

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, June 6, 2019

Area Council members attending:

Bruce Blakely, Bob Burke, Carol Clark, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin (not present), Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Bill Roesner, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio:

City Councilors John Rice, Brenda Noel, Cheryl Lappin

Guests:

Bill Humphrey, Mildred Hutchinson, Rebecca Cantor, Jane Frantz

Meeting called to order at 7:30 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Vice President Barbara Darnell chairing meeting as President Nathaniel Lichtin was not present.

BFitt60: Proposal for Health, Wellness, and Fitness Business at 35-41 Lincoln Street

Best Fitness is a company that is proposing to establish a health, wellness, and fitness business at the site of the former Blossoms business at 35-41 Lincoln Street in the Newton Highlands village center. Part of this property is currently occupied by Village Kids, which is closing on July 15th.



The company was represented by its owner, Mark Johnston and its co-owner, Dave dos Santos. The landlord of the property, Paul Feinberg, introduced the business owners. Mr. Feinberg noted that the Blossoms tenant has left the property and that the owner of Village Kids is retiring, with the business closing on

July 15th. Mr. Feinberg mentioned that he initially tried to find a restaurant as a tenant, but that didn't work out. He has been looking for a viable tenant whose business can help keep the village center vibrant. The space is about 4000 SF in area.

Mr. Feinberg is looking for support from the Area Council and others to obtain a Special Permit to waive certain parking requirements that the current zoning calls for. He is asking for a waiver of 9 spaces and is concerned that City Council will not hear his petition until after the summer.

This will place a burden on his plans for the property and create a prolonged vacancy by adding 2 additional months of administrative time for the project to move forward.

Dave dos Santos gave an overview of the Best Fitness company. He and Mark Johnston have been in business for 20 years and have owned 16 fitness clubs at any time, at most. These establishments have been located in New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. At this point, the company owns 10 stores. Mr. dos Santos pointed out that fitness is a large business these days. The company has decided to get involved managing smaller boutique fitness spaces.

Their first concept for boutique fitness was to create an entity inside the existing larger clubs, but then they decided to venture out with a free standing business in Billerica. The current proposal in Newton Highlands would be their second facility outside or a main club for a boutique fitness space. Mr. dos Santos then gave an overview about boutique fitness. Their brand is called Bfitt60, and it is a small concept group training facility. There would be 35 classes per week, and most attendees are expected to attend between 5 am to 9 am. Afternoons are not expected to be as busy. Having a boutique fitness facility is unique, as there is nothing quite like this in the market. The company wanted to choose Newton as their next site.

The expected customers are typically folks who come to the facility to exercise early in the day, and then go to work after they are done. The facility will have 3-4 showers at the Newton location. Two employees may be at the facility: an instructor to oversee the training and another person who would work at the front desk at peak times. Classes would be 60 minutes. All participants will wear a heart rate monitor, and the facility will offer heart rate based training. Participants can see their exertion level by their actual pulse on a screen. Using this method, participants can gauge their activity, knowing when to push forward and when to back off on their exercises. The facility will cater to people of diverse physical abilities, since almost anybody can do this type of fitness training, whether the person is an athlete or someone with limited capacity.

In a fitness environment such as this, the community base is typically large. People using the facility tend to get to know each other. A community environment is fostered.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic spoke in support of the parking waiver. He pointed out that the current zoning does not reflect the policy or intention of the city to support village-based businesses. The current zoning rules regarding excessive parking requirements create an undue burden and expense upon property owners and businesses and these rules are actually harmful to economic vitality in the city. Srdjan suggested that the city should not only waive these requirements by the Special Permit process, but that city departments (Planning, Economic Development, etc) should be co-petitioners, thereby saving the landlord unnecessary cost and time in getting the Special Permit approved.

Mr. Feinberg, the landlord, pointed out that with regards to parking requirements, the property is grandfathered for 15 vehicles, but the new proposal would leave them 14 parking spaces short. With an additional credit for some spaces, the proposal is 9 spaces short based on current zoning requirements.

Mr. Feinberg is concerned that this process will take 4-6 months time to get the special permit. He is not asking for any other relief than for parking. The current process is burdensome. It requires the proponent to meet initially with the planning department, which then decides whether to allow the proponent to apply for a Special Permit. The Zoning administrator then has 45 days to review the application for the Special Permit. Next, there may be a hearing scheduled in the next month. Then the petitioner has to wait another month for a vote from the city council. Finally, there is a 20-day appeal period.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory commented that in Newton Highlands, coffee shops and small restaurants do not open until 8 am. There may not be many local options for patrons of the boutique fitness establishment to gather before or after their exercises.

Area Councilor Bob Burke noted that he belongs to the YMCA, and that people in his classes tend to bond and coalesce together.

Mr. dos Santos stated that with their boutique fitness business in Billerica, the facility is in a shopping plaza, and that it is the only business that attracts people to the plaza. People who participate in these types of fitness facilities are often competitive in their approach to fitness. The Billerica location was chosen because it was close to existing full service clubs, and it was used as a Beta test model. Due to its proximity to other full scale fitness facilities, it could be backfilled with management when necessary. Mr. dos Santos noted that before the fitness club entered the plaza, it was a dead center. The only vibrant tenant was a Mexican restaurant. Within 2 months, the presence of the fitness club increased sales at the restaurant by 25%. The market reacted positively to the establishment.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked several questions:

- 1) How many employees? There will be 2 employees there at one time, with a total 15 employees.
- 2) How many customers per day? There will be about 18 classes per day, with about 7 people in each session, leading to about 100 patrons per day.
- 3) What are business hours each day? The facility will be open from 5 am to 8 pm, Monday to Friday, and Saturday from 5 am to a closing time of noon.
- 4) What renovations are needed to building? It is a 4000 SF space, and it will be gutted. The investment will be about \$500k. The facility will have a check-in place and lockers. The space will have a turf area, a rubber area, a cardiovascular area, rowers, airdyne bikes, and weights.

People will participate in blocks of exercise. There will be a monthly membership fee, probably ranging from \$79 to \$129 per month. Renovations will happen to the façade of the building. From the current 2 units, one door will be eliminated and replaced by a straight piece of glass. The establishment will have transparent windows so that people can look in. The awning will stay there, but it may be a different color. From the street, passers by will be able to see activity going on in the facility.

Mr. Feinberg again expressed concern that City Council has a blackout period for “major projects” over the summer, including this petition that is just asking for a waiver from parking requirements for 9 cars. The summer blackout will delays the project for 2 months. He is asking for a city councilor to ask for exception to the blackout period to file a special permit petition. City Councilor Brenda Noel stated that she will explore any opportunities to bring this petition forward expeditiously for Special Permit.

Further comments were made noting that the petitioner is asking for a zoning waiver for 9 parking spaces for a business that will cater to about 100 people per day. It was note that from the peak hours of 5 am and 6 am, there won't be any issues with on-street parking as no other businesses are open at that time. There may be a second peak time for customers at 9:30 am. People will stay on average 1 hour per session. The employees will be able to use the 4 off-street parking spaces that are present in the rear of the building. There may be 2 employees at a time. The landlord noted that there are 18 rear lot off street parking spaces for all tenants at 35-41 Lincoln Street. It was also noted to expect foot traffic and people taking the MBTA to access the facility.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory called for the Area Council to write a letter in support of petitioner. This motion as seconded and approved by a vote 7 yes, 0 no, and 1 abstaining. Groot will be drafting this letter.

Administrative Items:

Approval of the May Minutes:

A motion was made to approve the April minutes with some minor spelling corrections and revisions, and this was accepted 8:0.

Treasurer's Report:

The Treasurer's Report was submitted to Area Council members by Groot Gregory. Groot announced that he has recalculated the Village Day budget. It is possible if all income comes in, and if anticipated race expenses are the same, we may end up with a surplus of \$2200. A review of budget items ensued, with some items coming in over budget and some coming under budget. The music this year will be \$800 over what it was last year (total around \$5000). The cost of the bouncy houses is the same. The printing bill is just \$130, whereas it was anticipated to cost \$600. Village Day donations are expected from Village Bank, Salon Capri, Brookline Bank, Schlesinger & Buchbinder, and O'Hara's. A discussion ensued about whether to have caricature artist at \$135 per hour for 3 hours. It was decided to have the caricature artist if the services cost up to \$400 for 4 hours. Groot noted that we will have 84 booths this year, which is more than last year. Village Day had about 66 booths last year, and there were 74 booths the prior year.

Village Day discussion:

Area Council members discussed planning for the Village Day event, which is due to take place on Sunday, June 9th. Steven Feinstein joined the meeting by phone to state that further information about Village Day was conveyed to Area Council members by e-mail.

Area Council members had a discussion about “raffles” and efforts to screen vendors if it was felt that they were engaged in questionable practices of collecting personal information.

It was noted that cars must be off of Lincoln Street by 9 am. The set up for booths will be between 8 am and 9:30 am. The road race will take place from 10 to 11 am. Lincoln Street will be reopened only when the police say that it may open at the end, probably after 4 pm. There will be no food truck this year, since it was too expensive to reserve the truck. The Newton House of Pizza will have a large presence for food, along with other village restaurants and food merchants. The Eatery will not be going outside, but will serve food inside. It was noted that one vendor needed a booth table. Steve has ordered tents, tables, and chairs for music. There will be temporary handicap parking space on Hartford Street.

City Updates:

No additional City Updates were discussed.

New Business:

John has talked with Carl O’Hara to have John O’Hara Square dedicated at Lincoln and Walnut Street. The City Council will be dedicating a bench for Brian Yates at Hemlock Gorge and the Newton Upper Falls Depot.

There will be an event and fundraiser at Vicki Danberg’s house on Chase Street on June 8, 4pm to 7 pm to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the sister city project between Newton and San Juan del Sur in Nicaragua. Former Alderman and Area Councilor Rodney Barker was a champion of this effort in the past.

The smoke shop in the Highlands does not seem to have much active business. Its license cannot be transferred if this business ceases, as new rules do not allow this type of business to exist close to a school. The Highlands After School program is based nearby at the Brigham House.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 PM.