

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Meeting Minutes, July 11, 2013

Attending: Rodney Barker, Bob Burke, Groot Gregory, Peter Meyer, Srdj Nedeljkovic, Robert Solomon

Ex Officio Aldermen: John Rice and Dick Blazer

Guests:

Newton Government:

James Freas, Chief Planner, Long Range Planning
David Koses, Transportation Planning Coordinator
Ron Mauri, Newton Parking & Residential Development
Adam Peller, Newton Transportation Advisory Group, (TAG)
Amanda Stout, Senior Economic Development Planner
Brian Yates, Alderman at Large, Ward 5

Other Participants:

Ruth Molta Cohn, Observer from Newtonville
Jacqueline Freeman, Observer from Newtonville
Mildred Hutchinson, Newton Highlands Community Development Corp.
Michael Kanellias, Winchester Street
Wayne Koch, Observer from Newtonville
Bill Renke, Newton Lower Falls Improvement Association
Helen Stroat, Observer from Newtonville
Stephen Tessone, Observer from Newtonville

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

Groot then presented The Treasurer's Report. As of June 24, 2013, there was \$5916.23 in our checking account. During the month, \$501.97 was allocated to pay for 2013 Village Day T shirts. No other Village Day transactions occurred during the month.

1. State Proposal for Rebuilding Needham Street

James Freas, Amanda Stout and David Koses from the Newton Planning Department presented a briefing titled “Envisioning Needham Street” which comprised the City’s current mid-range plan for rebuilding and enhancing the Needham Street Corridor. This project is scheduled to be completed on or about the year 2020.

This was essentially the same public briefing the Planning Department gave to a citywide audience in June. It was done in part as a courtesy to Council members because that citywide public briefing took place on the same date and time as our June meeting, and in order to obtain feedback and input from the NHNAC. Here are the major items from the presentation.

(A) Reconstructing Needham Street presents several challenges:

- Serious traffic congestion caused by heavy “pass through” travel going to and from 128, the Mass Pike and all parts of Needham and Newton
- Corridor isolation which means there are no exits to other parts of Newton between the end of Center Street and the turnoffs to Oak and Christina,
- Unattractive and dangerous streetscapes with poor sidewalks and pedestrian crossings, sterile and unattractive store fronts and the almost total absence of trees, shrubs, gardens and other vegetation.

(B) But strong assets as well:

- Rich natural resources and systems are nearby including the Charles River, the soon to be constructed Upper Falls Greenway, other walking and bike trails, the historic Hemlock Gorge reservation and Newton Upper Falls.
- The best remaining development opportunities for business in Newton. There is already a good balance of old and new businesses and several new businesses are moving onto the street or proposing to do so in the near future.

(C) This “Vision Plan” was prepared for the City by MIT students and includes inputs from other existing plans, schemes and studies including:

- The City’s Comprehensive Plan and the Newton Outdoor Recreation Plan
- The results of several community workshops and business surveys
- The plan and proposal for light rail from Newton Highlands to Needham Heights along the abandoned railroad line where the soon to be constructed Upper Falls Greenway will be located.

(D) Major Elements of the Redesign Proposal that are under consideration

- Relatively large manufacturing and commercial companies in the roadway south of abandoned railroad tracks that cross the roadway and a pedestrian friendly mix of smaller businesses and residential housing in the northern half.
- One lane each way for automobiles with a two-way left turn lane, except for only 3 lanes over the bridge at the Charles River.
- Bicycle Lanes that connect to Needham and Newton, the Upper Falls Greenway, and adjacent bike and pedestrian trails in Needham
- Consolidation of some curb cuts into and out of existing businesses
- New sidewalks and improved pedestrian crossings
- A full realignment of Oak and Christina streets
- Improved auto, bike and pedestrian access to businesses along the corridor
- Possible construction of a new and safe roundabout where Dedham and Needham Streets intersect at Winchester Street.
- The planting of berm trees, shrubs and other vegetation along the entire corridor

(E) Proposed Development Principles

- Major intersection improvements
- The promotion of mixed use development
- A cohesive and attractive place for pedestrians
- A safe, comfortable and efficient roadway and corridor for all modes of travel
- Strong links to nearby natural resources and open spaces
- Strong integration of the entire corridor with adjacent streets and surrounding neighborhoods

(F) The City wants to hear from us and will initiate the following public involvement activities to help us participate.

- Community meetings
- Workshops geared to the entire planning process for the corridor
- Public hearings on the formal corridor design project
- Meetings on the Proposed Master Plan

(G) Srdj and several other council members thanked the Planning Department members for the quality and thoroughness of this presentation. An extended and frank discussion then took place on various elements of what had been presented.

-----Srdj hoped that future light rail between Newton Highlands and Needham Heights would remain a guiding and complementary principle of the Needham Corridor plan because the rail right of way along the old rail bed is 80 feet wide, but only 50 feet of that would be required for the light rail itself. That would still leave 30 feet for bike and trail travel. Enhancing transportation alternatives by implementing the light rail extension would serve thousands of potential travelers in the corridor and would allow for new development to take a transit and pedestrian oriented form. Srdj pointed out that significant new economic growth in the corridor would be difficult to accommodate unless the rail extension is an integral part of the mid and long range plan.

-----Alderman Brian Yates stated he was pleased that attention was being given to efforts that would integrate the upgraded roadway with the Upper Falls community that has been isolated in part by what Needham Street has become. Realigning Oak and Christina Streets should be a big plus for promoting integration and multi modal travel. Alderman Yates also noted that several of the furniture and boutique businesses that seemed interested in locating along Needham Street would likely be complementary in terms of the kinds of shoppers who might also want to frequent nearby antique, boutique and other specialty stores that are already located in Upper Falls. These initiatives along with the new Upper Falls Greenway are very positive developments.

-----an extended discussion took place when several members questioned the feasibility and safety of a roundabout as one option under consideration at the intersection of Center, Winchester and Needham Streets. Robert questioned how safe this roundabout intersection would be for motorists, pedestrians and disabled people in wheelchairs. Others also questioned why the City is advocating for a roundabout here rotaries along some other roadways are associated with a high number of accidents that occur from vehicles approaching and inside these rotaries.

----Adam Peller from the Transportation Advisory Group stated that he supports the Planning Department's efforts to negotiate better bicycle/pedestrian accommodations along Winchester to the Route 9 bridge that would include a cycle track. He added, however, that he has a few concerns. One involved issues pertaining to the 3 lane configuration over the Charles River Bridge. The third lane is currently proposed to go out towards Needham, but Needham wants it to go in the opposite direction, into Newton. Adam also stated that Mass DOT's consulting engineers cited a flawed 2000 CTPS study with add-a-lane projections as the basis for their design. Adam hopes that Newton will demand a more comprehensive study of regional traffic patterns after the add-a-lane project. The Newton Planning members present stated that there is a planned project in the fall to do this. Adam fears that the New Kendrick Street exit will be the preferred route to Metro Boston if Needham Street and the Route 9 intersection become backed up. Newton neighborhoods would likely suffer as a result. Compounding this, according to Adam, is the fact that add-a-lane is scheduled to happen in a few years, prior to the Needham Street project.

All three members from the Planning Department acknowledged that this is a genuine concern, but the City feels that the proposed roundabout is a totally

revamped and much improved design from traditional rotaries in Massachusetts. The City argues that there will be several built in features to make them much

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safer for pedestrians and motorists alike and to improve traffic and pedestrian flow in all directions. In any event, no firm decision has yet been made on what will go there.

At the end of the discussion, some attendees voiced uncertainty about the clarity of how all of this project would function and tie together. There was also concern that the space allocated for motor vehicles, bicycles and other amenities would preclude space to construct the kind of wide tree lined sidewalks that would actually attract pedestrians to walk the length of the roadway. The long time it would take to complete the entire project (2020 or beyond) also was disappointing to some attendees.

But there was a general consensus that the Council wanted to remain fully engaged as this progresses so that the end product serves to enhance the development of Newton Highlands and other villages affected by what happens along the Needham Street Corridor.

2. Village Day and Silent Auction

Peter and John reported that both Village Day and the Silent Auction were “tremendously successful.” 85 merchants participated in the Silent Auction which brought in approximately \$3,500.00. O’Hara’s donated 10 \$25.00 gift certificates, all of which were sold for approximately the full amount.

Next year, we hope to have contributions from the new Wegman’s and several other businesses in the Chestnut Hill area. John reported that we grossed approximately \$5,000 from all Village Day activities and that \$4,000 of that was generated in excess of costs.

John noted that some Highlands residents and merchants were asking if it might be “a good idea” to move Village Day from June to another month because there seem to be so many family and public conflicts at the time of Village Day. Some were also speculating that a Saturday event might actually draw more people than on Sunday. The consensus seemed to be to keep Village Day on a Sunday in June date since any other month or day would also have problems associated with it. Almost any other time of the year conflicts with something big in Newton. It was also noted that attendance at the past two Village Days has been down a bit, but this is probably because so many other villages have similar events during the course of the year.

3. Hyde Bandstand

John reported that the dedication of the Hyde Bandstand on June 14th was “a huge success” and subsequent concerts have been well attended by enthusiastic audiences. The bandstand has simply had a very positive impact on how people react to and enjoy the music. Next year, we hope to introduce live performances of theatre and dance by middle school and college students.

4. Cold Springs Dog Park

Rodney reported that Parks and Recreation Commissioner Bob DeRubeis has decided to construct two fences at Cold Springs. These will be placed in a manner to prevent the dogs from coming into direct contact with kids playing sports or with people walking the trails. Rodney deemed it fortunate that the City has abandoned plans to plant shrubs as a barrier between dogs and people since this was “obviously deficient”. Rodney claimed that most dog owners have accepted this arrangement as satisfactory if not exactly what they would have wanted.

5. MBTA Accessibility Update and Related Items

Robert reported that a meeting has been scheduled with the Mayor to discuss a range of disability issues in Newton. Bill McClellan from the MBTA will also be present mainly to discuss the possibility of expediting the renovation of the Newton Highlands station to make it fully accessible to all types of people, but particularly to people in wheelchairs. Robert also announced that he is proposing a 5 year plan to the City to ensure that all crosswalks become much safer than they are now. Rodney stated that nothing has yet been done on promised improvements at the Center Street and Allerton Road crosswalk. Srdj will contact Bill Paille to get an update.

6. Highlands Parking Proposal

Srdj reported that a subgroup of the Transportation Advisory Group (TAG) examined our parking plan and proposal at a meeting on June 20th. As noted in the June meetings, a major concern to our Council is the need for a structure to allow revenues generated by the permit program to be available for the Highlands for specific use here. This has legal ramifications, so the TAG subcommittee was unable to decide one way or another at the June 20th meeting. TAG Chairperson Andrea Downs feels that residents should purchase a \$25.00 permit each year to

park in front of their homes when parking restrictions are in effect. Srdj believes that the revenues of the permit program for employee and commuter parking are

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adequate and that residents should receive 2 permits per household without any fees or charges. An agreement will need to be worked out, but the next step is to get together with the City's Legal Department to see if the city will support a prospective permit program that would allow revenues to return for community betterment uses. We need to know whether there are specific state laws about residential parking permit programs to know if it is feasible to proceed with this proposal.

7. Electronic Newsletter

Efforts are continuing to increase the number of residents receiving our periodic newsletters on line. We picked up new email accounts at Village Day. One thing we are looking at is holding a contest where those opting to receive the newsletter by email would be entered into a raffle for one of 5 gift certificates by various village merchants. This would be announced in the next printed newsletter.

8. Other Items

- Peter reported that the Rox Diner expects to be open by the end of July. Things do look as though they are nearing completion.
- John reported that it will be difficult to bring a water supply for underground sprinklers to the Officer English garden because the garden sits on top of an MBTA bridge. However, he will explore the option of placing sprinklers that can be connected to a hose which will provide water from one of the adjacent businesses. At least that way, the garden will have a simpler way of being watered. Council members endorsed this effort and gave John support to continue to pursue this new option.
- John reported that O'Hara's has decided not to do bump outs for an outdoor café. The costs are simply too steep, estimated at about \$25,000 for about 5 seats.
- Srdj reported that nomination papers must be turned in the last day of July. He reported that Paul Gilbert and Greg Reibman will not be running for another term because of a tight work schedule and other commitments. Paul will still be available to help with specific projects, such as the ice skating rink. Peter Meyer is uncertain about his intentions, but Ron Mauri

has taken out papers and intends to run. All other incumbents seem ready to run for another term.

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- John stated that serious discussion is underway about some kind of holiday party with members of all the other area councils.
- Groot reported that Annabelle wants our support for some upcoming projects by the Highlands Business Coalition.
- John reported that National Grid is replacing gas lines between Bowdoin and Hartford streets. This should take about a month to complete.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:50 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Bob Burke, Secretary,
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council