

NEWTON HIGHLANDS NEIGHBORHOOD AREA COUNCIL

REGULAR MONTHLY MEETING – MARCH 6, 2014, 7:30 PM

Attending: Rodney Barker, Groot Gregory, Srdj Nedeljkovic, Robert Solomon, Carol McPherson

Ex Officio Aldermen: Alderman John Rice

Guests:

- Dianne Khalaj, Walnut Foods and Liaison from the Highlands Merchants Coalition
- Bruce Henderson, (former) Zervas parent
- Steve Feinstein, Zervas Parent
- Sallee Lipshutz, President, Waban Neighborhood Area Council
- Maureen Meagher, Waban Neighborhood Area Council
- Carol Rose, Newton Council on Aging
- Chris Steele, Newton Economic Development Commission

Meeting called to order at 7:40. Chris Steele nominated to take meeting notes as Bob Burke had a sudden issue that caused him to miss tonight's meeting.

Minutes from previous session

- Minutes were presented to the Council. Items of note included a request to formally thank Barbara Darnell for her work on the soup social
- Dianne was asked about the value that the merchants derive from participating at the social:
 - Current customers thanked the merchants and made a point of coming by the store again afterwards
 - Other than this, not much direct economic impact. However, the soup social enhances the sense of social participation
 - Going forward, the Area Council decided to re-examine how to organize the work involved regarding the Winter Social. According to Groot, Barbara has indicated that she will not be able to be the person in charge of coordinating next year's event.
- (Approved at 7:47 by unanimous vote)

Treasurers report

Groot Gregory presented the Treasurer's report. Current balance for the Council's checking account is \$7,841.57. Note that the budget for ice rink was \$1,000, but actually spent 2,200 due to the need to pay Paul Gilbert and his team, and also due to the requirement to reconstruct the rink due to the collapse of the first rink.

Please also note that John Rice indicated that some of this expense is to be shared with the Hyde, and final tallies are forthcoming.

Area council boundaries

The discussion of alterations to the boundaries of the areas covered by the Newton Highlands, Upper Falls, and Waban area council is to be deferred until the Spring. At that time representatives from the area councils will work with local residents to gather the requisite signatures from the current “outlier” roads – areas which adjoin and should nominally be represented by one of the area councils

Further, formal changes to the areas will await direct engagement by the Board of Aldermen.

Area Council Planning: Short and long term goals

A discussion was held regarding the overall priorities of the area council. This began with reviewing the discussion from the previous meeting, and resulted in the following individuals being assigned specific areas of interest

- Transportation and transit - Robert Solomon
- Vitality - Groot Gregory (who will work to define the term first)
- Seniors/elderly - Carol Rose
- Proactive planning and zoning - Srdj and Ron Mauri
- Historic preservation - Rodney Barker and Carol McPherson

Skating Pond

The skating rink is still in use, and this year’s season has been the longest since the Area Council has constructed a rink. Rinks have been used across the City, but none more than in Newton Highlands. There was a collapse of the rink in December, requiring repair and refilling.

As mentioned above (Treasurer’s report), the Village and Hyde have paid individuals to construct and then to clear the rink throughout the skating season. Many of these costs have been paid by the Hyde, and not brought back to the Highlands

Robert Solomon suggested that the village investigate making the walls higher and selling advertisements in order to partially or completely fund the project.

Officer English Garden

Rodney intends to speak with Barbara Balasa as soon as possible, but has not yet had the opportunity. The sprinkler expert from the City will be in the Highlands to investigate the possibility of installing sprinkler heads in the garden in about May. It will then be up to those entrusted with maintaining the Garden to find a means for occasionally attaching a hose to the sprinkler system.

Rodney expects to be able to report in full detail at next Month’s meeting.

Pizza Social

Alderman Rice noted that plans can move forward as soon as the Council and the Hyde choose an appropriate Saturday for the event.

Bandstand

Alderman Rice noted that 13 Friday concerts and movies have been scheduled for the Summer. There will be no event for July 4 weekend. In addition, there will be two Sunday night theatre productions based on the theme of "Shakespeare in the Park." The theatre productions are largely funded by the Hyde, but also assisted by a grant from Newton Pride.

Alderman Rice will provide the schedule, and this will also be displayed on a large sign at the Hyde. Local merchants should be made aware that they are welcome and encouraged to bring tables and sell products at the events.

Halloween Planning

Alderman Rice noted that for the past 4 years the stage walls pipe and drape have been donated for the walls for the house. As a result, walls go up in about an hour and there is little difficulty in breakdown as well.

However, the individual who had generously donated materials in the past is now retiring, and it may be appropriate for the Area Council and the Hyde to fund a more permanent solution. Alderman Rice suggested that the Hyde could pay \$2,000, and the Highlands Area Council could participate for \$1,000 to purchase new pipe and drape. It was also suggested that Newton Pride might be approached to help fund.

Alderman Rice also suggested that the pipe and drape might be donated or loaned to South Fest and NSHS and possibly resulting in rental income to help offset costs.

Action item: The Council authorized an expense of \$1000 to contribute towards the pipe and drape purchase for the Halloween event.

Village Day

Srdj and Groot led the discussion of Village Day, beginning with the notice that there will not be a road race.

With regards to the silent auction, John Rice intends to find and speak with Peter Meyer to determine whether he is willing to run the auction again this year. If he's not able to do it, the Council may have to come up with other plans. \$3,000 of the Highlands budget comes from the silent auction. Sallee suggested that perhaps the Highlands silent auction might be somehow combined with the silent auction for Waban. This discussion is set to continue, as is the discussion of who will coordinate the auction.

Entertainment and rides still to be figured out. Rides provide a draw for children, and therefore for the parents and drive the overall success of other exhibits. However, as the City holds more village days, the per event revenue for the ride vendor has declined. Alderman Rice is attempting to get City to leverage relationship with rides across the villages.

Dianne noted that the Highlands village business community has not yet really been meeting about Village Day. The merchants are giving the raffle prizes, but it is unlikely that village business owners would be able to run the auction

Groot provided an update on T-shirt sales, noting that he has very poor data on the number of shirts actually sold and the revenue received. A conversation then ensued over whether an alternative approach of sponsored t-shirts, provided for low or no cost would be a better solution. There appeared to be a consensus that sponsors might be appropriate but *only* if local businesses were the prime beneficiaries of logo placement on the shirts.

On the subject of graphics for the shirts, Carol McPherson will speak with Ellen Fisher to see if she would be willing to donate a design based on a village theme of some kind. Likewise, Dianne will ask Eunice Feller to see if she has usable graphics files for logos for the village businesses.

Action item: A committee was formed to work on the T-shirts: Carol, Steven, and Groot. The committee will select a T-shirt design and present to the council at our April meeting.

Lights on the trees

John Rice has been working with O'Hara's to see if they will be willing to put decorative LED lights in the trees outside their restaurant. They have agreed, but only if others on the street will do. As a result, John is investigating the city's participation and assistance doing at least some, if the landlords can also. He is also looking into providing power for the lights from a City source.

Note that the urban tree warden has already approved the plan, and given guidelines on how to do this properly.

Dianne voiced her strong support for having lights placed on the trees. She indicated that village businesses would likely contribute to purchasing the lights. Lighting the village would improve the ambiance and the feeling of vibrancy in the village at night and should be pursued.

Transportation

Robert has spoken to Bill McClellan, director of light rail operations at the MBTA. Legislation has moved forward to address the ramps, platform and overall accessibility for the Green Line at Newton Highlands, but Bill has indicated a concern that action on the bond to fund the project will now have to wait until the election of the new Governor. It is unclear whether this item can move forward with approval of the budget by July.

It was noted that design can begin only when the bond is funded. As the process for the NH station advances, Robert indicated his interest in also addressing accessibility at the Chestnut Hill stop.

In other matters, the MBTA began efforts to address sidewalk improvements at the rail bridge in the fall, beginning with erecting plywood screens. However the weather changed before concrete work could begin, and the plywood screens remained up during the winter. They have been badly damaged by

winds and weather. The plywood was finally repaired last week and the sidewalks will be repaired as soon as the weather passes.

Dianne noted emphatically that local merchants have not been kept informed about the work on the sidewalks.

There is no definite date from Bill Paille regarding any proposed changes or improvements to the Allerton Road crossing of Centre Street. However, he indicated that safety improvements at the Allerton Road crossing will precede any work done on Lincoln Street near Hartford.

Businesses

Dianne provided a brief update on local merchants' plans for the coming year, and stated that she will provide a full list of dates and events at the April meeting.

320 Lake Group Home

Groot reported that the Newton Zoning Board of Appeals upheld the Inspectional Services' decision to not require a special permit for the expansion of 320 Lake Avenue for use as a group home for developmentally challenged individuals.

A similar facility is already in place on Lincoln Street at Woodward Street. In that case, SHI – the manager of the facility – had approached the neighborhood to answer questions prior to purchase and final planning. This did not occur in the current case.

Inspectional services and the ZBA held that a special permit is not applicable in the present case due to the City's non-discrimination clause. The Area Council identified a need to in future help everyone get to community engagement early as this is in everyone's best interest.

Zervas

Bruce Henderson provided an overview of the history of the Zervas school and of the current proposal to raze the current facility and construct a new school planned for a capacity of 490 pupils.

The current facility was designed for 250 pupils and now has enrollment of over 300. The School Committee needs to address enrollment and has decided to standardize elementary schools at enrollment of 460-490 students. Zervas, being centrally located within the city, provides an attractive option for flexibility and addressing growth.

However, Bruce noted that Newton has a long-term implied commitment to walkable neighborhood schools. Prior to the mid-1980's, the City has 23 elementary schools, and the vast majority of students were able to walk to school. After closing 8 schools, only 60% of elementary pupils are now within walking distance.

Bruce also noted specific concerns about school size and culture, as well as about the Zervas site's ability to handle the traffic and recreational space requirements an elementary school of this size would present.

The area council discussion centered on concerns regarding enrollment estimates, questions about how the schools plan will address forecasted housing development in the city, and the balance between educational, village, and community concerns. There was also considerable discussion of Question 1 of the override and whether this specifically ties the City to renovation or replacement of Zervas at the current to the exclusion of all other options.

Bruce suggested that the community as a whole needs to be made aware of the development and also understand the decision that is explicitly being made. He also recommended that other groups affiliated with walkable communities (e.g. Green Decade, Bike Newton) be engaged in the dialogue. Rodney Barker suggested urging a delay to the process until further information is available to validate the decision.

Action item: The Area Council discussed a plan for individuals to write to the school committee, mayor, and aldermen to urge a delay and a discussion. A formal letter is to be drafted by Srdj Nedeljkovic to the School Committee to that effect.

Village Visions

Srdj introduced the topic of Village Visions by presenting a brief powerpoint illustrating some of the areas of interest around the Village, including streetscapes along Walnut & Lincoln streets as well as the Crystal Lake Bathhouse and the Newton Highlands Playground off of Dedham Street. In each case, he suggested that the Village community and Area Council might be able to play a part in setting future direction.

Chris Steele and Carol Rose then presented a brief outline of topics, interested parties, and desired outcomes for a meeting or series of meetings on these topics. As noted in the writeup, such a session would aim to bring people together from Newton Highlands to set forth what they want their village to become. It would bring together the voices of people who commonly participate and to draw out those who don't as often. To fix today's problems and provide for tomorrow while still preserving everything that makes Newton Highlands a great place to live, to raise a family, to run a business, to shop, and to visit.

Importantly, the process is intended to increase and enhance citizen participation in addition to making recommendations of substance. Carol and Chris will develop a specific proposal to be delivered at the next NHNAC meeting.

Meeting Adjourned

With no additional business to discuss, a call was made to conclude the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 9:55 pm