

NEWTONVILLE AREA COUNCIL MINUTES DECEMBER 12, 2019

NAC Members Present: Peter Bruce, Martina Jackson, Susan Reisler, Tarik Lucas, Dana D'Agostino, Marc Kaufman, Colleen Minaker, and Helene Sroat. Ward 2 Councilor Emily Norton was also present.

Public Attendees: Kartikey Trivedi, Jessica Archer.

Review and Approval of Minutes: November minutes were approved by unanimous vote.

Washington Street Vision Plan: Peter Bruce led a discussion on the Washington Street Vision Plan. First, the group discussed what they thought about the new revisions by the Zoning and Planning Committee and Planning Department. Much of the discussion was about building heights. It was appreciated that the largest allowable heights had been dropped in recent drafts from 10 to 6 stories, and that there would be varied heights along the skyline. But, concern was expressed that "medium heights" in the Plan were considered to range from 3 to 6 stories, since public opinion, as expressed in the NAC survey, overwhelmingly opposed more than 4 stories, and since there are no buildings currently as high as 6 stories in the area. The point was made that in a few places, exceptions might be made to allow buildings as high as 6 stories. There was a discussion about "drop-in" zoning, and then there was some clarification and discussion about the roles of the Planning and Development Department and the Zoning and Planning Committee.

It was agreed that the Peter should write a letter to City Councilors asking them to take seriously the attitudes expressed in the NAC survey and to lower the cap for "medium heights."

Martina Jackson urged that the NAC work with the Zoning and Planning Committee and try to establish a consulting/advisory role with that body. Members were amenable to seeing if that would be possible, and, if so, to experimenting with such a role.

What's Next? The current NAC members spent some time discussing what they accomplished over their tenure and what they hoped the new NAC members will continue to work on and take on as new projects. Marc Kaufman gave a detailed talk about these accomplishments and what he hopes will continue. (See attached handout). He urged that the NAC continue to monitor, with the City Council, efforts to expand and improve T service and eventually build the Purple Line. He also discussed the way bridges and columns limit the widths of tracks and the difficulties of adding a second set of tracks to allow trains to pass both ways at the same time through Newton. He seemed hopeful, however, about the prospect of bringing federal money into the process and getting beyond the T's current, restrictive plans for Newton.

Helene discussed the liaison role that the NAC has with the 28 Austin Street project and believes it will continue for about six more months. She stressed how strongly the NAC, our ward's City Councilors, and especially Jake Auchincloss, have been pushing to have Bram Way closed to create a reasonably wide plaza. An owner with an easement, however, has refused to allow it to be closed, and, at least for now, the Mayor has been unwilling to take legal action against him, so that Bram Way is now always opened and the plaza is relatively constricted.

Perhaps it will be possible to close the Way for special events or when weather is warmer and popular demand for a larger plaza increases.

The NAC, in its liaison role, will also be involved in monitoring traffic regulation in the 28 Austin Street area, and helping decide whether traffic on Bram Way should be one or two ways. It was also noted that “smart meters” will be introduced into the Austin Street lot, and that their pricing will be controlled by the Planning Department.

Helene advised that we work with the Parks and Recreation Department to plan events in the Plaza. \$20,000 was set aside in the 28 Austin St. Board Order for the NAC to use to promote cultural activities, but as Tarik pointed out, it is contingent on its being left over from other possible uses and funds.

Relatedly, we discussed the Walnut Street enhancements which should begin this spring. This will involve widening sidewalks, installing new streetlamps, benches, and planters.

28 Austin St. owes considerable money for leasing the old parking lot. Marc wanted to insure that the funds would be used for the betterment of Newtonville, as the Board Order stipulates.

New Directions: Tarik suggested we sometimes hold meetings in the Senior Center, the Washington Place community space, or other places in Newtonville, rather than in City Hall. He also suggested doing another survey.

Many people suggested improving the NAC’s social media presence and expanding its presence into new neighborhoods. Also popular was the idea of working with other area councils to help educate the public about the City’s evolving zoning proposals.

Maura suggested the NAC focus more on educating the public about how city government works and on trying to engage people more. She liked Kirill’s ideas about using social media more wisely.

Administrative Issues: Peter asked if we could put our agenda into Amy Sangiolo’s letter and all agreed that was fine. He also said he would write a letter to the City Council regarding NewCal, similar to what he had written in a NAC newsletter, and the group agreed. He discussed writing the Annual Report and Maura volunteered, as outgoing Secretary, to do that.

Final Goodbyes: The NAC had a final goodbye party for the five departing members: Maura Harrington, Marc Kaufman, Colleen Minaker, Helene Sroat and Tarik Lucas, celebrating with cake, sparkling cider, and juice for everyone.

Respectfully submitted by Maura Harrington, Secretary, and Peter Bruce, President.