

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, November 7, 2019

Area Council members attending:

Bruce Blakely, Bob Burke, Carol Clark, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Bill Roesner, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio:

City Councilors Brenda Noel and Cheryl Lappin

Guests:

Bill Humphrey (City Councilor-elect for Ward 5), Isabelle Albeck (Waban Area Councilor), Mildred Hutchinson, Carol Carroll, Amanda Theunissen

Meeting called to order at 7:35 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes.

Closure of Pedestrian Bridge Across Charles River near Barry Price Center

Residents of the neighborhood near Christina Street have reached out to the NHNAC with concerns that a former railroad bridge across the Charles River has effectively been closed for access from the Newton side. The bridge had been used as a pedestrian connection from Christina Street to the DCR parkland in Needham. A padlock has now been placed on a door in the fence that separates the parking lot of the Barry Price Center from the bridge. The current director of the Barry Price Center has expressed concerns that leaving the door unlocked may create a safety issue for individuals with disabilities who are clients of the Center. In addition, he expressed concern that children from the neighborhood may pass through their property to access the bridge. A portion of the parking lot of the Barry Price Center is located between Christina Street and the bridge.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic pointed out that the bridge is accessible from the Needham side, where there is a relatively new paved pathway through the DCR park that exists along the Charles River. There are walking paths along the Charles River on the Needham side extending from the bridge down to Cutler Park. These paths are well maintained and it appears that the bridge itself is sound. The bridge has a metal railing on one side and a concrete barrier on the other side, but there is no railing on that side of the bridge. There has been some erosion of land at each side of the bridge as it crosses the Charles River, but access to the bridge itself is not impeded by this erosion. People currently may access the bridge from the Needham side unimpeded and cross over the river, only to be prevented further access into Newton by the padlocked gate.

A discussion ensued regarding potential issues with reopening the bridge. It is unclear if there may be an easement that would allow public access. City Councilor Cheryl Lappin noted that she would explore issues related to the gate and access with staff at the Price Center. Some Area Councilors

questioned whether the concerns about safety of opening the gate were justified, as people are accessing and walking over the bridge from the Needham side without any issues. The bridge could certainly be enhanced with a new railing on the side that currently lacks one, as well as some regrading of land where there has been erosion on either side of the bridge. However, it was pointed out that these issues could be addressed over time after access from the Newton side was re-established. Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted that the bridge is an important pedestrian access point to parkland that extends to Cutler Park as well as a significant connection for pedestrians between the Charles River Landing apartment building, other buildings in the former Needham Industrial Park, and the Needham Street corridor. There was significant support of having this pedestrian connection maintained during the Needham Street visioning process that was conducted in 2018.

A motion was made as follows: The Area Council encourages the City of Newton to work with the Price Center to reopen access to the pedestrian bridge across the Charles River because it is an important neighborhood amenity to access the public parkland in Needham and because this bridge provides pedestrian access to the Needham Street corridor. This motion was passed by a vote of 8 in support, none in opposition, and 1 abstention.

Climate Action Plan Proposal (Nathaniel Lichtin):

There will be a public hearing at City Hall regarding the Climate Action Plan, which is a plan for mitigating climate change. The NHNAC discussed whether the Area Council should draft a letter in support of adoption of the Climate Action Plan.

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin provided an overview of some of the components of the Climate Action Plan. The plan makes recommendations for reducing greenhouse gases over a short term period of 5 years with there being a goal to get to net carbon neutral levels by 2050. The plan is categorized into major areas, a partial list of which includes implementation, promoting clean and renewable energy, greening transportation and streetscapes, and reducing emissions related to waste disposal. Seven different methods to achieve these goals are proposed, including reducing single occupant trips (improving bike, pedestrian, transit options), revising the building code and the zoning ordinance (note that methods to influence new building code adoption are at the state level), increasing the use of green electricity, moving to electric vehicles, moving towards electric cooling and heating, incentivizing businesses and residents to reduce emissions, and increasing public outreach of green practices.

Proposals include moving Newton Power Choice aggregation to 100% renewable energy by 2025, reducing VMT (vehicle miles travelled) by 5% by 2025, and increasing the share of electric vehicles from 1% to 10%. Additional goals include having 100% electric heating and cooling, a 3% reduction of energy consumption in existing residential buildings, and a goal of 15% reduction of energy consumption in commercial buildings. The plan also has a section about heat pump application. Most of the impact on the carbon footprint comes from changing residential practices. One of recommendations is to have an energy coach at the city level to support this plan.

A discussion ensued regarding how practical it would be to implement these changes. Concerns were expressed that people would be forced to implement and then utilize expensive electric heat. Renovations of homes might be too costly to meet the new standards. Further concerns were voiced

that the city has not taken adequate action on certain definite green energy proposals when action could have been taken, for example by improving rail transit in the existing rail corridors along Washington Street and Needham Street. It was pointed out that some of the recommendations noted in the Climate Action Plan were very broad, while relatively simple measures are not being proposed, such as advocating for plans that could actually reduce VMT and reduce single use car trips. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted how the city continues to charge \$350 per child per year to use the school bus system, while parking for teen drivers at Newton South is charged at about \$150 per year. Several Area Councilors expressed concern that it will cost money to implement much of these goals of the Climate Action Plan, and that the city does not have resources to implement these. Much of what needs to happen related to the goals and implementation of the proposed Climate Action Plan needs to happen at the state level or the federal level.

A discussion was then held on whether the Area Council should draft a letter regarding support for the current draft of the Climate Action Plan initiative. Although many Area Council members agree with the broad goals of the proposed plan, the conclusion was that the draft may be too broad and over-reaching without specific do-able action items. Therefore, the Area Council will not formally provide comment about the current Climate Action Plan proposal. Support is there for doing something about reducing human impacts on climate change, and it was noted that this plan is a good start. However, Area Council members generally felt that we need a Climate Action Plan that has a list of concrete and specific actions of how we can directly reduce energy use in Newton. Area Council members were reminded that there will be a public hearing on November 14th to weigh in on adoption of the Climate Action Plan.

Union Twist marijuana dispensary:

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin attended a public meeting that took place regarding the Union Twist marijuana dispensary proposal for Four Corners. The meeting was full of contentious opinions. Nathaniel proposed that the Area Council host a follow up meeting. A discussion ensued whether this should be scheduled during a regular NHNAC meeting or outside of the normal meeting time. In order to have the meeting closer to the affected neighborhood, it was suggested that the next meeting should take place at the Zervas School, but this will cost money. A recommendation was made to ask Union Twist to support hosting the next community meeting.

Amanda Theunissen expressed concerns about the site of the proposed Union Twist dispensary being in Four Corners. She pointed out that some people do not want to have a marijuana dispensary at this location. Beacon Street is a two-lane road, and the location of the proposed Union Twist does not provide access to regional roadways. The site does not have easy access to public transit and there is a concern it will draw regional traffic. In addition, Cold Spring Park is within 300 feet of the proposed site. There is concern about recreational use of marijuana within the park. Also, the size of the store at 2500 square feet suggests that it may draw customers from a wide area.

It was noted that the current City Council is unlikely to be voting on this proposal, which will likely be voted in the next term. Union Twist will likely file for Special Permit approval after January 1. There will then be a Land Use public hearing. The proponent will need to prove that

their proposal meet the legal requirements, in which case approval of the proposal is likely as there would be no legal grounds to deny permit. Union Twist has pointed out that if their proposal is not accepted, then another marijuana dispensary will likely be located at this site. Area Council member Bruce Blakely suggested that it may be more likely that the project can be modified rather than cancelled. Amanda Theunissen pointed out that it is possible that this location does not meet the zoning ordinance, which would prevent any dispensary from locating at this site. The Area Council will explore having another public meeting to discuss the proposal at the Zervas School in mid-January.

Area Council Debates:

The candidate debates for municipal elections sponsored by the four Area Councils took place at Newton North High School on October 20 and at the Zervas School on October 27. The debates were generally well attended, especially at the start of each debate. There was a general feeling that the first debate at Newton North may have benefitted from a more organized approach. Several Area Council members commented that Andy Levin and Ken Parker did a very nice job in moderating their debates.

There are expenses of \$894 incurred for the debates and each Area Council will likely need to pay for 25% of the cost. A vote was taken to increase the allocation of funds to up to \$300 to pay for the NHNAC share of the cost. This motion passed 9:0 with no abstentions.

Local and City Updates:

Development at 956 Walnut Street:

Council President Lichtin gave an update about the 956 Walnut Street project. The proposed development will be discussed at a public hearing at City Hall on December 3rd. There are no new updates regarding the plans for the development, which consists of a total of 7 units to be built with underground garages. Each unit will be approximately 4000 square feet.

Halloween and Haunted House

Barbara Darnell and Amy Wayne gave a report the Haunted House event that took place on Sunday, October 27. Barbara thanked Amy for the wonderful job she did with make-up for the event. Groot Gregory was recognized for making a great tree. The Haunted House was held during a rainy night, but the attendance was very good. The children's party before the Haunted House was also well attended. A call was made for more young people to participate as actors for Haunted Houses in the future. The theme for next year's Haunted House will be "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory."

Northland Development:

Area Council President Lichtin noted that a meeting about this proposal is taking place tonight and that City Council is in the final stages of drafting a City Council board order about the project.

There have been ongoing disagreements about how the transportation effects of the project will be mitigated. It is possible that the final Land Use Committee meeting about the project will be held on November 12th.

Area Council Elections and Membership:

On Election Day earlier this week, there were 5 Area Councilor candidates on the ballot for Newton Highlands Area Council: Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, and Amy Wayne. The 5 Area Councilors whose names were on the ballot were all elected with between 228 and 250 votes cast. In addition, there were three write-in candidates who met the threshold for a minimum of 25 votes to be elected. These three newly elected Area Councilors are: Bruce Blakely, Bob Burke, and Amanda Theunissen. Therefore, after these 8 Area Councilors are sworn in, there will be one vacant position on the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council that the council will seek to fill.

Other Items:

It was noted that the proposal to acquire the Webster Woods parcel will be before the Community Preservation Act Committee on November 12th. It was noted that a permit for a sign had been requested for the former New England Mobile Book Fair site on Needham Street. It appears that the building will be divided into multiple uses.

Administrative Items:

Approval of the October Minutes:

A motion was made to approve the October minutes. The minutes were amended with several corrections being pointed out. The amended minutes were approved 8:0 with one Area Council member absent.

Treasurer's Report:

The Treasurer's Report was submitted to Area Council members by Groot Gregory. There is a charge of \$39 to cover expenses related to the Haunted House.

New Business:

Carol Carroll noted that there is an initiative to revise the demolition delay ordinance and to make changes about the process for Landmark status. Bob Burke made a request that better lighting is implemented at crosswalk locations. It was noted that the historic Stevens building on the corner of Walnut Street and Lincoln Street had changed ownership.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:07 PM.