

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, September 4, 2014

Attending: Rodney Barker, Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Steven Feinstein, Groot Gregory, Ron Mauri, Carol McPherson, Srdj Nedeljkovic, Robert Solomon

Ex Officio Aldermen: John Rice, Dick Blazer and Cheryl Lappin

Guests:

Laura Fitzmaurice, Historic Newton
Bruce Henderson, Vaughn Avenue
Mildred Hutchinson, Newton Highlands Community Development Corporation
Patrick Maher, Winslow Road
Carol Rose, Newton Council on Aging

Srdj called the meeting to order at 7:40 PM and determined that we had a quorum to conduct business.

Bob then presented the minutes from July's meeting. These were approved with corrections that Bob said he would incorporate into a revised final draft to be presented at September's meeting.

Groot presented the Treasurer's Report. As of September 1, 2014, there was \$8,343.37, all of it in our checking account. Steve stated that Diane from Walnut Foods is still tracking down those who pledged to purchase items at the Village Day Silent Auction, but still have not showed up to pick up and pay for these purchases.

The following items were discussed.

Proposal for Local Historical District

Carol, Rodney, and Laura Fitzmaurice expanded on their earlier presentations on what we need to do to make portions of Newton Highlands a Historical or Architectural District.

At its regular August meeting, The Historical Commission voted unanimously to approve the concept for a local Newton Highlands Historical District that was presented to our Area Council earlier in that month.

This is an important step forward, but it's only the beginning of a fairly long process that will take well into next spring to complete. Here are the major tasks ahead:

- Determine what parts of the Highlands should be included in the historical district itself
- Document the historical significance of each house within that defined District
- Publicize a proposal based on recommendations derived from this research
- Hold a public hearing

The Board of Aldermen must approve whatever final package we come up with. Only the exterior of each house is protected and additions which don't conflict with the original design are also allowed. Homeowners, contractors and prospective buyers are not prohibited from doing what they want with the insides.

Ron, Bob and Steve have already agreed to help with the housing inventory. Carol and Keith have also said they would like to help.

Alderman Lappin stated that she thought it would be easiest to get community approval if the boundaries of the Historical District are reasonable and of true historical significance. These are also probably the parts of the Highlands where homeowners would actually desire that their properties are protected in this manner.

Area Council Boundaries Update

A brief discussion took place updating the status of the campaign to complete expanding and refining the boundaries of the NHNAC. It was agreed that those who volunteered to conduct the door-to-door survey in the expanded portions of Newton Highlands would regroup and gather the necessary number of signatures from affected homeowners so that a final boundary plan could be submitted to the Board of Aldermen for approval.

Zervas School Working Group

Srdj and Steve presented a comprehensive briefing paper on the proposed "Plan B" Site Plan for an Expanded Zervas Elementary School" that has been put together over the past several months by members of NHNAC's Zervas Working Group, (ZWB). Srdj and Steve pointed out that our Plan B retains the same

building size, classrooms and educational program as the most recent plans from the Zervas Building Committee (ZBC), referred to in several quarters as Plan A.

According to the Zervas Working Group's paper, Plan B accomplishes several important design goals. These include:

- There is no need to take private property, thus saving the City more than \$2.4 million
- Residential streetscape on Beacon Street would be retained
- 45 mature trees would be preserved that would otherwise be paved over
- Functional open space on the site is increased by a modest amount
- Reserved gardens and open space areas are doubled
- Outdoor classroom space is maintained at similar size to current plans
- Entrance plaza faces Beethoven and the play areas, rather than a parking lot

Associated benefits of Plan B as perceived by the Zervas Working Group are also articulated in this Briefing Paper and Plan outline. It incorporates desired educational programs, reduces the adverse effects of school expansion on the community and makes Zervas what it should be, "The Jewel of the Community". Additionally:

- Pedestrian safety is improved
- More open space is created with the expansion of gardens, playing fields and gathering space
- The entrance is oriented to the majority of those who walk from the community

Plan B includes the following positive features:

- Places parking in the rear of the building rather than in the front
- Makes all pavement pervious to reduce run-off into wetlands and other adjacent areas
- Reverses the "L" design of the building to allow contiguous open space and more open space overall
- Removes the need to widen Beethoven producing a calming effect on motor vehicle travel passing through a dedicated blue Zone Lane
- Shifts the rear-wing of the building away from the protected wetlands at Cold Spring Park, and shifts the entire property toward Beacon Street

Srdj and Steve noted that one of the complaints against Plan B is that it would reduce the number of parking spaces for teachers and support staff by eliminating 5 of the spaces provided for in the City's so-called Plan A. This, they argued, is way off the mark in real terms because Plan B still provides more on-site parking per teacher than all but two of the other elementary schools and more on-site parking per capita than the new Angier School will provide. The main point is that there would be more than adequate parking for all teachers with Plan B and that any remaining needs could be supplemented by 150 available on-street parking spaces near the school.

Finally, the Briefing Paper and Plan included a lengthy set of appendices including a Plan B Site Plan, floor plans and the most recent site plan (Plan A) to facilitate a ready comparison between that Plan and Plan B. Also included in the appendices was an Analysis of Parking at Newton Elementary Schools prepared by the NHNAC and a Survey of Trees on Abutting Properties to be acquired for Parking Lots.

An extended discussion took place on the proposed Plan B and related items.

Steve briefed the Council on the often contentious meeting of a Committee of the Whole of the Board of Aldermen the previous Monday when the City formally put forward its proposal to purchase 3 lots adjacent to Zervas in order to construct a parking lot for more than 75 vehicles for school personnel. According to Steve there was much discussion pro and con, but several areas of concern were raised by various aldermen during the proceedings along with requests that the vote be delayed until several questions about these concerns were addressed by the City. According to Steve, the City had hoped to have a vote that evening, but there were enough doubts over various issues that resulted in a vote of 11 for purchasing the property and 12 abstentions, so the measure was sent back to the Finance Committee for further consideration. The measure is scheduled to be taken up once again at the Board's next regularly scheduled meeting on September 15th.

Srdj stated that he was "incredulous" that the City claimed that the public was involved in the planning process when, according to Srdj, there was no debate allowed regarding alternate school sites or final projected school capacity, based on what he and others observed during their attendance at several of these planning sessions.

Rodney stated that he was "perplexed" and "bothered" that the City would ask for funding for the expanded parking lot before the matter of Plan A, Plan B, or whatever other Plan ultimately comes forward had been fully decided. "You shouldn't spend money before you know whether you will need it".

Bob and others argued that the City should allow for an open and meaningful debate on all the Plans before moving forward with placing anything in “cement” or embarking on any purchase associated with the Zervas renovation.

Patrick Maher from Winslow Road has been a long time participant and observer of the Newton Schools and the many open spaces and recreational areas in the Highlands and Waban. He argued that both Plan A and Plan B are problematic because there simply isn’t enough space at Zervas to adequately handle 490 students, teachers and other support staff. He also felt we should be asking other questions related to an enlarged Zervas such as: “Do parents who currently send their kids to Mason Rice really want them transferred to Zervas?”

Srdj requested that the NHNAC Zervas Working Group be endorsed by the NHNAC to continue working on the Plan B site plan and engaging with aldermen and other members of the community. That request was approved by the majority members present of the NHNAC.

Transportation and Transit Update

Srdj reported that the Mayor is eager to encourage community participation in an MBTA-run meeting in support of the handicapped improvements at the Newton Highlands MBTA station. The Mayor believes we need a good turnout at such a meeting to show the community’s support for these upgrades and he is counting on our Area Council to generate a good turnout. Srdj told the Mayor we would do everything possible to ensure a good turnout and would do so just as soon as the Mayor’s office firmed up a date and time when the meeting will take place. Then we can go about picking a suitable location and organizing the other logistics needed to make this event a total success.

There were no further comments on Adam Peller’s proposal at August’s meeting for placing an island in the median of Centre Street on the wide open stretch near Allerton as a traffic calming measure. However, the City transportation staff have indicated that a curb extension will be built at this location in the Fall.

Barbara and Rodney remain concerned about the hazards for pedestrians at Hyde and Centre streets and discussed various options for slowing down traffic there.

Bob reported that he saw a survey team from the City taking notes and measurements at the intersection of Allerton and Centre streets.

Summer Concert Series

John reported that the Summer Concert Series will end on September 6th. This season has been a smashing success. Thousands of people have attended a total of 36 events. Attendance has been up and down depending on what's being presented, but people are now coming from every part of Newton and from outside the City as well. This is a big commitment by our corporate sponsors and we owe them a big debt of gratitude for all they have done to make these events possible. Bob stated that something like this would have been unthinkable in the Newton Highlands he grew up in. Many thanks all around to John from every member of the Council present this evening.

Electronic Community Engagement

Steve reported that he's working with Myles Fidelman from the Newtonville Neighborhood Area Council on the best ways to upgrade our ability to engage the people of Newton Highlands through electronic media. They are looking at the advantages and disadvantages of media like Facebook, Next Door.com, List- Server etc. Steve reported that his attempts to work with Survey Monkey had not been productive and he was recommending we cancel our participation in the Program. Bob proposed that we reimburse Steve \$78.00 for what he had paid into Survey Monkey on behalf of the Area Council. The motion was seconded and approved 8-0.

Halloween Party at Hyde

Groot provided an update on our involvement in the Hyde School Halloween Program generally and the Haunted House specifically. He requested that the Council allocate \$300.00 as our contribution to the Haunted House festivities. A motion to that effect was made by Rodney and approved 8-0.

Groot also stated that volunteers would be needed for the Sunday before Halloween (October 26th). Several members of the Council stated they would be glad to help.

Soup Social in January

Groot and Barbara stated that we need to have a three way meeting involving the Area Council, the merchants of Newton and the Hyde Center to begin planning for this event. Barbara stated that it is a lot of work to organize this event and wondered how engaged the community is with this event. She's not certain this is worth all of this effort.

Other Items

According to Parks & Recreation, the City is planning to install the hose system At Officer English Garden sometime in the Spring.

The Annual "Paddles and Pumpkins" celebration at Crystal Lake will be held on Sunday, September 28. All are welcome to attend.

A request was made to let the City know it's time to remove the construction sign near the intersection of Woodward and Lincoln.

Groot stated that the Brookline Bank is eager to put out benches outside their building on Walnut Street, but the City has been slow to acknowledge or act on this proposal.

New Arts at 82 Lincoln Street has a program scheduled in October to reach out to people with disabilities who are interested in becoming involved in Newton's vibrant arts scene.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council