

## Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, February 7, 2013

Attending: Rodney Barker, Bob Burke, Paul Gilbert, Peter Meyer, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Greg Reibman

Ex Officio Aldermen: John Rice and Dick Blazer

### **Guests:**

#### 1. Walnut Street Bridge

Suzanne and Howard Berwind, Highlands Residents, 40 Chester Street  
Justine Cohen, Non-Profit Public Service Sign Coordinator  
Scott Cooper, Highlands Resident, 1 Bowdoin Street  
Eunice Feller, Bread and Chocolates  
Linda Gulman, Indulge  
Diane Khalaj, Walnut Foods  
Moe Khalaj, Walnut Foods  
Marcia Kohl, Marcia & Bea Antiques  
Ralph Kohl, Marcia & Bea Antiques  
Marc McGerry, Highlands Resident, 83 Carver Road  
John Meyer, Highlands Resident  
Karl O'Hara, O'Hara's Food and Spirits  
John O'Hara, O'Hara's Food and Spirits  
John Sanders, Green Planet Kids  
Annabelle Ship, Green Planet Kids

#### 2 Other Guests

Rena Getz, Waban Neighborhood Area Council  
Ron Mauri, Newton Parking & Residential Development  
Robert Solomon, MBTA Accessibility Issues

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Srdj called the meeting to order at 7:40 after determining that a quorum was present. Srdj presented the January minutes that were prepared by Groot because of Bob's absence. These were approved unanimously.

In Groot's absence, Srdj presented the Treasurer's Report. There was no change from January's report. As of January 26, 2013, there was \$7,418.20 in our checking account and \$15.00 remaining from cash donations. We paid Paul Gilbert \$176.42 for ice rink supplies, but we still owe \$300.00 to Parks and Recreation for the Haunted House. John announced that there are still some ice rink related payments outstanding for snow removal and maintenance.

### **1. Ken Leonetti's Resignation**

Srdj announced that he had received a letter of resignation from Ken Leonetti. Ken cited business demands and extended time away from Newton as constraints on what he is able to do for the Council. Ken's resignation opens up a vacancy on the Council and Srdj pledged an open and well publicized process to recruit a strong replacement as soon as possible. A motion to add a replacement member was approved unanimously.

### **2. Issues Related to Signs on the Walnut Street MBTA Bridge.**

The meeting turned to a controversy centered around the guidelines established by the Council at its December meeting for the orderly placement and removal of signs on the Walnut Street Bridge. The immediate catalyst was the surreptitious removal of signs that had been placed on the bridge by 3 Village merchants to promote their business related activities.

This incident coupled with the Council's guidelines dividing placement of signs between Village businesses and nonprofits were catalysts that drew several merchants to this meeting. Many merchants felt that the Council's guidelines were unfair to local businesses because they set arbitrary time limits on individual signs and unreasonable restrictions on what businesses could post. Most of the business representatives in attendance told the Council they weren't aware that the new Guidelines existed. The merchants claimed that all they really wanted was a reasonable allotment of space on the bridge for village businesses to promote their services in whatever way they chose.

A frank and extended conversation took place on these items and related concerns. Several members of the Council acknowledged that more could have been done to directly involve the merchants in developing, promulgating and communicating the Guidelines.

However, several Council members were passionate in arguing that the Guidelines were not directed against the merchants or other business interests in the Village. They were intended solely to bring some order, fairness and harmony to business interests, Village nonprofits and broader community endeavors.

Peter Meyer and Rodney Barker pointed out that the number one objective of the Area Council since its inception in the 1970's has been to promote and support the retention of vibrant and healthy businesses in the Village, and that the Council is well aware of just how much the merchants have done over the years to support community activities in the Highlands. John noted that Peter had been asked to serve as an unofficial arbiter to resolve future conflicts involving sign placement specifically because he has been both a Council member and a thoroughly involved and widely trusted business owner in the Highlands.

As the discussion progressed, several areas of agreement were identified, and the discussion turned to positive ways of ensuring the continuation of full trust among the merchants, the Council and by all interests that have a stake in the orderly placement of signs on the bridge.

Srdj proposed that a 6 member committee be formed (3 from the Council and 3 that Annabelle would recruit from the merchant community) be organized to fashion revised guidelines for the placement of signs on the bridge. The motion was approved unanimously by the 6 Council members present.

### **3. Expanding the Council's Service Area into Winchester Street Neighborhoods**

Srdj distributed a copy of a letter from Interim Election Commission Secretary Peter Koutoujian to City Clerk David Olson. The letter announced that 164 certified voter signatures from the Winchester Street neighborhood were collected in support of expanding the Area Council into this part of Newton Highlands. It will be recalled that several residents on and adjacent to Winchester Street approached the Council several months back to request inclusion. The 164 collected signatures exceed the requirement that 20% of all registered voters in the proposed area support an expansion.

The Program and Services Committee of the Board of Aldermen will hold a hearing on Thursday, February 20<sup>th</sup> to consider the expansion. Srdj thanked all members of the Council and the several residents from the Winchester Neighborhood who helped collect the required signatures.

#### **4. Cold Springs Dog Park Issues (9th Installment)**

Rodney reported that Newton Parks & Recreation has made an offer to install what they term a “natural fence” (i.e. high shrubs, trees etc.) at strategically located areas of Cold Springs Park. Hopefully, this will help to insure a reasonable degree of separation between dogs and their owners and other people who use this part of the Park for other recreational purposes.

Rodney stated that he had doubts about how effective this would be in separating animals from humans, but that we should endorse it simply to give it a chance since the City did not seem receptive to a fenced in area for dogs at this point in time. No formal vote was taken, but no objections were voiced by Council members or those in attendance.

#### **5. Bicycle Connection from Upper Falls to Newton Highlands**

Srdj announced that Jerry Reilly and Adam Peller have placed a hold on their plan for a letter writing and outreach campaign to request that Mass DOT consider a bicycle link connecting Upper Falls and Newton Highlands that would be part of the State’s Needham Street project. They did so because they found that the City has already been making substantial progress engaging Mass DOT in several amenities and improvements along the Needham Street Corridor. So Jerry and Adam have withdrawn plans to collect letters and endorsement, but they remain fully committed to the bicycle link or some acceptable variable.

#### **6. Draft Parking Plan Business Survey**

Srdj distributed copies of a 2 part Draft Parking Survey of Highlands businesses and merchants. It seeks to ascertain the needs of local businesses for on and off street parking and how responsive they would be to the Council’s proposal to dedicate 150 new parking spaces through a fee-based parking permit system for businesses and commuters on local streets within a 5 minute walking distance to the Village Center. Srdj and Peter encouraged all merchants at the meeting to complete the survey and get it back to the Council as soon as possible.

## **7. Project Envisioning Newton Highlands**

Srdj distributed copies of an outline that described broad criteria for initiating a comprehensive inventory of Newton Highlands in terms of what we hope it might look like in the future, parts of the Village that need improvement and what can reasonably be done to increase opportunities for housing, transportation, work and recreation. Srdj stated that he hoped all Council members would examine and comment on the draft.

## **9. Center Street Crossing at Allerton Road**

Transportation Commissioner Bill Paille will be present at our April meeting to discuss the City's plan for improving pedestrian safety at this intersection.

## **10. Winter Farmer's Market Update**

John gave an update on the first two months of the Winter Farmer's Market. This is drawing about half the number of shoppers that regularly came to last year's Summer Farmers Market at Cold Springs Park. Most out of town merchants have been pleased with the setup although two have dropped out because of the long distances they had to travel from their place of business to Newton. Peter plans a follow up inquiry with local merchants after the Winter Market closes to determine if their businesses suffered as a result of competition from the Tuesday event.

## **11. MBTA Accessibility Update**

In Robert Solomon's absence, Srdj reported that he and Robert attended an MBTA Open Meeting at the Copley Square. Among other items, T Officials and citizens discussed the T's progress in building its handicapped accessibility program in terms of priorities, performance, building practices and other relevant factors. Bob has been working with Bill McClellan of the T to put in place an accelerated training program to improve the time it takes to put wheelchairs on MBTA Trolleys and buses. This has already produced significant progress in cutting down the time it takes to lift a wheelchair onto trolleys from close to half an hour to about 5 minutes.

## **12. Update on Nonconforming Lot Zoning**

Ron Mauri provided an update on two cases of nonconforming lot zoning on substandard lots that are coming to a head in the Highlands. The first involves a stop work order that has temporarily halted construction of a large house at the top of Upland Avenue. The issue was the developer's decision to remove many trees and put up large concrete blocks on the edge of the property as retaining walls. Several neighbors were concerned about the potential for water and drainage damage to their homes and property from a denuded hillside and improperly placed concrete retaining walls. The neighbors have appealed the building permit to the Zoning Board of Appeals and a hearing will take place on February 26<sup>th</sup>. An Appeals Court ruling on the Bradford Road substandard lot is still pending.

## **13. Annual Community Meeting**

The date for our annual meeting with the Highlands community has been set for Thursday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, from 7-9 PM at the Women's Club. Barbara is handling planning arrangements. John is organizing the mailing of post cards that will announce the meeting along with a request that as many residents as possible provide their email address so we can send them electronic newsletters and save on printing and mailing expenses. Council members were again asked by Srdj to consider issues and topics for presentation.

## **14. Officer English Garden**

John reported that he and Paul are still working on a shared cost agreement for watering the Officer English Garden. This would involve setting up a double meter between the City and an adjacent business that is already metered. Rodney reported that Barbara Balasa wants a firm commitment that a reliable source of water will be available before she will agree to help design or plan the new garden this coming spring.

## **15. Update on Ice Skating Rink**

The skating rink has been well patronized, but the frequent dustings of snow followed by repeated thaws have made it an "up and down" season. Tomorrow's major blizzard will almost certainly bring the season to a close. The time, effort and expense of removing 2 feet of snow from the rink has to be measured against the fact that we will be nearing the second half of February when the higher sun and warmer temperatures will make consistent freezing of the ice almost impossible.

### **16. New Businesses in the Highlands**

The Rox Diner is scheduled to move into the old Baker's Best storefront sometime in late May and a vegan restaurant will be moving into the Walnut Street location formerly occupied by Christina's.

### **17. Winter Soup Social**

The Winter Soup Social drew a smaller crowd than the previous two events, probably because of local activities related to the Martin Luther King holiday and the Presidential inauguration.

### **18. Village Day and Silent Auction**

Peter has agreed to head up the Silent Auction at this year's Village Day. His goal is to get 150 businesses in Newton and elsewhere to contribute an item worth at least \$25.00 to be auctioned off. Merchants who donate will be entered into a Super Pool for a prize that might include something like a free large ad in the Boston Globe.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:50 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,  
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council