

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission (EDC)

MEETING MINUTES

April 9, 2024

The regular meeting of the Commission was held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, April 9, 2023, at City Hall in Room 204. Remote participation was available via Zoom.

Attendance: Jack Leader (Chair), Jim Griglun, (Vice Chair), Jane Obbagy (Secretary), Lisa Adams, Hedy Jarras, Florent Mali, Phil Plottel, Barney Heath (staff), and John Sisson (staff).

Remote attendance: Ramzi Elfekih, Sarah Rahman, Chuck Tanowitz.

Guest Speaker: Jerry A. Bazata, SVP and Senior Banking Specialist at Cambridge Trust, presented information on his experience providing financial guidance to small businesses. He also touched on those businesses' need for market data and some of the challenges and delays they can encounter with municipal permitting processes.

Commissioners commented about permitting challenges they've heard about, business attraction efforts in other municipalities, and the importance of the City providing customer service to the business community.

Commissioners also talked about community development corporations, non-profits, and other quasi-governmental agencies that can play a different economic development role than cities and towns.

Mr. Plottel suggested updating the city's economic development webpages to include more market data. Mr. Heath agreed and recommended incorporating more information from the strategic plan, for which an update is planned.

Ms. Obbagy suggested adding information about the city's vision for the future—why Newton is a desirable place to live and do business.

Commissioners also spoke about helping startups with process and procedures, addressing hurdles presented by city ordinances, and marketing the regulatory improvements—letting people know that Newton is open for business.

Approval of minutes: Minutes of the March 12 meeting were approved.

City Updates

Mr. Sisson emailed a list of updates to Commissioners on Friday, April 5, including:

- Guidance from the Law Department on writing support letters and op-eds,

- Planning staff’s quarterly update on village center overlay zoning activity,
- The website listing of City Councilors,
- A recap of the March 25 Zoning & Planning meeting, and
- Upcoming public meetings that may be of interest to Commissioners.

Mr. Heath provided a brief update on larger real estate developments, including Northland’s Needham Street project, Newton Crossing (formerly Dunstan East), the MBTA’s station improvements in Newtonville, and the Washington Street Pilot.

Mr. Plottel asked about the status or plans for improvements to the Rte. 128 interchange proposed as part of the Riverside redevelopment. Mr. Heath explained that those improvements were cancelled when the development proposal was changed and downsized in response to market conditions.

Mr. Sisson shared three updates: Public Works’ improvement projects in Newton Highlands, Pettee Square in Upper Falls, and DCR’s improvements to Hammond Pond Parkway.

Subgroups:

Ms. Adams said the strategy group did not have an update.

Mr. Leader asked if any Commissioners had the opportunity to connect with their City Councilors.

Ms. Obbagy attended office hours in Ward 2 and said officials and residents talked about the need for an economic development vision. She said the discussion raised concerns about the decline of the city’s commercial tax base and increased traffic.

Mr. Leader said Newton once had much more public transit for people to travel within the city. Commissioners also talked about Newton as a cut-through used by commuters from other cities and towns.

Mr. Plottel asked if any level-of-service studies quantify the amount of traffic over time and questioned whether traffic is actually worse or just perceived as being so. Mr. Heath said he could ask Public Works for data.

Ms. Jarras said it was great to have NewMo as a transportation option. It would have been helpful to local businesses to be able to provide NewMo vouchers or discounts. Mr. Heath explained that the model was financially unsustainable without more State funding. Commissioners talked about “micro-transit” solutions and the difficulty of financing them.

Mr. Leader asked if Nicole Freedman might be able to attend a future meeting and discuss transportation challenges and possible solutions. Mr. Plottel asked if city could share data showing results of the West Newton traffic reconfiguration.

Mr. Leader said the business listing group has made some process identifying data.

Mr. Plottel said the rDNA group is working with city staff to solicit lab and business representatives to participate in a first meeting with the consultant.

With regards to the traffic discussion, Ms. Obbagy pointed to substantial improvements in traffic flow and safety created by a relatively minor reconfiguration of the lanes of Galen Street at the MBTA express bus station in Watertown.

Next meeting: Mr. Sisson said the next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 14.

Other business:

- Ms. Obbagy asked about the next presentation from the Boston College real estate students about the Rte. 9 shopping center. Mr. Sisson said the final presentation was yet to be scheduled.
- Mr. Leader asked about the 40B housing development on Rte. 9 and whether that was advancing. Mr. Heath confirmed that it was going before the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Mr. Plottel moved to adjourn and the motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:25 p.m.

Submitted by John Sisson, Economic Development Director.