

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, September 7, 2023

Area Council members:

Barbara Darnell, Robert Fizek, Groot Gregory, Jeremy Freudberg, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Larry Rosenberg, and Amy Wayne. Rakashi Chand and Nathaniel Lichtin not present.

Ex Officio:

City Councilors Bill Humphrey, Brenda Noel and Holly Ryan were not present.

Residents and others:

Martha Bixby, MaryLee Belleville, Bob Burke, Kim Thurmod, Jeffrey Freudberg, Rena Getz, Carol Carroll, Loumona Petroff

Meeting called to order at 7:04 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg presiding. The meeting was held in person at the Brigham House as well as via Zoom videoconferencing technology. The meeting was recorded.

Substantive Topics:

Preliminary Election Debate:

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg reported on the recently hosted candidate debate on September 5 for the preliminary election that is happening for Ward 2 and Ward 6. The debate went very well. There were about 40 in attendance and the Youtube video posting indicates over 700 views. A venue will need to be chosen for hosting future debates prior to the November elections. The Area Councils have a good question bank and will work on developing additional questions for the next round of debates. The date and location for the debates for the general election will be decided later, but they will be taking place in mid to late-October. Area Councilor Groot Gregory suggested that multiple locations may be considered, including the Hyde Center and the Allen House. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell reported that Lisa Gordon, city council candidate for Ward 6, had thanked the Area Councils for arranging the recently held debate. It was noted that there are 6 contested races up for consideration in November, 2 at-large and 4 ward races for City Council.

The NHNAC will be sharing the cost for the video production for the recently held debate. Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory proposed that the NHNAC should allocate up to \$500 to reimburse John Fremer, who brought important equipment and his professional background to enable the first multi-cam live stream in this venue for video production for the preliminary debate that just occurred. A vote was held and the motion was approved 7:0 (2 absent: Lichtin and Chand). The Area Council will consider a future donation to the Allen House for hosting the debate. Area Councilor

Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted that a portion of the closing statement by candidate Bixby was cut off in the video production.

Route 9 at Winchester/Centre traffic signal operation:

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg reported that the traffic signals are now active at this location and no longer on a flashing mode. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic remarked that the current traffic signal program is failing to allow traffic to move through the intersection, leading to excessive delays and congestion. This observation was corroborated by Area Council President Freudberg and Area Councilor Rosenberg. When driving on Route 9 westbound and heading towards Centre Street, it was noted that when there is a green light at Centre Street, there is a flashing arrow of uncertain nature. There is also lane shifting by cars leading to a general confusion. It was pointed out that this is a state project out of the city's control, but the city of Newton will assume control of the road once the project is completed.

Area Council President Freudberg suggested that the Area Council contacts traffic engineers at DPW in Newton to ask them to communicate concerns about the intersection to the Mass Department of Transportation. Area Councilor Robert Fizek made a motion that the Area Council write a letter to Newton DPW to contact Mass DOT to collaborate on a solutions to improve this intersection. The letter will be forwarded to Newton's state representatives as well. The motion was approved 7:0 (2 absent: Lichtin and Chand).

Levingston Cove Update:

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg contacted Luis Perez Demorizi, Director of Parks & Open Space, inquiring about the potential date for completion of the project. There is an issue with supply of a galvanized steel coated railing for the fishing deck, and there has been a supply backlog of providing this by the manufacturer. It is expected that the fencing will be procured in October and then installed. More planting will continue at the site in the Fall. Area Councilor Fizek noted that he has requested a cost accounting for the project.

A letter was published in Fig City News by Newton resident Halina Brown expressing concern about the placement of boulders at Levingston Cove and how these boulders will reduce access and worsen safety. These are the same concerns that the Area Council had brought forward to Mayor Fuller and PRC commissioner Nicole Banks and Director of Parks & Open Space Luis Perez Demorizi in a letter and during a meeting that took place this past June. A discussion ensued on how the originally approved plans for the boulders at Livingston Cove were not implemented as initially presented, and how the Area Council intends to follow up with Mayor Fuller after the cove reopens regarding whether these jagged stones should be modified or removed.

Safety on Lincoln Street:

Area Councilors Barbara Darnell and Larry Rosenberg expressed concerns about safety on Lincoln Street and this will be discussed further at a subsequent meeting. The Village Enhancement project is due to have a public meeting at some point this fall. Area Council President Freudberg will follow up to confirm the date of the meeting. Area Councilor Robert Fizek suggested that the village enhancement community meeting should be held locally.

There have been no updates about the issue of Buttonwood restaurant outdoor seating on Lincoln Street, which currently infringes in the traffic right of way on Lincoln Street. A suggestion was made to have the outdoor dining moved to Columbus Street. A discussion ensued on whether there is enough width on Columbus Street to accommodate outdoor seating. Further discussion ensued about police enforcement of traffic and parking rules in the Highlands and around Crystal Lake. Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg stated that he will discuss additional traffic signalization issued with the city traffic engineer.

Zoning Redesign Discussion:

Area Council President Freudberg noted that the Zoning and Planning Committee is meeting this evening to consider amendments to Version 2 of the new Zoning Plan to create a new Version 3. Regarding updates to the zoning plan, the Area Council had asked that heights in the village center be reduced from 4.5 to 3.5 stories, so that the VC3 zone would be changed to VC2. This amendment was rejected at ZAP, such that the VC3 zone would be retained in the Highlands. The Area Council had asked that parcels on Route 9 should be removed from the proposed VC1 zone, and the most recent updated zoning plan shows that these were changed to MRT zoning. The Area Council had requested that at Four Corners, current commercial uses should be retained and not converted to solely residential. This item has not yet been discussed by ZAP, but the updated MBTA Communities Act now supports some maintenance of village commercial uses rather than insisting only residential projects. It was noted that the new zoning plan for an MRT zone allows 3 units to 4 units per parcel, and up to 6 units per parcel. Since this is an overlay zoning proposal, a property owner could choose to continue their current use as per the current zoning.

City Councilor Deb Crossley has provided an update regarding the zoning plan on the Newton Highlands google group page. The Route 9 corridor will be designated as a MRT zone, except the CVS plaza which stays VC3. VC1 is being eliminated. There are changes to setbacks to MRT, and a minimum lot frontage is proposed at 45 linear feet. A lot would need to have 90 linear feet in order to be subdivided. Side setbacks are to be 10 feet in the MRT zone. The setback in the front is proposed to be 20 feet average. Setbacks were also changed for proposed VC2 and VC3 zones.

Many amendment requests for the new zoning plan have been received and requests were made by some to have more MRT zoning. Generally, this proposal was rejected at ZAP. There is still lack of clarity on the overall potential buildout regarding MBTA compliance with these changes. The height allowance for VC2 and VC3 has been dropped from 18 ft to 14 ft for a pitched roof. It was noted that in a recent iteration of the plan, Allerton Road and half of Woodcliff Road were removed from the proposed MRT zone and will stay as a Single Residence zone.

Rena Getz updated the Area Council and noted that the Strong Block in Waban has been voted for Landmark status. Ms. Getz recommended that the MBTA Communities Act compliance portion as it relates to zoning should be considered separately from the Village Overlay Zoning proposal and that more attention is needed before proceeding with the overlay district proposal. Ms. Getz and Area Councilor Amy Wayne have developed a letter to inform the community regarding the proposed zoning changes. The purpose of the letter is to provide an overview of the proposed zoning with various links to sites that explain what the proposed zoning will be. The letter is an informational

document. The letter is intended to be distributed to owners of parcels that are intended to be up zoned with the new zoning proposal, and it is also intended to be sent to their abutters, and the abutters to the abutters. This letter is being developed in draft form and its contents will be based on upcoming ZAP decisions and discussions. The letter will provide information about the zoning proposals ahead of the September 26 public meeting of the Zoning and Planning Committee. A discussion ensued regarding potential costs to distribute the letter.

Area Councilor Robert Fizek asked about the amendment process for the zoning proposal. There has been little identification of who was sponsoring or supporting each amendment. The letters regarding amendments have been posted on the city's website. There is concern that there is lack of transparency about who is making each amendment request. Area Council President Freudberg will follow up on obtaining that information. Mr. Fizek also has additional questions regarding the latest zoning proposal which were posted to the Newton Highlands public google group and read to the Area Council, including whether historic resource protections will be considered and whether a robust design review process will be conducted in village centers. MaryLee Belleville commented that even though the zoning proposal states that only lots more than 30,000 SF are subject to a special permit review, many of those lots can be subdivided and therefore bypass the special permit process.

Administrative Items:

Review and Approval of July and August Minutes: The draft minutes from the July and August NHNAC meetings will be reviewed at the next scheduled Area Council meeting.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory noted that there are no significant updates. Gift Certificates for Village Day were obtained for Chris Pitts and John Rice.

New Business:

Area Councilor Robert Fizek suggested that the Area Council organizes a tracker of correspondences and votes taken, and whatever action items are outstanding. Area Council President Freudberg will be working on developing the tracking document and also on updating the Area Council website. Mr. Fizek suggested finding additional assistance from someone who could help with updating the website.

It was noted that nomination papers for Area Council are due September 15. A discussion ensued about the commitment required to obtain signatures.

Carol Carroll asked if the MBTA accessibility project design is being coordinated with the city's Newton Highlands village enhancement project.

Next Area Council meeting: It was noted that the next meeting of the Area Council will be taking place on Thursday, October 5th.

Meeting Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 8:34 pm.