

# Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

## Meeting Minutes, February 1, 2024

### **Area Council members:**

Robert Fizek, Jeremy Freudberg, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Larry Rosenberg, and Amy Wayne. Groot Gregory and Barbara Darnell were away.

### **Ex Officio:**

City Councilors Martha Bixby present. Stephen Farrell and Bill Humphrey not present.

### **Residents and others:**

Jeffrey Freudberg, Phyllis Werlin, Jackie Lynch, City Councilor Martha Bixby, Emily Manus, MaryLee Belleville, Dan Powdermaker, Terry Sauro, Nathaniel Lichtin, Carol Carroll, Alison Haran, Kim Thurmond, Isabelle Albeck

Meeting called to order at 7:08 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:

#### School Strike:

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic brought forward the topic of the Newton school strike, noting that this issue is having a substantial effect on the city and its residents, including those in our local community. Area Councilor Amy Wayne pointed out that the strike is against state laws that prohibit school strikes. Area Councilor Larry Rosenberg expressed regret that children are out of school. Area Council President Freudberg noted that the School Committee will be meeting tonight to discuss making up days lost during the strike during school vacation. In addition to the adverse effects on children and their families, the strike is giving Newton negative publicity.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic stated that it is unlikely that the strike will end until the city provides much of what is being negotiated by the teacher's union. There seems to be a breakdown of trust between the two negotiating parties. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic noted that the city will likely need to adjust its budget for other programs that are of lesser priority in order to fund the school system fully. In Area Councilor Nedeljkovic's opinion, the city should consider postponing projects that are of a lesser priority, like funding \$30 million for the proposed NewCAL project, and focus on ending the strike immediately. The main priority right now should be ending the strike, and future city budgets should be developed and adjusted taking into account any new funding that is necessary to end the strike immediately. This can happen in upcoming budget cycles, but questions about funding reallocations should not delay ending the strike.

### Mass DOT bridge replacement project – Route 9 over Green Line

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg noted that there was a lively discussion on the Newton Highlands google group regarding proposals to replace certain bridges on Route 9. There will be a public meeting hosted by Mass DOT on February 7 to discuss the project to replace the small bridge on Route 9 that is over the MBTA tracks just west of Centre Street overpass. The construction schedule regarding road closures and lane shifting will likely be discussed during an upcoming meeting that Mass DOT will be holding on February 7. Mass DOT has announced its intention to reconstruct the bridge and the sidewalks on both sides of the road over the MBTA tracks.

The main issue will be how traffic will be maintained during the construction. More details will be shared by Mass DOT during the February 7 meeting.

### Interviews for Area Council Vacancies:

There are 2 vacancies currently on the Newton Highlands Area Council since 7 candidates were elected for this current term. The Area Council had notified the community about these positions and residents who live in the service area were invited to express interest.

At tonight's meeting, Emily Manus presented as a candidate for one of the unfilled positions. Ms. Manus grew up in Newton Upper Falls and went to school at the Hyde School. She recently moved to Forest Street and is now a resident of Newton Highlands. She is interested in contributing to the community. She is a social worker and psychotherapist by profession. Ms. Manus would like the Highlands to continue to be a great place to live and would like to help contribute to community events that happen in the Highlands.

Area Council President Freudberg welcomed Ms. Manus and described some of the functions and activities done by the Area Council. He noted that the area council often brings issues forward to the city that are of interest to the community and advocates for the interests of the local businesses. Area Councilor Rosenberg noted that one of the goals of the Area Council is to help build a better community. Also, the Area Council helps organize Village Day.

Area Councilors thanked Ms. Manus for her interest in being appointed to the Area Council. Based on Area Council bylaws, a vote to appoint a new member can be held at our next meeting in March.

### Route 9 at Winchester/Centre Street Traffic Signal:

Area Council President Freudberg stated that there continue to be concerns regarding traffic flow at the new traffic signals at Winchester and Centre Streets under Route 9. City Councilors Bixby and City Council Vice President Kalis met with the Newton DPW and were informed that Mass DOT intends to address the traffic issues by making some modifications at this intersection. These modifications include reassignment of lanes to eliminate lane shift going northbound, relocation of signs related to the lane shift, changes in traffic signal timing at the ramps to improve traffic flow

under the bridge, additional adjustments to signal positions, and adding more signal heads at the intersections to make the roadway visible and clear.

Area Council President Freudberg expressed concern that there are no plans to coordinate signals at the intersection of Centre Street and Route 9 with adjacent traffic signals, like the one at Walnut and Centre Streets. He noted that there are often backups in southbound traffic that cause traffic congestion into the Highlands and even towards Newton Centre. The city DPW mentioned that the entire Needham Street project will revert to city control after Mass DOT has completed their work on Needham Street. However, Mass DOT will continue to control the signals at Route 9. The timeline for any further work at the Route 9 intersection has not yet been clarified.

There is also a potential safety issue regarding the new pedestrian crossing at Needham, Winchester, and Dedham Street. The signal at this intersection is unclear regarding the pedestrian crossing, and traffic continues to move southbound even when there is a walk signal.

#### Winter Social – Winter Festival Recap:

On January 27, the Winter Festival was organized as a joint effort between the Hyde Community Center and Newton Pride. The weather was ideal, cool, and dry. There were about 500 people who attended the event. Almost every Newton Highlands restaurant contributed soup for the event. There was a great band in the bandstand. This was a fun and exciting time for everyone. Many City Councilors participated as soup servers. The event will happen again next year at the end of January 2025.

Nathaniel Lichtin felt that the music was loud which made it difficult to have conversations. It was noted that there was lots of attendance from all over the city. There was also a great assortment of soups. John Rice reported that there was excellent feedback about the band. Many people were dancing and enjoying the band. There was a light bright truck at the event that was being used by kids who were enjoying making designs with the lights.

#### Village Day planning:

Area Councilor Groot Gregory provided an update by e-mail. For the 5K race, there is still an ongoing search to find a running group to manage the Village Day road race. Information regarding sign-up for vendor booths will be going live soon to register vendors. An order will be placed for the tents, bouncy houses, and a face painter will be hired. John Rice stated that he will obtain permits from the City of Newton.

Carol Carroll suggested that the Area Council may consider honoring former Alderman George Mansfield and his leadership on the Area Council and the Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation. The NHCDC is a pivotal organization that helped renovate parts of the Hyde school and the Brigham House and that helped establish the Hyde Community Center. There was a discussion about unveiling a sign commemorating George Mansfield and to locate the sign in Rodney Barker Square.

After the Area Council meeting, on the Newton Highlands google group, Carol Carroll wanted to clarify that the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council, as part of City government, requested and was given the use of the closed branch library that is now the Brigham House when it became surplus property. The name Brigham House was coined, and the library function continued with volunteers. Over time, usage changed. Ms. Carroll suggested that perhaps there will be a future role for NHNAC at the Brigham House.

Nathaniel Lichtin brought up the issue of pricing for booths for Village Day. He suggested that the Area Council may wish to have a discussion about increasing pricing for booths.

#### Potential Vote on Letter to DPW regarding Village Enhancement Project:

Area Councilor Robert Fizek has drafted a letter regarding the proposed Newton Highlands Village Enhancement project. In the letter, it was noted that the city should require that undergrounding of utilities is an integral part of the project. The undergrounding of utilities should be a high priority for this project. It was also noted that the city should conduct additional local community meetings to solicit additional feedback about the project from local Newton Highlands residents.

A discussion ensued whether DPW and the City of Newton actually intend to support efforts to underground utilities in the village center as part of the Enhancement Project. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic expressed support for the points made in the letter. Area Council President Freudberg expressed concern that because the project has many possible improvements for the streetscape, this increases the complexity of the project and will create funding problems. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic suggested that the project could be phased so that Lincoln Street is completed first and that the Walnut Street component could happen later. A discussion took place regarding which city entity is responsible for the project and it was noted that this is a DPW project. Jeffrey Freudberg expressed concern that as a city project, the undergrounding of utilities may be difficult. State agencies may have more luck working with the utility companies. Mr. Freudberg also feels that this project should be done incrementally.

A motion was made to support sending the letter to DPW, Planning Dept, and City Council. The motion passed 5:0 with no abstentions.

#### Administrative Items:

Review and Approval of January Minutes: The draft minutes from the December NHNAC meetings were considered for approval. The minutes were approved 5:0.

Treasurer's Report: No new updates to the Treasurer's report for this month.

#### New Business:

Area Councilor Wayne suggested that the Area Council should provide a small gift for former Area Councilor and Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin as a token of appreciation for his years of

service. There was consensus to offer Mr. Lichtin a gift card and a cake at a subsequent Area Council meeting.

Area Council President Freudberg expressed dismay that there was a lack of snow and ice clearing at the new Levingston Cove walkway.

John Rice noted that the Parks and Recreation Dept and various city non-profits have created programs for children during the school strike, and that these programs have had significant participation. A discussion ensued regarding lack of access to school buildings and facilities during the strike. A question was posed why school buildings cannot be opened during the strike so that various programs could take place.

Next Area Council meeting: The next meeting of the Area Council will be taking place on Thursday, March 7<sup>th</sup>.

Meeting Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 8:44 pm.