowitz asked about efforts to connect with Nonantum businesses that had signed a petition opposing the zoning changes. Mr. Sisson said, during his visits with business owners on Watertown and Adams streets, people voiced some curiosity and concern but were not necessarily opposed to the zoning proposal. Ms. Rahman suggested Commissioners attend some of the public meetings and feel free to voice their opinions. Ms. Obbagy noted that, in one of the meetings she attended, the supportive comments were very general and the critical comments were much more specific.

### **B. Facilitate Owning & Operating Businesses**

#### **1. Craft Brewing ordinance passage.**

Mr. Sisson shared that the Council did approve zoning language to enable craft brewing of alcoholic beverages after amending the required parking ratio to garner necessary votes. The Council also eliminated the prohibition on the bottling of

alcoholic beverages, an ordinance that may have dated to the 1920s.

2. Outdoor dining 2024 planning.

Mr. Sisson shared an update on the research he'd conducted of other municipal policies and found that Newton's are mostly aligned with the policies of other Cities and Towns. Mr. Sisson also touched on policies on open-air retail and sandwich boards. Ms. Merino asked about policies in Waltham, as many restaurants are clustered along Moody Street, which, aside from Union Street, is different than a lot of restaurants in Newton. Ms. Obbagy talked about her experience with open-air retail in Concord, which was very successful but engendered some pushback from pedestrians. Mr. Tanowitz said Waltham may provide some good lessons. Ms. Adams asked how outdoor dining and open-air retail differ. Ms. Rahman asked if it might be possible for restaurants and retailers to perhaps share outdoor space.

3. rDNA Permitting Process.

Ms. Rahman mentioned Mayor Fuller's recent tour of Chapel Bridge Park and the discussion with LabShares principals about permitting processes. Mr. Sisson said HHS is hiring a consultant to assist with updating the rDNA process. He also pointed to earlier discussions about splitting the permit application in two, with one portion filled out by LabShares and the other portion completed by the new tenant. Ms. Rahman said the EDC will be involved in this process, and Mr. Plottel will be leading that working group. Other Commissioners should contact him about participating in that effort.

**C. Increase Newton's commercial tax base**

1. Internal updates.

- Ms. Rahman talked about the EDC's strategic plan and its focus on real estate around the city. She asked Mr. Freid for his thoughts about local market conditions. He said the retail sector and small office seem to be performing well, but larger commercial plates are seeing downward pressure. A lot of the big users—lab and life science—have pulled back.
- Ms. Rahman touched on the California Street Manufacturing District study and Mr. Griglun's earlier comments on ensuring some flexibility for future development. Mr. Griglun commented that high interest rates will probably stifle development in the foreseeable future. Too many unknowns, he said.
- Ms. Rahman mentioned recent discussions with Greatland Realty Partners and Bulfinch, whose assets seem to be performing well but not without challenges.

- Ms. Rahman also pointed to the paused redevelopment of the Riverside MBTA property. Mr. Leader agreed that the market conditions have negatively affected that proposal but pointed out several roadblocks erected by the City Council, which have created missed opportunities for lab development. He said these discussions have been going on since 2006.
- Ms. Rahman said much of the EDC's past work has focused on real estate development. Given current conditions, she said, the EDC may want to focus on additional goals. She presented some of the ideas she and the EDC officers had discussed:
  - a. Updating the 2019 economic development strategic plan.
  - b. rDNA permit process improvements.
  - c. A collaborative project with the MetroBridge program at BU.
  - d. DEI project ideas.
  - e. Newton business listing.
  - f. Village center parking study.
  - g. Riverside analysis based on earlier studies.

Ms. Obbagy asked for some clarification on the rDNA process improvement project. Mr. Mali asked about the need for a business listing. Ms. Rahman suggested that Commissioners think about how they might contribute to one of these projects. Ms. Adams asked which of these projects may be low-hanging fruit, perhaps business listing. Ms. Merino supported leveraging university programs and consultants. Ms. Jackson said she liked working on earlier projects and supports tackling some of these but asked about the need to compensate students. Mr. Segneri suggested focusing on two aspects: defining a discrete and achievable project scope and assessing the amount of existing data that could be leveraged for the project. Ms. Merino emphasized the need to address DEI, not necessarily as a separate project but as part of each project.

### **Next meeting**

The next meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Tuesday, November 14, 2023, in Room 204 at City Hall and virtually on Zoom.

### **Adjournment**

Ms. Adams moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Ms. Merino. The motion was approved by all members present. The meeting was adjourned at 8:36 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John Sisson

Director of Economic Development