

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, December 5, 2019

Area Council members attending:

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

Ex Officio:

City Councilor elect Bill Humphrey, City Councilor elect Holly Ryan

Guests:

Leon Schwartz (Right Size Newton), Larry Rosenberg, Carol Carroll, Amanda Theunissen

Meeting called to order at 7:34 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes.

Northland Development project

Area Council president Nathaniel Lichtin reported that the special permit for the Northland Development project planned for Needham Street was approved by City Council 17 to 7. Right Size Newton has begun an effort to hold a referendum to overturn the project and is soliciting signatures to place the item on the ballot. Nathaniel reported that a construction liaison committee will be appointed that will inform the community about the construction impacts of the project. There will also be a community engagement contact list, and Northland will designate a person who will serve as a direct contact with members of the community. City Councilor elect Holly Ryan noted that Councilors from Wards 5 and 8 will be participating on the community engagement group.

Leon Schwartz from Right Size Newton presented information about the effort by Right Size Newton to obligate the city to hold a referendum whether to overturn the City Council approval of the Northland project. Leon noted that Right Size Newton did not intend initially to pursue the referendum option but felt obligated to undertake this effort due to the special permit being approved without full information provided about the impacts of the Northland project. Leon cited that the Northland developer was not forthcoming about providing all projected traffic counts and that they were not willing to consider phasing the project. Also, Leon noted that Northland was not willing to commit to firm limits on reducing single occupancy auto use to 60% or counting traffic generated by retail uses in trip generation totals that would trigger penalties. Leon said that Right Size Newton's primary goal is to make the Northland project a better one.

When it comes to the possibility that the Northland site would become home to several large Chapter 40-B affordable housing developments, Leon stated that it would be unlikely that Northland would move forward with this option. Without retail or commercial uses, a housing-only option would not be attractive rental space. Also, Leon noted that to his knowledge, there has never

been a 40B project greater than 600 units. If a 40B project were built, the advantages would be more housing affordability. Leon acknowledged that the community would lose benefits like the shuttle bus and undergrounding of parking on the site, but pointed out that these amenities are primarily internal improvements intended to benefit the developer's project. Leon did note that if the Northland site were a 40B housing project, we would lose the \$1.5 million in funds intended for the Countryside school. Also, Leon noted that holding a referendum on the Northland project is justified because the process of approval of such large projects in Newton is not well established.

Area Councilor Carol Clark asked about the shuttle bus plan. Leon noted that the shuttle bus plan for the approved project includes buses that run every 10 minutes from the site to Newton Highlands. The prior proposal to have less frequent buses that run to different Boston locations has been eliminated. However, Leon noted that the Special Permit requirements remain silent on the issue of the shuttle buses and that there is no obligation for the developer to maintain this service in the future. Also, many people feel that the shuttle buses will be inadequate in terms of reducing the traffic impacts of the project.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic stated that although even though some people are dissatisfied with the City Council vote approving the Northland project, we should respect the established process for decision making. The Northland project has been under review for over 2 years and development at this location has been under consideration for at least the last 10 years, so there was ample opportunity for public feedback to city councilors who would vote on the project. After many months of deliberation and changes to the development plans, what is the justification for now holding a referendum to overturn a legitimate decision? Residents are always free to choose new candidates for City Council if they are displeased with decisions like this one. At that point, a suggestion was made to stop any further discussion about the Northland project and Area Council President Lichtin suspended the topic.

Local and City Updates:

Union Twist marijuana dispensary:

Union Twist is a company that is proposing to open a marijuana retail establishment on Beacon Street near Four Corners. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin spoke with the attorney for the project, Michal Ross, about the possibility of holding a community meeting at the Zervas School. Union Twist does not feel that this location is appropriate but is willing to participate in a meeting at the Waban Library. Nathaniel is proposing a date of January 13th for the meeting. A discussion was then held on the purpose of this meeting and what is hoped to be accomplished.

Nathaniel noted that the purpose of the meeting is to inform the local neighborhood about the proposed dispensary. The prior meeting was held in West Newton and some local community members were unable to participate. It is anticipated that Union Twist will submit a special permit application in early January. One other purpose of the community meeting would be to provide a forum for discussion of how the project's effects could be mitigated, such as by limiting hours of operation or managing traffic flow.

Area Councilor elect Amanda Theunissen suggested that the discussion should focus on how the proposed site does not meet basic zoning requirements, such as access to regional roadways. However, others pointed out that this community meeting may not be a good venue to discuss zoning issues and that expressing those views may be best served by informing city councilors who will eventually vote on whether to approve the permit for the project. The Host Community Agreement does not automatically lead to approval of a marijuana dispensary if the zoning requirements for the site are not met.

Another reason suggested as to why to hold the community meeting is to provide an opportunity to brainstorm about ways to mitigate the impacts of the project. For example, residents may wish to insure that the store is not open on Sundays. Issues such as appointment times, hours of operation, traffic flow and the design of parking and the driveway may be discussed. It was noted that it would be important to invite City Councilors to this event, along with certain city staff including representatives from the police. The meeting should focus more on expressing community concerns rather than providing a platform for Union Twist to promote their project. Area Council president Lichtin stated that he would invite representatives from Union Twist and let them know that the format for the meeting is still under review.

Another value of holding a local public meeting about the Union Twist proposal is for members of the public to get more information about what is being proposed for the Special Permit, and then be more informed about possible objections that may be raised. The Waban Area Council will be asked to participate in the meeting. People opposed to the having this project at the proposed location on Beacon Street will learn more about the project and the zoning considerations and then be able to speak at the City Council public hearing and provide feedback to City Councilors who will be voting on the proposal. But in addition to presenting arguments opposing the project, attendees of the meeting should consider what mitigation would be preferred if this site is approved.

Development at 956 Walnut Street:

Council President Lichtin gave an update about the 956 Walnut Street project. The proposed development was discussed at a Land Use committee hearing at City Hall on December 3rd. The special permit was approved by Land Use with a vote of 5 yes, 0 no, and 2 abstentions. The approved plans consist of a total of 7 units to be built with underground garages. The size of each unit was reduced slightly and the height of each building will be limited to 2.5 stories. There will be 2 underground parking spaces per unit. The proposal will go to a full City Council vote next week.

Christina Street Pedestrian Bridge:

A meeting between representatives from the Price Center and members of the community is in the process of being scheduled to discuss removing the fence barrier that has been erected that blocks access to the old rail bridge across the Charles River to public parkland in Needham. Some research suggests that there is no easement across the Price Center property and that the Price Center owns this property outright, but the actual ownership and sale of the prior rail right of way is unclear. Many people including city councilors and others are now interested in seeing access to the bridge restored. The city is looking at ways to obtain grant funding to make improvements that would allow better access to the bridge and trail system along the Charles River. People who live in Upper Falls

recall using this bridge in the past and are supportive of restoring this access. One option under consideration is for the city to purchase a small parcel of land from the Price Center in order to create public access from Christina Street to the bridge. However, it is unclear if the Price Center is interested in selling this small portion of their parking lot.

Stevens Building on the corner of Lincoln Street and Walnut Street:

There have been a large number of transitions in the village center. Several Area Council members have noted that there has been a purchase of a number of properties along Walnut Street including the Stevens building. The Stevens building has apparently been purchased by a trust. In addition, the building housing the Schlesinger Buchbinder law office is up for sale. The liquor store next door, however, is not currently for sale. It was also noted that the owner of the Town Cleaner is retiring. A new hotel is opening on Walnut Street near Floral Street, and the project continues to move forward.

Carol Carroll brought up the issue of the historical significance of the Stevens building. The issue of the historical significance of the Stevens building is a concern should there be a development proposal. One option may be to designate the building as a Landmark property. A discussion ensued if the Area Council should take a role in promoting this building as a Landmark property. Under proposed new regulations, individuals may move forward with a 10-person petition of registered voters to propose a landmark property designation. The proposal would be made to the Historical Commission, which would then make a recommendation. Area Council president Lichtin stated that if a proposal regarding Landmark status of the Stevens building were put forth, the Area Council may consider further involvement in promoting this forward.

Wellesley Office Park Proposal:

There is a proposal to demolish parts of an office park in Wellesley that is just off of Route 9 westbound and to create a large mixed-use development on this parcel. This new development may have an impact on traffic in Newton, especially along Route 9. The Waban and Upper Falls Area Councils have been in touch with the developer and are in the process of coordinating a public meeting to bring the project to the community's attention.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic suggested that the project would be improved if a pedestrian and bicycle bridge were built across the Charles River between the project and Quinobequin Road, specifically where it intersects with Lakespur Road. This new route would provide the most direct and pleasant pedestrian access to the transit, namely the Waban MBTA station.

Climate Action Plan Proposal:

The Climate Action Plan was approved by City Council. Area Council President Lichtin noted that comments made regarding the Climate Action Plan at the prior Area Council meeting were shared with City Council at the hearing.

Washington Street Vision Plan Proposal:

Area Council President Lichtin noted that the Washington Street Vision Plan was sent back to the Zoning and Planning Committee for further review. There were no other updates.

Development at 1114 Beacon Street (former Apgujung Restaurant):

The development proposal at the site of the former Apgujung Restaurant in Four Corners is moving forward. It is currently under review by the Conservation Commission as there are wetlands in the rear of the site. The revised proposal now includes a 3-story townhouse on the parcel abutting Beacon Street along with a building in the rear that would have over 20 units. The overall size of the development is at about 25 units, with most of the units located in the 4-story rear building. The height of the rear building is projected to be 40 feet high. The Area Council will invite the developer to attend our January meeting to inform us further about this project.

Year in Review, Ways to Improve:

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell proposed that the Area Council have a sign placed on the MBTA bridge that would inform the public about upcoming Area Council meetings. Area Councilor Amy Wayne stated that she would look into the cost of making the sign. A motion was made to allocate up to \$100 towards purchasing a sign to place on the MBTA bridge, which passed 8 yes and 0 no, with one Area Councilor absent.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory discussed an organization called “Welcoming Newton” that gets the word out to new residents about what is happening in the city. This may be a good organization to establish a partnership to inform people about the existence of Area Councils. Groot will follow through with Welcoming Newton to discuss possibilities for collaborative efforts. Area Council President Lichtin also pointed out that the Area Council had previously discussed sending a mailing of postcards to residents in the Highlands to have them sign up for our on-line Google group.

Area Council President Lichtin spoke with Steve Feinstein regarding Village Day. Steve will continue to organize the event for 2020 but is looking for someone who may wish to either help or take on this role. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic will prepare the annual report of Area Council activities for 2019 as this year is coming to a close.

Administrative Items:

Approval of the November Minutes: A motion was made to approve the November minutes. The minutes were approved with no revisions 8:0 with one Area Council member absent.

Treasurer’s Report: The Treasurer’s Report was presented to Area Council members by Groot Gregory. No transactions have been recorded since the prior month.

New Business: No additional New Business was discussed.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:03 PM.