

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, August 5, 2016

Attending: Rodney Barker, Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Steve Feinstein, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio Present:
John Rice

Guests:

Hassan Broughton, Newton Highlands
Barney Heath, Newton Department of Planning
Mildred Hutchinson, Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation
Jen Kohl, Newton Upper Falls Neighborhood Area Council
Sallee Lipshutz, Waban Neighborhood Area Council
Ernest Lowenstein, Hyde Street, Newton Highlands
Ron Mauri, Newton Highlands Historic District Planning Committee
Diane Prunte, Newton Highlands Historic District Planning Committee
Lily Canan Reynolds, Newton City Government Community Engagement Mgr.
Barbara Smiley, Newton Highlands Local Historic District Planning Group
Brian Yates, City Councilor, Ward 5, At-Large

Secretary's Report and Treasurer's Report

Srdj opened the meeting at 7:35 PM. The Secretary's Report for July was approved along with the corrections for the June report.

The Treasurer's Report included the following. As of August 1 2016, we had \$14,894.18 in our checking account, of which \$9,240.53 is currently available. \$120.00 is available in cash.

\$400.00 is still owed to us for Village Day activities and we still owe Steve \$304.63 for expenses related to that event.

Most financials complete for Village Day. Net surplus between \$1450.00 and \$3,300.00.

For the Local Historic District, total proceeds stand at \$3,075.00 and total outlays stand at \$1,336.35.

New Planning Director Presents City's Housing Plan and Housing Strategy

Barney Heath, Newton's new Planning Director came before the Council to discuss two items: (1) the City of Newton's recently released Housing Study and: (2) the City's recently released Housing Strategy.

The Director paraphrased an earlier statement by the Mayor that tonight's meeting is one small part of a "conversation" with the City Council, other elected officials such as this Council about what we want the City to look like now and in the future. It's both a blueprint and a starting point for this conversation.

Barney highlighted the following trends from the Housing Study which he labelled as "disturbing".

- We have an ever larger base of older residents living here
- The number of millennials has also declined
- Households now average only 2.5 people
- Housing prices have skyrocketed and now average \$1.2 million
- Rents are also way up
- There are fewer middle income families and individuals living here
- There is very little mixed use housing
- There is little opportunity for low and moderate income to buy or rent here

Some of the main points from the City's Housing Strategy included:

- The Mayor is aggressively promoting adding housing throughout the City
- The goal is to create 800 new units of housing by 2021 that is considered to meet the definition of being "affordable"

- Housing development would be as close as possible close to good public transit
- This would be supplemented by new inclusionary zoning legislation
- Accessory apartments will, hopefully, also be part of the strategy

A frank and extended discussion took place following Barney's presentation. Ernest Lowenstein stated that he was troubled by how many real units of affordable housing the Mayor really has in mind with his commitment to 800 affordable units. Is 800 the real number of actual affordable units or is 800 the total number of units of which perhaps only 15 to 20 percent would be affordable?

Lowenstein and others also voiced concern about what the impacts they felt the building of new housing (affordable or otherwise) in or near village centers would cause. Eliminating parking lots while building housing in village centers could, in effect, have adverse effects on the village centers themselves. Residents stated that the overwhelming majority of shoppers will not bike or walk long distances to shop, eat or drink in our village centers.

Rodney and Amy stated they were deeply concerned about school capacity challenges that would result from all this new housing, whether the housing was affordable or not. Rodney specifically asked if the School Committee and the School Department has been involved in helping the City address capacity issues from this new construction.

Councilor Yates stated that, in his opinion, the City "doesn't have a clue about school capacity", but he commended the Director for beginning a serious discussion on several contentious issues related to housing development and development generally. He hoped and trusted that we could find common ground in the months ahead.

Rodney, Amy, Barbara Smiley and Bob briefed Barney on the status of the proposed Newton Highlands Local Historic District. Barney was familiar with local historic district development programs from his previous work, particularly from the time he served as Planning Director in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. He stated that he is favorably disposed to them as a result of his Rhode Island experience and he seemed genuinely impressed by how much progress we have made in putting this local district together.

Srdj thanked Barney for his presentation for addressing so many issues. Echoing Councilor Yates, he stated that he hoped that this would be the first of many discussions on a range of development and preservation challenges facing both Newton Highlands and the City as a whole.

Charter Reform and Area Councils

We next turned to a discussion of specific changes that the Charter Reform Commission has put forward as to the powers and responsibilities of Newton's area councils and how they would be formed, organized and administered.

An extended discussion took place on 7 specific items that the Charter Reform Commission is examining which pertain to area councils. Here is a summary of changes our Area Council recommended on each of 7 items.

It should be noted that a general discussion of what the powers and responsibilities of area councils should be was interspersed throughout the following discussion.

1. Defining New Boundaries:

New service areas should be decided and developed by citizens of the affected area and not by the City Council. Vote of 7-0-0 in favor.

2. Creation, Boundary Changes and Dissolution by Petition:

20% of registered voters in each proposed district must favor the creation, boundary change or dissolution of an area council. Nathaniel proposed that supporters first gather 5% of residents at which point the City would send out a mailed notice to all residents informing them about the initiative to establish a local historic District that includes their residents. Vote of 7-0-0 in favor.

3. Powers of the Area Council Including Receiving Funds:

Money from the General Fund should not be used to support Area Council activities or programs. However, area councils should be able to raise funds using mechanisms that are common to business improvement districts or neighborhood improvement groups. Vote of 7-0-0 in favor of ability to accept funds generally. Vote of 6-0-1 in favor of funds for business and neighborhood projects.

In terms of area council powers, the discussion then turned to Srdj's proposal that area councils also have the power to develop local programs and strategies related to transportation, parking, historical preservation, open space and design review within the service area. There was a general consensus that most of these items could properly be addressed by area councils, but several members voiced concern about giving area councils design review authority. Nevertheless, there was a vote of 4-1-2 in favor of all the items Srdj proposed.

4. Signatures to Get on the Ballot:

Endorse Charter Commission's recommendation to require 25 signatures for each area council candidate, submitted one month before the election. Vote of 7-0-0 in favor.

5. Ballot Uniformity:

Endorse Charter Commission's proposal that all Area Council elections be held on the first Tuesday of November citywide during an election year. Ballot boxes should be available in each ward polling station, corresponding to the street address of the relevant area council. Vote of 7-0-0 in favor.

6. Appointment of Area Councilors to Fill Vacancies:

Endorse Charter Commission's proposal that area councils themselves pick replacements by a majority vote of all the members. In the case of our area council, that would be 5 votes. Vote of 7-0-0 in favor.

7. Ex-Officio Members:

All City councilors who represent residents in the service area of an Area Council shall be Ex-Officio members of each Area Council service area that the Councilor represents. Vote of 7-0-0 in favor.

Crystal Lake Vision 2020 September 15th Meeting

Plans are progressing for the 7-9 PM September 15th Open House Meeting at the Crystal Lake Bathhouse. The purpose is to rally support for a new year round facility that would replace the existing structure. Community leaders who will

be invited to speak in support of the project include the Mayor, City Councilors, our State Representatives, multiple neighbors and major department heads concerned with parks and recreation and City Programs and Activities. Rounding it off will be Schuyler Larrabee, Janet Bourque, and our own Srdj Neleljkovic.

The \$800.00 needed to put on this community meeting is being split evenly between our Area Council and the Crystal Lake Conservancy. It should be a gala affair.

Items in Brief

- Robert Solomon will give us progress report on handicap access at the Newton Highlands MBTA Station during next month's meeting.
- The City is providing \$2.5 million for major improvements at the Hyde Playground.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:01 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council