

## **Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, March 7, 2013**

Attending: Rodney Barker, Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Paul Gilbert, Groot Gregory, Peter Meyer, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Greg Reibman  
Ex Officio Aldermen: John Rice and Dick Blazer

### **Guests:**

Howard Berwind, Highlands Residents, 40 Chester Street  
Scott Cooper, Highlands Resident, 1 Bowdoin Street  
Mildred Hutchinson, 92 Lincoln Street  
Ron Mauri, Newton Parking & Residential Development  
Robert Solomon, MBTA Accessibility Issues  
Chris Steele, Newton Economic Development Commission  
Brian Yates, Alderman-at-large Ward 5

---

Srdj called the meeting to order at 7:40 after determining that a quorum was present. Bob presented the minutes from February's meeting that were unanimously approved as written.

Groot then presented the Treasurer's Report. There was no change from February's report. As of February 22, 2013 there was \$7,418.20 in our checking account and \$15.00 remaining from cash donations.

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

Discussion continued on ways to resolve the continuing controversy over the posting of signs on the Walnut Street Bridge. A brief discussion took place on a letter that had been sent via email to the Council from an unnamed source purporting to be from the Newton Highlands Village Merchant Coalition. This letter was highly critical of the Council's guidelines for posting signs on the bridge, and charged that Council actions were detrimental to the interests of businesses in the Village.

Several Council members addressed the major points in the Coalition's letter by restating specific policies and concrete actions the Council has taken to support business interests in the Village.

Rodney again argued that supporting village businesses has been a top priority for the Council since it was formed in 1974. In fact, it was the major reason the Council was established in the first place. He felt certain that every current member recognized and prioritized this mission.

Srdj noted that one of the major things he promised when elected President of the council was to work with the Village businesses to promote both economic and community vitality in the Village. Peter was asked to serve as the Council's Village Business Liaison specifically because he owned a business here and has had close ties with several other business owners in the Village.

Srdj noted that the Council has been active on several efforts that directly support Village businesses. We provided testimony to Committees of the Board of Aldermen in support of a permit O'Hara's was seeking to enlarge and enhance its seating and parking capacity and to other businesses seeking permits to relocate to the Highlands or expand their operations here. We are also actively involved in efforts to improve parking access in the Village, in working with the City to consider other transportation and zoning policies that will result in positive energy and growth of our villages, and targeting investments that will help businesses and the entire community.

A history of the sign controversy was briefly discussed. Back in October 2012, we learned of a developing dispute regarding signs on the bridge. The Council agreed to serve as a mediator to try to help resolve these problems with Peter volunteering to serve as an intermediary when and if future disputes arose.

John again reiterated that the Council's involvement in overseeing the placement of signs on the bridge was advisory in nature and based wholly on the voluntary cooperation of the various parties. He restated that the Council lacks any jurisdictional, legal or disciplinary powers to adjudicate or regulate this issue. The MBTA owns the Bridge and whatever is posted there is subject to their discretion. Any recommendation by the Council would require the voluntary consent and collaboration of all interested group or individuals. Unfortunately, our recommendations have not achieved the full satisfaction of every business in the Village.

Peter expressed an opinion that not all of the businesses in the Village have been involved in the controversy and perhaps have no specific opinion on this matter. Bob Burke and Robert Solomon stated that they reached the same conclusion as Peter from their informal talks with several business owners. Nevertheless, all Council members thought it was imperative that the NHNAC work diligently to increase trust and amicability between the Council and with every Highlands business.

To that end, Groot proposed two measures:

1. Move that the Council publicly support the merchants' in posting signs on the left 12 feet of the East Fence of the MBTA bridge under any guidelines that the merchants may choose to establish for themselves. Any comments regarding sign placement on that section of the bridge that is brought to the attention of the Area Council will be forwarded to a member of the Merchants Coalition with no action needed on the part of the Area Council.
2. Move that the Council provide a donation of \$500.00 to the Merchants Coalition to be used for any activities they deem useful to the economic vitality of the neighborhood.

Motion 1 was approved unanimously while Motion 2 was approved 5-0 with two abstentions. The donation to the Merchants Coalition will take place once such entity has been formally incorporated.

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

Srdj and Peter distributed the results of the 2 part Draft Parking Survey of Highlands businesses and merchants that were discussed at last month's meeting. This 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 5-10 minute walking distance to the Village Center.

The survey was distributed to 40 businesses and half of them have already responded.

Part 1 of the Survey looked at problems with parking availability in the Village. The results showed that a large majority of respondents are concerned about the availability of parking for both their employees and customers. Half believe that inadequate parking is losing them customers, particularly during peak shopping periods of the day.

Part 2 asked for opinions about the Council's draft proposals to improve parking access in the Highlands. There was overwhelming support for the proposal to create 150 new dedicated parking spaces for businesses and commuters on local streets, but only mixed or varying support for specifics related to a fee-based parking permit system.

A discussion on the findings ensued. There was a general consensus that this was a valuable first step to engaging the merchants in a discussion about viable parking options and that it provided a base for an on-going dialogue with the merchants and City officials.

### **3. Add A Lane Briefing by Chris Steele**

Chris Steele updated the Council on the impacts of the 128 Add A Lane on traffic in Newton generally and more specifically on roadways that run through Newton Highlands. This section of the Add A Lane project will be constructed along the portion of Route 128 between Dedham and Route 9. Chris distributed maps that provided a detailed overview of Add A Lane changes to the ramp system at the intersection of Route 128 and Route 9 as some ramps are removed and others are relocated.

The major concern that Chris wanted to bring the Council's attention was the impact of these changes on traffic along Route 9 and on side streets leading off it including Woodward and Elliott streets and Quinnobequin Road. He became familiar with these concerns while working with residents to form the Waban Neighborhood Area Council and from his work with area businesses as Chairman of the Economic Development Commission.

Srdj noted that the major problem involves what effects all of this will have on traffic lights along Route 9. The State has designed a very impressive reconstruction at the 128/9 intersection itself, but has not adequately addressed mitigation for the project's impact on traffic in streets and neighborhoods along the Route 9 corridor. The State has promised to address these issues before construction is completed, but both Chris and Srdj stressed the importance of the Council joining other groups in Newton to make certain the State does adequately address the impacts here.

#### **4. Non-Conforming Lot Briefing by Brian Yates and Ron Mauri**

Alderman Brian Yates and Ron Mauri reported on several important rulings by the State Land Court and Appeals Court, and the City's Zoning Board of Appeals addressing the legality of constructing new dwellings on certain substandard lots in the Highlands and elsewhere in Newton. First came a ruling by the State Land Appeals Court that stated Newton zoning prohibits the issuing of a permit to build a new dwelling on a vacant sub-standard side yard lot on Bradford Street next to the Mauri's home. The City's Zoning Board of Appeals subsequently revoked permits for the construction of two houses on Goddard Street that were already under construction. The Goddard Street decision now goes to the Board of Alderman for final disposal.

Brian and Ron were not particularly surprised by these two decisions. They are also reasonably confident the full Board will ultimately concur with both decisions since they are the logical culmination of a hard and long fought effort that has been led by Brian in the Board of Aldermen to bring the City's interpretation of its zoning codes into full conformity with what he emphatically concluded was explicitly the intent of the Board of Aldermen in 2001 when they addressed this small lot issue. According to Brian, these two decisions could produce a "profound" and "salutary" effect on homeowners bordering on or adjacent to 200 or so other substandard lots that would now be protected from overdevelopment. Even so, there will remain unresolved problems on this issue because of several improper building permits that have already been issued.

#### **5. MBTA Accessibility Update**

Robert Solomon provided an update on MBTA Accessibility issues that built on the presentation from Srdj in February. Robert continues to work with Bill McClellan of the T on an accelerated training program to improve the time it takes to put wheelchairs on MBTA Trolleys and buses. He verified that this initiative 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.

Robert also stated that the T is now conducting spot checks on their station loading platforms to make certain that all drivers are properly trained to operate the wheel chair lifts and otherwise assist handicapped T patrons. Finally, Robert announced that he is developing an article for the Tab describing the trials and difficulties of safely maneuvering a wheelchair in the City's crosswalks. He expects his article will be published in the very near future.

## **6. Community Meeting Rescheduled to May**

Barbara announced that the Community Meeting at the Women's Club has been rescheduled from March 21<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday in May. A prospective agenda will be presented at our April meeting.

## **7. 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.

## **8. Update on Project Envisioning Newton Highlands**

Time constraints allowed for only a very brief update on the project for Envisioning the future of Newton Highlands. Srdj suggested we tackle this in part with definable and specific projects like Crystal Lake Bathhouse, Howard Whitmore Field, the Needham Street Corridor and the Officer English Garden.

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

John reported on new developments that will impact Village Day and the Silent Auction. The company that used to provide the children's rides and games is no longer able to do business at Village Day, so we will have to come up with something to take its place. Peter will be working on lining up the people and business commitments for the Silent Auction. More at next month's meeting.

## **10. Winter Farmers' Market Update**

John reported that about 300 people are now coming to Tuesday's Farmers' Market at the Hyde Center and the operation is running very smoothly

## **13. Update on Skating Rink**

The skating rink was well patronized even though we had less than 4 weeks of skating the entire season. February's 30 inch storm effectively ended the season. There was no way all this snow could be removed and it was futile to even try to do so.

John will have the final figures on costs at the April meeting. He and several other Council members commended Paul Gilbert for the "Yeoman's Work" he did to make this all happen under very adverse weather conditions.

### **13. Hyde Bandstand**

Commodore Construction is on target to complete the bandstand by Village Day. Total cost about \$15,000. 10-12 musical groups are ready to perform for the summer season.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:10 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,  
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council