

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, November 3, 2016

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

Ex Officio Present:

John Rice and Richard Blazer

Guests:

Jeffrey Cohen, Newton Highlands Resident

Mildred Hutchinson, Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation

Rena Getz, Waban Neighborhood Area Council

Sgt. Sean Healy, Newton Police Department

Dan Kiernan, Newton Highlands Resident

Sallee Lipshutz, Waban Neighborhood Area Council

Chief David MacDonald, Newton Police Department

Officer Michael McSweeney, Newton Police Department

Ron Mauri, Newton Highlands Historic District Planning Committee

Suzanne Rocklin, Newton Highlands Resident

Robert Solomon, Accessible Transportation Coordinator

Jeff and Kate Vaughn, Newton Highlands Resident

Secretary's Report and Treasurer's Report

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

The Treasurer's Report included the following. As of October 31, 2016, we had \$14,665.00 in our checking account; \$8,629.00 is currently available plus \$120.00 available in cash.

For the Local historic District Planning Group, there is \$8.65 remaining in the original funding from our Area Council. \$3,075.00 is available from the April, 2016 fundraiser that can be used for documentation and outreach.

There is \$1,670.00 remaining for the Officer English Garden and other improvements on the Walnut Street Bridge.

\$382,38 was paid out for promotional materials for the September meeting with the Crystal Lake Conservancy on a new facility to replace the Crystal Lake Bathhouse. \$400.00 was paid out for the police detail at Village Day and \$500.00 for printing in support of the Halloween Haunted House.

\$1,000.00 was paid to the Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation (NHCDC) to support the 2017 Summer Concert Program. \$17.62 was paid to Amy Wayne for printing related to the Crystal Lake Bathhouse program.

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

Safety, Transportation and Enforcing Snow Shoveling

Newton Police Chief David MacDonald along with Sargent Sean Healy and Officer Michael McSweeney came before our Council to bring us up to date on the City's response to enforcement of the snow shoveling ordinance and other related transportation, safety and enforcement issues. The Chief noted that this was one of many meetings he has held with community and village organizations and that he has learned a lot from each of them.

Chief MacDonald made the following points:

- His Department simply doesn't have the resources to enforce all but the most egregious violations of the snow removal ordinance.
- He also stated that enforcement has to be tempered by the fact that some folks in Newton simply can't afford the cost of a landscaper to remove snow from their properties and sidewalks. We should be focusing more effort on encouraging neighbors with snow blowers to help these people.
- The real safety priority for the police is to make certain that all cars are removed from streets before snowstorms.
- The Chief doesn't believe there will be a fundamental change to the current overnight parking rules, but he did acknowledge that each area is different. The densely packed Nonantum neighborhood faces far more difficult parking challenges than Oak Hill.

- The Chief said he would take the concerns raised in the meeting about traffic off of Lincoln Street back to the Traffic Bureau for possible additional enforcement actions.
- Robert Solomon brought up the problem of city contractors dumping snow from streets onto sidewalks. He thinks it is just “a few bad actors” that cause most of the problem, but it’s a safety hazard nonetheless.
- The Chief responded that residents should immediately call 311 or the police if any street snow plow owned or hired by the City dumps snow onto their sidewalk. They should also call if private contractors dump snow from private driveways and walkways onto any sidewalk.

There was an extensive and vigorous discussion following the Chief’s remarks and the comments of Officer McSweeney and Sargent Healy. Barbara stated that she still wasn’t convinced that more could be done to enforce the shoveling ordinance with homeowners. There was general agreement, however, that village businesses and their landlords are very responsible when it comes to removing snow from their sidewalks and walkways.

In other areas, Chief Mac Donald and officers Healy and McSweeney noted that traffic complaints from the public are triaged depending on severity of the infraction and its immediate danger to public safety and vehicle access to the streets. Double parking and speeding are big ticket items, literally and figuratively.

Newton Highlands Local Historic District

Rodney and Bob gave a rather short report because several of the major tasks are nearing completion and a full report of accomplishments and remaining tasks will be presented next month.

The major single remaining task is to complete the preliminary study report and several members of the Newton Highlands Local Historic District Planning Group are working to finish various elements of the study that will be incorporated into the final draft. Rodney stated that it’s truly remarkable what this band of volunteers has been able to accomplish.

Needham Street Update

The meeting then turned to discuss the development and drafting of a strong and coordinated letter by a large number of environmental and public interest groups in Newton to the Highway Administrator of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation regarding priorities for the Needham Street corridor. Srdj presented the contents of the draft letter and the aims of the coalition.

A central aim of the coalition is to end the decades old isolation of residents and businesses on Needham Street from the residents and businesses of the Newton Highlands Village. The draft letter notes that:

- Needham Street is becoming more of a destination for residents (i.e) rather than being an industrial area that residents avoided. In effect, residents now go there to shop.
- Even given its role as an arterial connector, the street design can still enable and promote a more vibrant residential and commercial environment.
- Mass DOT's "75 percent designs" are an improvement over what's there now, but do not address the needs for livability and economic vitality.
- They don't meet the vision in in Newton's draft *Transportation Strategy* nor are they consistent with Mass DOT's *Complete Streets* guidance.

The draft letter urges Mass DOT to reconsider and improve these plans considering the wider goals for 21st century transportation and the long-expressed desires for better cycling, walking and transit in this vital corridor.

In particular, the draft letter calls for protected bike lanes, connected bicycle routes, narrower pedestrian crossings, establishing 20 mph corridor design speed.

The draft letter recommends specific changes or actions on 5 portions of Needham Street, specifically the Winchester Street section, Curtis Street, Route 9 intersection, the Charles River Bridge and the Oak and Christina Streets intersection.

The letter was signed by Andreae Downes, and Adam Peller, members of the Newton Transportation Advisory Committee. The contents of the letter have already been endorsed by the Newton League of Women Voters, Bike Newton, Green Newton, Livable Newton, Mass Bike, Walk Boston, Engine 6 (affordable housing advocates), Newton Bicycle Advisory Committee and several prominent transportation advocates in Newton.

Srdj stated that the coalition hoped that the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council would also endorse the draft letter. In fact, it was hoped that the Upper Falls and Waban area councils would also endorse it. A general discussion then took place. It was moved and seconded that our Area Council endorse and lend its name to the letter. This motion was approved 7-0-2.

Charter Reform and Area Councils

Nathaniel briefed the Council on last evening's meeting of the Newton Charter Commission and he supplemented his presentation with a detailed letter to all area councilors that covered every item in even more detail. Some of the major points include:

1. Defining New Boundaries:

The City Council will establish the guidelines for creating boundaries, but boundaries must be "reasonably compact". Area councils cannot have a service area with more residences larger than the average number of residents in a ward at the time of the area council's creation.

2. Creation, Boundary Changes and Dissolution by Petition:

The method of forming an area council will be determined by the City Council. It must allow area councils to be formed via citizen petition, but some other provisions are vague at this time.

3. Powers of the Area Council Including Receiving Funds:

There is no prohibition on city funding for area councils, but there is also no positive mention about them receiving funding. Nathaniel surmised that this should allow the City to fund area councils through the normal budget process if the City Council decides to include that ability in an ordinance.

4. *Functions:*

Area councils shall have advisory and communication functions, but may perform other functions, including substantive functions, prescribed by ordinance.

5. *Consistency:*

Powers must be granted to all area councils equally.

6. *Membership, by-laws, annual reporting, and maintenance of financial records:*

The City Council must create requirements for all of these items.

7. *Communication with City Government:*

The Charter will not establish a liaison within the City for area councils to communicate with. Nathaniel notes that the Commission may, however, recommend that a liaison position created in a non-binding letter to the Mayor and the City Council containing items they think would be a good idea, but don't belong in the Charter.

8. *Indemnification.* The City will provide indemnification to area councils under Article 11.

9. *Election of Area Councilors:* The City Council must establish a manner for electing area councils, but it does not have to necessarily need to be through city run elections. Nathaniel noted that the current language does not require that area councilors be elected, so there's the chance they could be appointed. Charter Commission member Jane Frantz told Nathaniel that this was an oversight and would be corrected.

Nathaniel commented on several of these points and other observations. Some of the major ones include:

- The vote to keep area councils was 6 in favor, 3 opposed.
- The draft language removed much of the detail in the current Article 9. They seem to have thrown the ball to the City Council to fill in the gaps.

- This is a reasonable outcome for the area councils. We didn't lose any critical issues at this stage.
- This current proposal is not a good reason to vote against the Charter, but it's also not a good reason to support it.
- The bottom line is that our major task moving forward is to get the City Council to give us a good ordinance and a good set of resolutions.
- The Charter Commission hasn't discussed what to do about grandfathering in the 4 existing area councils. They will probably wait for Article 12 "transition provisions" to consider this.

Everyone commended the work that Nathaniel has done to monitor the work of the Charter Commission and keep us fully informed about how their decisions will affect our area councils and the general functioning and composition of city government.

A discussion took place specifically on the Article 12 "transition provisions" and what the best course of action would be for our Area Council as it seeks to maneuver in a changing environment.

Nathaniel made a motion that the current charter provisions regarding area councils, the authorizing resolutions for existing area councils and the existing bylaws for existing area councils remain in effect until the City Council passes new ordinances on how area councils operate.

Groot endorsed this proposal but stated that the motion should include two exceptions. The City could be able to indemnify us in the interim for something we do in our capacity as area councilors and the City could be able to provide funds for us if they so choose. Nathaniel readily agreed to Groot's additions and the full motion was seconded and approved on a vote of 9-0-0

Items in Brief

- Later this month, Rodney is scheduled to receive the highly prestigious Thelma Fleishman Lifetime Achievement Award for his years of commitment to Historical Preservation in Newton.
- There will be full presentations on the Northland Redevelopment Proposal for the Marshall's shopping mall and adjacent areas of Newton Upper Falls. One will be at the Northland office and a second before the Newton Upper Falls Area Council. Groot suggested that we try and get them to brief us because some this project will impact Newton Highlands as well as Upper Falls.
- John reported that the Halloween Haunted House and party was a "smashing success". Attendance was high and the kids were very enthusiastic. He thanked our Council for its support and said it was money well spent.
- John Rice reported that the Winter Soup Social is being scheduled for the first weekend in February.
- Nathaniel in a follow up to his main report announced that the Charter Commission would be considering the fate of ward city councilors on November 16th
- The MBTA is finalizing its design alternative for the Newton Highlands MBTA Station accessibility project
- The Crystal Lake Conservancy will be holding a follow up meeting on November 16 to further discuss plans for replacing the old bathhouse with a new facility.

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The meeting was adjourned at 9:50 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council