

# **Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, September 1, 2016**

Attending: Rodney Barker, Bob Burke, Steve Feinstein, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdj Nedeljkovic, Julius Starkman, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio Present:

John Rice

Dick Blazer

Guests:

Jini Fairley, City of Newton ADA Coordinator

Jane Frantz, Newton Charter Commission

Mildred Hutchinson, Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation

Sallee Lipshutz, Waban Neighborhood Area Council

Robert Solomon, Newton Highlands MBTA Station Accessibility Coordinator

## **Secretary's Report and Treasurer's Report**

Srdj opened the meeting at 7:40 PM. The Secretary's Report for August was approved with corrections.

In Groot's absence, Srdj presented the Treasurer's Report. It included the following. As of August 24, 2016, we had \$14,894.18 in our checking account, of which \$9,240.53 is currently available. \$120.00 is available in cash.

Other items remained basically unchanged from August's report.

## **MBTA Accessibility Update**

Robert Solomon and Jini Fairley came before our Council with detailed and spirited progress reports concerning efforts to make the Highlands MBTA station fully accessible.

Jini provided an overview of the major tasks and responsibilities of her office as they pertain to ADA and Section 504 issues in Newton. She stated that she and the Mayor are totally supportive of efforts to provide full accessibility at the Highlands MBTA station.

Jini stated that her job is basically to help make sure that all city-owned facilities, programs, services and activities are ADA compliant. She is also the official liaison between the Mayor and our Area Council on the Highlands MBTA project. She stressed that the MBTA and Mass DOT have full authority over this. The City of Newton has no direct responsibility or authority.

Once the project gets rolling, however, our DPW and Planning Department will become more involved. She wished the City had more direct authority in this matter, but it simply does not. She concluded by stating she and Robert would coordinate on anything he sets up with the City and with the T and he has promised to involve Jini in all matters he takes up with the City.

Robert briefed us on the complicated intricacies of how the State must design, develop and construct the Highlands MBTA project. At the outset, Rodney stated that he was still perplexed at why a simpler design couldn't be developed and implemented.

Robert stated that it was State policy that a more detailed planning program with multiple options must be examined in full during the planning process. There is nothing we can do to change that. He had hoped that Tom Rivero, the MBTA official working on this planning process, could have been present tonight, but Tom had other commitments.

The State has currently completed 15% of the design work requirements. There are 4 more benchmarks (30, 40, 75 and 90% completion) needed to get us to 100% completion.

Tom is in the process of writing an RFP that, when approved, will start the design work for reaching the 30 percent benchmark. We have the money through 2020, but we have to get to the 100 percent design well before then.

Robert was asked how confident he was that any of this would actually happen. Robert stated that if they can get to work on 30 percent design we should be okay at holding onto the money. But if stay stuck at the 15% level, the Governor could take the money back. Robert will continue to touch base with Tom and will report back next month on what he finds

## **Charter Reform and Area Councils (Article 9)**

Nathaniel introduced what turned into a spirited discussion on proposed charter changes affecting current and future area councils in Newton. Nathaniel and Srdj centered the presentation and subsequent discussion around six questions the Charter Commission was asking our input on. These were

1. What do you believe is the mission/purpose of your area council, (i.e community building events, beautification, addressing safety related concerns, communications/outreach/etc.
2. Newton's area councils are formed on a grass roots level and are not uniform across the city in their missions and practices. What do you see as the advantages and "disadvantages".
3. Please comment on the area council elections process (i.e. creation of boundaries, gathering signatures, voting sites, etc.
4. What do you perceive as the relationship between the City Council and your area council.
5. Please describe your sources of funding, expenditures, and accounting practices.
6. Please describe how you communicate with the residents in your area, both formally and informally to include the full range of opinions on important topics.

No formal votes were taken on any of these items, but there was a free ranging discussion on most of them. Discussions were vigorous. People tended to be on one side or the other regarding whether new councils should arise by citizen organization or through a top-down mechanism via City Hall.

There was unanimous agreement that area councils provided a vital role in Newton, but that Article 9 needed work and reflect current thinking regarding neighborhood governance that may have evolved since when the Charter was last changed. The language is old and outdated and the issues of importance have changed.

There was also general agreement that the mission/purpose of our area council included all the items and more that are delineated in the first question and the strength of each depended on the saliency and timeliness of specific items on our agenda at any given point in time.

Most of our members weren't certain that there had to be strict uniformity across the City because there are often different and quite unique challenges from one village to the next. Unanimous agreement, however, that the missions, agendas and approaches of area councils transcend most traditional neighborhood associations although the latter may have deeper roots in the villages they serve. In short, no one size fits all.

Srdj and some other members felt that on a case-by-base basis, area councils should be given additional authority by the City Council, but there was no overwhelming consensus about whether we should have delegated or simply advisory authority. There was, however, unanimous support for keeping the possibility open for future substantive authority.

Boundary setting was probably the most hotly debated item. Some area council members, including Steve and Sallee Lipshutz from the Waban Area Council, wanted to set firm boundaries before the fact whenever area councils want to expand or contract. Srdj and Rodney thought the boundaries should be dynamic and "organic".

Several members described the relations between our area council and the City Council as excellent and collegial, particularly as they involve the relationship between the ward councilors from Wards 5 and 6 who have collaborated with us on several village related matters. It was noted that some members were initially concerned that there would be inherent conflict over turf and authority, but there has not been any. In fact, relations have grown stronger over the years, nurtured by devotion that we all have to this village.

Bob pointed out that there is no single effective way of communicating with residents of our service area because no two issues are exactly the same or involve the entire service area. Reducing noise from early morning activity at the Post Office involved just the Post Office itself and a handful of homes while outreach about Village Day and the 2020 Vision at Crystal Lake potentially affect the entire City and we have had excellent outreach on each of these and others. Our outreach on the proposed local historic district needs to be more intense and concentrated because it primarily affects homeowners and residents of the approximately 240 homes within the proposed district.

At the conclusion of the discussion, our Council unanimously approved sending a letter from the Area Council to the Charter Commission based on the draft letter that Nathaniel wrote, along with a set of recommended changes to the language of Article 9. Councilors were asked to send any suggested edits to Nathaniel to include in the final letter. It was also suggested that Councilors and guests send letters of their own in support of area councils to the Charter Commission and attend the upcoming public hearing of the Charter Commission.

## **Crystal Lake Vision 2020 September 15<sup>th</sup> Meeting**

Plans are nearing completion for the 7-9 PM September 15<sup>th</sup> Open House Meeting at the Crystal Lake Bathhouse. As noted in last month's report, the purpose is to rally support for a new year-round facility that would replace the existing structure.

Community leaders who will speak in support of the project include representatives from the Mayor's office, 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 Skylar 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 Conversancy.

## **Newton Highlands Local Historic District Update**

During the past month, Barbara Smiley, Bill Roesner and Carol Clark made remarkable and breathtaking progress in completing many of the undocumented properties within the proposed Local Historic District. Barbara is handling the historical narrative and Bill and Carol are doing the architectural requirements.

We originally thought we would need approximately \$20,000 in consultant support to complete the inventory and final report. We now figure we will need no more than \$10,000 and probably quite a bit less to complete everything. Katy Homes will present what we have compiled to the Community Preservation in mid-October.

To this end, we are nearing completion of 6 representative samples of properties we have documented, a progress report of all the things we have done to advance this project and as many signatures as possible from residents of all parts of Newton since it is their tax dollars that will fund what we need to complete the inventory.

In short order, we must begin to compile a “preliminary report” that will be the basis for moving our project through the Newton Historical Commission, the Massachusetts Historical Commission and ultimately through a public hearing, community meeting and consideration by the City Council.

In other notes, we were concerned to learn that the “Engine 6” Group is scheduled to hold a closed member meeting at the Union Church in Waban to discuss, among other items, their contention that Local Historic Districts are being advanced as a way to circumvent affordable housing in the Highlands and other parts of Newton. We talked it over with Srdj before the meeting and he subsequently wrote an open letter to the Engine 6 Group, a copy of which is included in the handouts for this meeting. Among other items, Srdj notes that:

*“The creation of a Local Historic District will have no adverse effect on the ability to create multifamily housing or zoning reform in Newton. Preservation of homes, some of which are smaller in size and on little lots, will promote housing diversity in the highlands. Also, our older housing stock often tends to be less expensive than brand new houses. I have yet to see a tear-down that resulted in a more affordable house.”*

*The purpose of a Local Historic District in Newton is to insure the preservation of significant historical buildings and public spaces.”*

Srdj noted at the meeting that he had called the head of the Engine 6 Group with an offer to sit down and discuss these matters. He will let us know what response he gets.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:05 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,  
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council