

CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission (EDC)

MEETING MINUTES

July 9, 2024

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

Attendance: Jane Obbagy (Secretary), Phil Plottel, Chuck Tanowitz, and John Sisson (staff).

Remote attendance: Jim Griglun, (Vice Chair), Lisa Adams.

Guests (remote): Candidate for State Representative Amy Sangiolo, City Councilor Rena Getz, and Newton resident Alison Haran.

Guest Speaker: Newtonville resident Jesse Baerkahn, president and founder of the retail advisory firm Graffito SP, spoke of his experience working with commercial tenants in Newton around Greater Boston. Mr. Baerkahn, an attorney, said small retailers and restaurant owners face many transactional barriers, such as contractual agreements and leases. These commercial operators lack legal expertise and funding for legal expenses. Graffito SP works to help address the legal and operational needs of “mom and pops” and to help property owners and investors to cultivate an attractive mix of commercial tenants that will generate foot traffic long-term.

Mr. Baerkahn suggested solutions such as lowering the short-term barriers to small businesses, primarily zoning and permitting. Long-term solutions might include creating paths for small businesses to move from commercial tenant to building owner, to create both jobs and generational wealth. One idea discussed was the idea of inclusionary zoning for smaller commercial enterprises.

Mr. Plottel asked about short-term solutions related to zoning and permitting reforms. Mr. Baerkahn said municipal policies like zoning often operate on a presumption that retailers either don't know what they're doing or will act in their own self interest at the expense of others. He suggested changing the playing field to enable small businesses to do more as-of-right and require formula businesses (chains, franchises) to face additional hurdles.

Mr. Baerkahn said one key to the health of Newton's village centers is having more people living close to commercial centers and transportation nodes. He suggested more flexibility in the zoning, allowing more uses that people want, should benefit residents, businesses, and property owners.

Approval of minutes: Postponed for a lack of quorum.

Economic Strategy Update: Mr. Sisson shared the table of contents of the 2019 economic strategy action plan and described a recent meeting with the consultant Camoin Associates. He said elements of the 2019 plan were aspirational. In the update of the plan, he hoped the focus would be more on actionable items. Ms. Obbagy asked if the City, through small zoning changes, would be able to have a measurable effect on the health of the retail landscape. Mr. Plottel said one of the chief challenges to businesses is the special permit process.

Business-Friendly Zoning Update: Mr. Sisson presented a memo listing (1) the zoning amendments that have been enacted over the past three years, (2) proposals before the City Council, (3) zoning priorities that have been identified, and (4) older zoning use definitions which could be examined and perhaps consolidated, updated, or eliminated.

Councilor Getz suggested the EDC and staff bring an action plan to Zoning & Planning and engage the Committee in these discussions.

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

Submitted by John Sisson, Economic Development Director.