

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, December 1, 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

Guests:

Andrea Downes, TAG, Cold Springs Trail, Needham St./ Winchester St. Letter
Mildred Hutchinson, Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation
Rena Getz, Waban Neighborhood Area Council
Sallee Lipshutz, Waban Neighborhood Area Council
Robert Solomon, Accessible Transportation Coordinator
Stephanie Toner, City of Newton

Secretary's Report and Treasurer's Report

Srdj was delayed so Steve 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 \$14,225.00 in our checking account; \$8,589.00 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.

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

Community Engagement

Stephanie Foner, the Mayor's Director of Community Engagement came before our Council to talk about a variety of new and traditional communications resources we could employ to more effectively communicate with residents of our service area.

We had a discussion of how we use the email list of the Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation which effectively reaches just about every household in our service area. Stephanie and members of the Council seemed to agree that over reliance on the NHCDC List isn't where we should be heading because as a government entity we should be developing our own email list and supplementary communications resources.

We then discussed other communications resources we already use and how our capability to communicate and increase citizen involvement might be greatly enhanced by what Stephanie termed "virtual participation". She briefly discussed things like live streaming of Council meetings, the use of Facebook Live, and her willingness to attend future meetings to experiment with communications technology. Steve said he would follow up with Stephanie to see how we could expedite these initiatives wherever practical.

Pedestrian Safety for Zervas Students

Srdj and Andrea Downs discussed the draft of a joint letter from Srdj and Sallee Lipshutz to Bob DeRubeis about how improvements at Cold Springs Park could contribute greatly to part of a concerted attempt by the Zervas Administrations, Zervas PTO and the neighborhood to reduce traffic and congestion on Beethoven and Beacon Streets during school arrivals and departures. A supplement to traffic controls would be efforts to improve the trails at Cold Springs Park as part of an overall plan to making the wide area around Zervas more walkable for students. Everyone seem favorable to sending the letter to DeRubeis, but there was some discussion about what the best timing for sending it would be.

Needham Street Update

It will be recalled that there was an extended discussion at November's meeting about a draft letter by a large number of environmental and public interest groups in Newton to the Highway Administration of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation regarding priorities for the Needham Street corridor. It urge 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. Finally, 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.

It will also be recalled that the letter was signed by Andrea Downs, 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.

At this month's meeting, Surd presented a follow up letter which endorsed most of the recommendations of the previous draft, but made a case for the undergrounding of utilities and concluded that construction of the roadway should not proceed until undergrounding is included in the State's plan.

A frank and spirited, but positive discussion ensued with Andrea making a case against doing anything that would delay implementation of the many improvements that the State seems willing to charge forward on. Andrea did not take issue with the benefits of undergrounding telephone poles and other utilities, but she felt certain that any effort to ask the State to delay the project for any reason would likely be interpreted as community opposition that could delay the projects. Andrea felt the state would most likely simply pull up stakes and move to a project in some other location where there would be a green light to precede immediately. There was general agreement that Surd had a strong case for pushing elimination of above ground utilities, but that Andrea was probably correct about the real danger of losing the many other positive amenities altogether.

Newton Highlands Local Historic District

Rodney and Bob announced that a final draft of the preliminary study report for the Newton Highlands Local Historic District Planning Group has been completed and just needs a final editing and the addition of a few appendix sections.

The Newton Historical Commission will hopefully review and approve it in early December and forward it onto the Massachusetts Historical Commission for their review. An aggressive public information and door to door canvassing and leafletting campaign has been planned and is ready to be launched once the preliminary study report goes to the State.

Newton Highlands MBTA Station Accessibility Update

Robert reported that the MBTA was close to signing a contract for design work that will start and finish when the 30 percent stage is complete. Work on this is expected to start this month. There will be another community meeting in the Highlands once the 30 percent level is achieved.

The MBTA is going with a design that raises the platform on the outbound side, but it won't go under station building. Everything will also be raised on the inbound lane along with a redesign of Walnut Street entrance. There will be no new entrances on Walnut Street, but there will be a redo of the crossovers. All of this will be in the 30 percent design.

Charter Reform and Area Councils

We discussed a letter that Srdj sent to Charter Commission Chairman Josh Kinsman dated today, December 1st regarding transition provisions for area councils under Article 9 between the old City Charter and a new Charter if it is ultimately approved by voters at the next municipal election in November, 2017.

If there is an interim period, we request that the status quo from the old charter remain in force, with one exception, until the City Council addresses the questions about area councils that the Charter Commission has left to the City Council's discretion.

Srdj's letter went on to state that the one component of the draft City Charter that should be implemented immediately when the Charter takes effect is the removal of the provision prohibiting area councils from receiving city funds.

The letter stresses that continuation of the status quo will allow area councils to have certainty about their composition, powers and governance while the City Council considers what rules it wants to establish for area councils. We totally support being covered by the City's indemnification safeguards. Finally, we need definitive language articulating where we stand in any new scheme of things.

A motion was made to approve Srdj's letter and it was seconded and approved on a vote of 8-0-1.

Items in Brief

- Winter Soup Social is set for Saturday, January 21st. Nathaniel moved that we allocate \$200.00 for a magician and other expenses. The motion was seconded and approved 9-0-0. A list was circulated to sign up volunteers to assist with setup and cleanup.
- John Rice reported that he had attended a follow up meeting on November 16th about a new and expanded 4 season Crystal Lake Bathhouse organized by the Crystal Lake Conservancy. Plans to replace the decrepit old bathhouse with a new year round use facility were discussed, but nothing big is going to happen in the short run.
- John also reported that plans are in place for winter skating on the rink at the Hyde Field. We will help pay for the rink frame and Julius thought he could get the needed plastic for the sides.
- Village Day is now scheduled for the 2nd Sunday in June and Steve said that there's a lot that needs to be done between now and then to pull this off.
- John also gave an update on the Northland Project noting that there is a lot of concern about the dynamic impact on schools, parking, traffic and other stresses caused by the introduction of so many new families and businesses into the area. The City realizes it must accommodate these concerns. He and others will continue to keep us up to date on a project that is so potentially large that it will impact not just Upper Falls, but the Highlands and gateway areas into Needham.

- The Zoning Redesign Pattern Book two day Open House is scheduled for Saturday December 3rd and Sunday, December 4th at the Newton Innovation Center, 124 Vernon Street, Newton Corner. The goal is to create an easily understood ordinance that preserves what is best about Newton and is at the same time forward thinking. It dovetails with Phase Two of the Zoning Redesign Project that is now underway.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council