

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission (EDC)

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**MEETING MINUTES**

June 11, 2024

The regular meeting of the Commission was held at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, June 11, 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, Ramzi Elfekih, Deborah Jackson, Florent Mali, Marcela Merino, Chuck Tanowitz, Carrie Weatherbee (Lasell University), Jennifer Caira (staff), and John Sisson (staff).

**Remote attendance:** Hedy Jarras and Matt Segneri.

**Guest Speaker:** Eric Turner, president of Lasell University, spoke to the Commission about current trends in college enrollment, trends in tuition costs and enrollment, college mergers, challenges facing small universities, and Lasell's strategic plan. He also touched on changes to academic programs, utilization of campus facilities, the renovation of a dorm, the building of a virtual reality classroom financed in part by grant funding, internship opportunities, and workforce training courses such as the university's surgical technician training collaboration with Newton-Wellesley hospital. The university is also collaborating with teacher cohorts in Ireland on universal course design programs.

Ms. Obbagy asked if the college's programs have enough interaction with local businesses. Mr. Turner said the college requires each undergraduate student to complete at least one internship, so Lasell does have established relationships with area employers. Ms. Jackson asked how the college matches students and employers. Mr. Turner said college faculty and advisors actively work on making these connections.

Mr. Mali asked about Lasell's top academic programs and the regional reputation of them. Mr. Turner identified programs in fashion, forensic science, health sciences, business, and communication—and said the fashion program is well known in the northeast.

Ms. Jackson asked about the naming of schools and developing endowments. Mr. Turner said his administration is early in the fundraising process.

Mr. Sisson voiced support for Lasell's workforce training efforts and asked if State grants could help play a role. Mr. Turner said the college has hired a grant writer to pursue funding. Ms. Obbagy asked about the opportunity for workforce training in the clean tech sector. Mr. Turner said Lasell has not yet engaged in that sector but is having discussions with two life sciences companies about workforce training in that sector.

Mr. Tanowitz asked about where students are coming from. Mr. Turner said many students—and a percentage of faculty and staff—do commute into the area or work remotely, the costs of housing being a factor.

Mr. Elfekih asked about the geographical breakdown of the student body. Ms. Weatherbee said most students are from Massachusetts and New England states, with some international students. Mr. Turner said, prior to the pandemic, Lasell enrolled 10% international students and has not been able to regain that number.

Several Commissioners expressed an interest in having follow-up conversations with Lasell on potential collaborations.

**Approval of minutes:** Minutes of the May 14 meeting were approved.

**Business-Friendly Zoning discussion:** Mr. Sisson introduced Deputy Director of Planning Jennifer Caira and shared draft language of a support letter that was distributed with the meeting agenda when it was posted for preceding week. As he explained, the public posting would allow the Commission to deliberate and vote whether to advance the language during the same meeting. This procedure would enable the Commission to submit a letter to the Zoning & Planning Committee (ZAP) ahead of the public hearing on June 27. Mr. Sisson said he drafted some language and that Ms. Obbagy had performed substantive edits for concision.

Mr. Leader asked Commissioners to read the language and offer any comments. Ms. Jackson said the letter looks fine but commented that the City seems to drag its feet when it comes to allowing commercial uses and sends the message that Newton doesn't care about economic development. Mr. Leader said the EDC has, historically, worked to prod the City Council to advance changes to the zoning ordinance.

Mr. Sisson said he's been very gratified to see ZAP's attention to business-friendly zoning. Ms. Caira added there's a lot of energy around this topic right now and suggested the EDC could help bring more attention to beneficial zoning modifications.

Mr. Tanowitz asked what commercial uses do other communities allow that Newton should consider. Mr. Sisson referenced a list of zoning issues identified by staff, the one-size-fits-all permitting process required for commercial signage, and restrictive parking requirements.

Ms. Obbagy suggested that the EDC should be more proactive in raising these issues and proposing solutions. Ms. Caira voiced her support for that effort. Commissioners discussed some potential uses, such as a food hall or Asian grocery with a food court. Mr. Leader referenced a Korean grocery that operated for years in Newtonville before closing.

Mr. Leader asked Commissioners if they supported the EDC advancing the business-friendly zoning letter. Mr. Tanowitz moved in the affirmative, seconded by Mr. Elfekih, and Commissioners voted to approve.

**BERDO discussion:** Commissioner Phil Plottel, who was not able to attend the meeting, had submitted a letter to the City Council on the Building Emissions Reduction and Disclosure Ordinance. Mr. Plottel's letter was posted with the EDC agenda to ensure Commissioners were

aware of it and able to discuss the local legislation. Mr. Sisson touched on some of the cost burdens of local building owners, especially those with older facilities. Ms. Obbagy said the legislation seems aligned with Newton's sustainability goals. Ms. Adams asked about statewide legislation. No one was aware of legislation outside of Boston, Cambridge, and Newton. Mr. Tanowitz referenced some detailed recommendations in Mr. Plottel's that City staff should seriously consider, such as staffing for BERDO administration. Mr. Leader asked about the City's buildings and BERDO. Mr. Mali asked if the Commission might take up this discussion again. Commissioners discussed inviting the Public Buildings Commissioner and members of the Sustainability Team to an EDC meeting.

### **City Updates:**

- Ms. Caira explained Jenn Martin joined City staff in June in the role of Transportation Planner and is working on the Washington Street Pilot, advancing the walk-ride-roll network plan, rolling out a new program to replace NewMo, and a range of other projects.
- Mr. Leader mentioned a recent resolution filed by City Councilor Pam Wright to increase Economic Development staffing. Mr. Caira said the resolution did not pass, but that many members of City staff do perform economic development tasks. Mr. Sisson referenced colleagues in HHS and ISD who assist businesses.
- Ms. Obbagy asked about MBTA upgrades to the Green Line and how those may create economic development benefits in village centers.
- Ms. Adams asked about inviting speakers to discuss transportation issues with the EDC.
- Mr. Leader said the EDC should continue to do more public engagement and connect with elected leaders about local economic development opportunities.
- Mr. Tanowitz suggested the EDC agenda for July include time for discussion of the West Newton cultural district effort. Ms. Obbagy agreed.
- Commissioners discussed the cost of housing and the role of accessory dwelling units (ADUs)

### **Working Groups**

- Mr. Leader asked about the business listings effort. Mr. Sisson said he's been working to obtain sample data from vendors for evaluation.
- Mr. Griglun said an rDNA meeting is anticipated.
- Ms. Adams has a memo of economic strategy recommendations for the update.

Mr. Tanowitz moved to adjourn, and the motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

Submitted by John Sisson, Economic Development Director.