

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission (EDC)

MEETING MINUTES

May 14, 2024

The regular meeting of the Commission was held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, May 14, 2023, at City Hall in Room 204. Remote participation was available via Zoom.

Attendance: Jack Leader (Chair), Jane Obbagy (Secretary), Ramzi Elfekih, Hedy Jarras, Florent Mali, Marcela Merino, Phil Plottel, Sarah Rahman, Chuck Tanowitz, and Barney Heath (staff),

Remote attendance: Jim Griglun, (Vice Chair), Lisa Adams, Deborah Jackson, Matt Segneri, and John Sisson (staff).

Guest Speaker: Meryl Kessler and Gloria Gavis, co-chairs of Newton Community Pride, shared information on current efforts to create a cultural district in Newton. They explained the work builds on earlier analysis and is the culmination of several years of discussion and organizing. Ms. Kessler introduced other member groups of the coalition advancing the cultural district initiative: Newton Cultural Alliance, the New Art Center, and the Charles River Regional Chamber. Ms. Kessler and Ms. Gavis shared presentation slides providing history of the effort, which started with a 2019 arts and culture plan. They also gave an overview of the Mass Cultural Council, which manages the cultural districts program and has designated 55 cultural districts across the state. The guest speakers explained the process through which cultural districts are created and the costs and benefits to participating municipalities.

Ms. Rahman asked about how the district would be managed and what organization would manage it. Ms. Kessler explained that every district has a different organizational structure and that the coalition members have been meeting with multiple City departments about potential collaboration. Mr. Plottel asked if the coalition has engaged the City Council, especially the Ward 3 councilors.

Ms. Obbagy asked how the coalition identified the area being considered. Ms. Kessler talked about the community engagement process they've performed to map cultural and historical assets, performance spaces, and businesses related to music and the arts. The presenters also touched on marketing and branding activities to promote the district as destination.

Ms. Kessler talked through the next procedural steps that would be required to create the district. Ms. Gavis explained the current work of Newton Community Pride to promote events and resources in the city's villages, like Newton Highlands and Nonantum, and that a cultural district in West Newton would be able to do the same.

Ms. Adams asked if the cultural district would create any restrictions or affect zoning. Ms. Kessler said it would not. Mr. Tanowitz asked if the coalition has engaged with the developers or property owners in the study area. Ms. Kessler said the effort is very early in the community

engagement process and has not connected with commercial interests yet. However, she sees business and property owners would be important stakeholders.

Mr. Elfekih asked if the coalition has examples which of the 55 existing cultural districts appears more successful and may provide a model. Ms. Gavris answered that geographies and priorities of each district can differ greatly, but there may be good examples of partnerships, programming, and marketing.

Mr. Plottel asked the coalition to consider other areas of Newton. Ms. Gavris said other areas of the city may be considered in the vetting of the application process.

Ms. Adams asked the coalition has a timeline. Ms. Kessler said the Watertown effort has taken about two years, so that may be a reasonable analog.

Commissioners discussed the importance of engaging the business community, perhaps as part of the application process. Mr. Leader asked Commissioners to talk about the cultural district initiative in their conversations with City Councilors.

Approval of minutes: Minutes of the April 9 meeting were approved.

City Updates

Mr. Heath spoke about the Washington Street Pilot program achieving 75% design, which is being deliberated by the City Council. Mr. Leader pointed out that Ward 3 Councilors Wright and Malakie were in attendance, and Mr. Heath said Councilor Wright has been on the steering committee from the beginning.

Mr. Plottel asked about the city's proposed BERDO ordinance and its potential effect on nonprofit institutions like Boston College. He said the proposed timeline for establishing baseline data on energy use and emissions seems ambitious. Mr. Heath said the Bill Ferguson, the co-director of sustainability, could present to the Commission. Mr. Plottel asked if that could include an update on the electrification initiative.

Mr. Sisson discussed two items about which he'd emailed a list of updates to Commissioners on Friday, May 10:

- The Boston College real estate student study of a Route 9 shopping center, and
- A short list of business-friendly zoning ideas being considered and information on the upcoming May 13 Zoning & Planning meeting.

Working groups:

- Strategy: Ms. Adams said the strategy group did not have an opportunity to meet prior to the meeting but hopes to have an update soon.
- Business listings: Mr. Sisson said the department is looking at obtaining business data from a commercial course, as the costs are lower than had been assumed. He said he will share that information with the working group.

- rDNA: Mr. Griglun described a discussion of local life science stakeholders with the City's consultant. Mr. Plottel said the City is working to update its rDNA ordinance, which was created 14-15 years ago, to increase the focus on biosafety regulation. He provided some recent history of regulatory approaches and the evolution of lab and incubator space in the city.

Other business:

- 78 Crafts Street proposal: Mr. Heath said, based on recent litigation, that project may not be moving forward.
- Mr. Sisson thanked Jeremy Fried and Sarah Rahman, two Commissioners rolling off the EDC as their terms expired.
- Ms. Merino asked about candidates for the EDC. Mr. Heath said a couple of candidates are being interviewed and recommendations of resident volunteers from Commissioners are welcome.

Ms. Rahman moved to adjourn, and the motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:28 p.m.

Submitted by John Sisson, Economic Development Director.