

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, November 2, 2023

Area Council members:

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

Ex Officio:

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

Residents and others:

John Rice, Bob Burke, Martha Bixby, Dan Powdermaker, Lisa Monahan, Lisa Gordon, City Councilor Vicki Danberg, Carol Carroll, Jane Frantz, Sonya McKnight.

Meeting called to order at 7:02 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:

Area Council election staffing:

Poll workers are needed to staff the Area Council elections. Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg reported that there are still a few shifts to fill for staffing the election for Area Councils. There are open slots at Emerson, Bowen, and Countryside. An Area Councilor who are is the ballot cannot work as a poll worker at a site within their Area Council's catchment area. A CORI check is required to be submitted to the City of Newton.

Safety on Lincoln Street:

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell pointed out that Newton Highlands village center does not have pedestrian activated crossing lights within the center of the village. At the Buttonwood Restaurant, there are concerns related to pedestrian visibility due to the Jersey barriers next to the outdoor seating. A pedestrian activated crossing light is presently working at the Hyde Center. Area Councilor Darnell is advocating that pedestrian activated lights should be placed at the crosswalk near Indulge and Anna's Taqueria, and another should be placed at Columbus Street near the Buttonwood Restaurant.

Area Councilor Robert Fizek suggested that something more attractive than Jersey barriers should be considered in the village center if restaurant seating is anticipated on Lincoln Street next year. The

barriers are typically removed during the winter snow shoveling season but are expected to be put back in place in the Spring.

Area Councilor Darnell also suggested that an automated speeding feedback sign should be placed on Lincoln Street within or near the village center in order to provide visual feedback to drivers about their speed. Area Councilor Freudberg noted that there are two ways to obtain these signs. A request could be made for a permanent sign, or a request could be made to get a portable sign. He suggested that the Area Council requests a portable sign from the police department. Some of these signs may have a data collection feature within them, and it may be useful to collect data on vehicle speeds in the village center. Area Councilor Rosenberg stated that without enforcement of traffic speeds, having these kinds of signs may not have much of an effect on improving safety.

A letter will be sent to DPW and to the Police Department requesting the placement of the speeding feedback sign, obtaining pedestrian activated crossing lights, and regarding enforcement issues. Area Councilor Freudberg noted that Traffic Council typically approves the placement of the pedestrian activated crossing lights after they have been placed, rather than approving their placement in advance.

John Rice noted that a request for a new stop sign for Erie Street at Bowdoin for traffic traveling towards Woodward Street was rejected by Traffic Council. A stop sign was approved for traffic traveling on Bowdoin towards Erie at that intersection. There have been requests to improve visibility at the intersection of Lincoln Street and Bowdoin Street by removing a parking space on Lincoln Street approaching Bowdoin.

Area Councilor Darnell noted that a stop sign at Station Avenue entering Lake Avenue is missing and that it should be replaced. Area Councilor Fizek noted that there the sign that reads “End Speed Zone” may be misinterpreted by some to mean that a high-speed zone ends at this location, whereas the intent is that the sign marks the end of a slow speed safety zone. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic suggested that the language on the sign would be clearer if it stated, “End slow speed zone.” Area Councilor Rosenberg suggested that the sign would be even more clear if it stated, “End 20 mph speed zone.”

Levingston Cove Update:

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg reported that he received a message from Luis Perez Demorizi from the Parks and Recreation Department regarding progress of the construction at the cove. The cove is not yet open, but it may be opened in the next couple of weeks. The handrails at the fishing deck are due to be delivered this week. The official date for opening the cove has not yet been announced. Also, there has not been a timeline set regarding further planning of improvements at the Left Beach at Crystal Lake Park.

Area Councilor Robert Fizek suggested that a request is made to Parks and Recreation Department so that a Master Plan of Crystal Lake should be done, so that planning for the Left Beach is coordinated with future planning at the Bathhouse. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic suggested that planning for the Left Beach should initially start with broad community input, rather than by the Parks and Recreation department presenting a set of plans and asking for a reaction.

Village Enhancement Project:

Area Councilor Jeremy Freudberg presented slides from the October 12th meeting at City Hall regarding the Village Enhancement project. The meeting was organized and held by the Department of Public Works. A preferred design was presented for Lincoln Street and for Walnut Street. On Lincoln Street, the “shared street” concept is the preferred option. Generally, there has been broad support of the “shared street” concept. The discussion then shifted to the preferred option for Walnut Street. There is less consensus about the design of Walnut Street. At Floral Street, several proposals were presented. Bicycle lanes in both directions are being proposed for Floral Street between Walnut Street and Route 9 in order to establish a connection between the Needham Street corridor and points in the Highlands and northbound.

Plans for Walnut Street indicate that several parking spaces are proposed for removal on Walnut Street between Lincoln Street and Floral Street. A discussion ensued if it was necessary to remove these parking spaces. Area Councilor Amy Wayne proposed that the parking spaces should be maintained and that bicycle accommodations may be placed on Hyde Street, bypassing the village center. Another concept for the intersection of Floral Street and Walnut Street included median barriers, extending the median so that car traffic could not cross Walnut Street at Floral Street. This proposal was highly controversial at the meeting. It was pointed out that the median barrier could present a hardship for people to live on Floral Street and for O’Hara’s Restaurant in terms of access to homeowners, its customers, and deliveries. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic noted that placing a median barrier at Floral Street could lead to more congestion at the Walnut and Centre Street intersection, as people may not be able to use Floral Street as an alternate route to go towards and from Centre Street and Newton Centre.

A discussion ensued about pros and cons of various options for Station Avenue, Walnut Street, and Floral Street. One option that was presented at the October 12 DPW meeting includes reversing the direction of traffic at Station Avenue. Another option included a two-way cycle track on the northbound side of Walnut Street between Floral Street and Lincoln Street. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic suggested that since there is no clear consensus regarding Walnut Street, perhaps the Walnut and Lincoln Street redesign could be considered and advanced separately. For example, the Lincoln Street project could be advanced first and that the Walnut Street portion of the project could be reconsidered after the Village Overlay Zoning proposal and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan have been developed and implemented.

Parking supply in the village center was discussed and there was consensus by Area Council members that better parking availability is important. The preferred options add a few parking spaces on Lincoln Street and remove parking spaces at Walnut Street. An overall net loss of parking from 149 spaces to 146 spaces is anticipated. Undergrounding of utilities was discussed. A cost projection of about \$7.5 million was mentioned at the DPW meeting. A discussion ensued regarding undergrounding, considering this cost estimate. There was unanimous support among Area Councilors that it was worthwhile to pursue undergrounding in the village center even if at this level of cost.

Carol Carroll suggested that more public feedback is needed about the proposal. It was noted that the DPW is accepting comments about the proposal during the next month. Further public input will be possible when the project is brought for approval before City Council in the future.

Carol Carroll expressed concern about the Office English Garden becoming a bus plaza with a bus stop in front of the Garden. John Rice pointed out that no changes would be made to the garden itself in any of the current options. A discussion ensued about the importance of coordinating the MBTA bus stop with private buses.

After a discussion about the project, the Area Council made a consensus opinion to support a phased approach to the village enhancement project. For the first phase, the city should proceed with the “shared street” concept for Lincoln Street and utilities on both Lincoln and Walnut Street should be undergrounded. For the second phase, the Walnut Street component should be reconsidered and phased after the completion of the Lincoln Street component and coordinated with MBTA’s plans for the Highlands train station and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan that is being developed by the City of Newton.

Zoning Redesign Discussion:

Area Council President Freudberg noted that the Zoning and Planning Committee at recent meetings has considered various amendments to the zoning plan. The committee voted to support Version 3.1 of the Village Center Overlay Zone proposal and the MBTA Communities Act proposal in its latest iterations. In the Newton Highlands village center, VC3 zoning is being maintained in the approved proposal. The City Council will be meeting on November 15 to discuss the entire proposal. Additional map amendments will be considered.

Area Councilor Fizek proposed a motion that the Area Council requests that VC3 is changed to VC2 in the Highlands village center. Also, Mr. Fizek suggested that the MBTA communities zoning should be considered first, and separately from the Village Center Overlay District proposal. The motion was seconded by Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin. A discussion ensued. Newton Highlands resident Dan Powdermaker asked what kind of public input was received by the Area Council regarding this issue. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin referred to visioning sessions held by the Area Council in 2021 where input was received from the public providing general feedback about density and building heights in the village center and in Four Corners. Area Councilor Amy Wayne reported on informal conversations that she has had from people in the community, as did a number of other Area Councilors.

Lisa Monahan noted that she attended some of the community visioning meetings and that details regarding VC2 and VC3 were not discussed at that time because these concepts had not yet been developed. Area Councilor Lichtin reiterated that community members had expressed their opinions regarding building heights at prior visioning meetings, generally preferring lower building heights. He noted that the Area Council had discussed visioning for many years at its public meetings prior to the current zoning efforts. Area Councilor Fizek stated that he feels that many people in the community are not fully aware of the extent of what is being proposed by the current zoning. Dan Powdermaker asked how many people are in the Area Council area. It was noted that approximately 3000 households are in the catchment area. Mr. Powdermaker stated that he is familiar with the

history of the village and that he supports further growth in the village center. He does not feel that the views of Area Council members are representative of the entire community such that the Area Council can adequately represent the views of its constituents regarding matters of the zoning proposal.

Lisa Monahan expressed concern that Area Council members, when asked, are non-specific about how many people each Councilor has talked with regarding the zoning issue. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked whether either Mr. Powdermaker or Ms. Monahan would support a public referendum in order to obtain a clear preference from citizens regarding the zoning proposal. Both Mr. Powdermaker and Ms. Monahan did not indicate approval for there being a referendum. Mr. Powdermaker subsequently provided additional context for not supporting a public referendum on the zoning issue. He stated that the issue is too complex for some people to make an informed decision, and that their elected City Councilors should be the ones making the difficult decisions regarding the zoning proposal. Mr. Powdermaker expressed concern that there is much disinformation regarding the zoning proposals that could unduly influence people regarding the proposal. He expressed concern against having a referendum because some groups may propagate false information about the zoning process.

Carol Carroll noted that it would be unlikely that there is time to educate the public on the latest zoning version. Lisa Monahan suggested that in spite of information regarding zoning that has been presented over the past several years, her opinion was not solicited by the Area Council. Ms. Monahan asked again if the Area Council had solicited specific opinions from people in the catchment area regarding their support of opposition towards the zoning proposal and whether residents had provided their opinion to have a separate vote at City Council for the village overlay proposal from a vote on the MBTA communities act zoning proposal. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin noted that topics related to the zoning proposal have been raised by the Area Council publicly at Area Council meetings over the past several months. Area Councilor Groot Gregory stated that people he has spoken with have not expressed opinions on whether City Council should vote on MBTA communities zoning separately from village center overlay zoning.

Dan Powdermaker expressed concern that if approval of the village center overlay zoning were separated from approval of the MBTA communities zoning that the MBTA communities act zoning proposal may not be in compliance. Area Councilor Freudberg stated that he has not personally received community input regarding splitting the overlay district zoning from the MBTA communities act. However, Mr. Freudberg stated that the Area Council has received engagement from the public regarding changing zoning from VC3 to VC2 in the village center. Lisa Monahan challenged whether Mr. Freudberg has this data regarding engagement. Several area councilors reiterated that they had received informal feedback from people in their neighborhoods and at various community events, in addition to during Area Council meetings that have occurred over the years. Carol Carroll stated that she has heard feedback from her neighbors and others requesting more time to understand the latest zoning proposal.

A vote was held regarding the motion proposed by Mr. Fizek. Regarding the motion to change VC3 to VC2 zoning in the Newton Highlands village center, the Area Council voted 7:0:1 in support of that motion, with all present Area Councilors supporting the motion and with Area Council President Freudberg abstaining. Regarding the motion to support asking the City Council to split approval of

the MBTA communities zoning from village center overlay zoning, the Area Council voted 4:4 on this motion with 4 members voting Yes (Fizek, Wayne, Darnell, Nedeljkovic) and 4 members voting No (Lichtin, Freudberg, Gregory, and Rosenberg). Being a tie vote, this motion did not pass.

Administrative Items:

Review and Approval of October Minutes: The draft minutes from the October NHNAC meetings were considered for approval. The minutes were approved 8:0.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory reported that the Newtonville Area Council is due to reimburse the Newton Highlands Area Council \$200 for costs related to the candidate debates. Area Council Treasurer Gregory noted that payment was made for \$1000 to the Hyde Center for plantings at the Brigham House. Payments will need to be made towards election poll workers for the Area Council elections at \$15 per hour. The projected total may be \$2500, which would be an expense shared between the four Area Councils. The city is not willing to support the cost of the election workers.

New Business:

John Rice noted that the Winter Soup Social will be at 5:30 pm on Saturday, January 27. It will be held outside at the Hyde Center and the Playground. The event has grown since it has become a citywide event.

Next Area Council meeting: The next meeting of the Area Council will be taking place on Thursday, December 7th.

Meeting Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 9:35 pm.