



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: February 11, 2020

TIME: 6:30 pm Room 211

1. Attendance

Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

Commissioners Attending:

Joyce Plotkin (Immediate Past Chair by phone); Phil Plottel (New Chair); Jean Wood (former Secretary, new Vice Chair); Howard Barnstone; Steve Feller; Rob Finkel; Debora Jackson (new Secretary); Jack Leader; Beth Nicklas; Sarah Rahman; Matt Segneri; and Chuck Tanowitz.

Barney S. Heath
Director
Planning & Development
Devra G. Bailin
Director
Economic Development

Commissioners Absent: Jeremy Freid; Marcela Merino; and Peter Lew.

Staff Attending: Devra Bailin, Economic Development Director.

2. Approval of Minutes of January 14, 2020

On a motion made by Rob Finkel and seconded by Beth Nicklas, the Minutes of the January 14, 2020 meeting were unanimously approved.

Commissioners
Phil Plottel, Chair
Jean Wood, Vice Chair
Debora Jackson, Secretary

3. Nomination/Election of EDC Officers

Mr. Plottel turned the nomination and election process over to Ms. Bailin. After no further nominations were received for Chair, upon motion by Mr. Leader and seconded by Ms. Nicklas, Mr. Plottel was unanimously voted as Chair. After no further nominations were received for Vice Chair, upon motion by Mr. Tanowitz and seconded by Mr. Plottel, Ms. Wood was unanimously voted as Vice Chair. Volunteers for the position for Secretary were requested. After Ms. Jackson volunteered, Mr. Finkel withdrew his name. Upon motion by Mr. Leader and seconded by Ms. Nicklas, Ms. Jackson was unanimously voted as Secretary.

Howard Barnstone
Stephen Feller
Robert Finkel
Jeremy Freid
Jack Leader
Peter Kai Jung Lew
Marcela Merino
Beth Nicklas
Joyce Plotkin
Sarah Rahman
Matt Segneri
Chuck Tanowitz

4. City Updates

Northland: Ms. Bailin reminded the members that the ballot question on this project is scheduled for March 3rd. She also noted that in the materials emailed and on the table is the Ballot Campaigning Fact Sheet prepared by the Law Department to guide appointed officials in their participation in the Northland Referendum. Because the EDC has business related to the Project, members may express opinions in their personal and official capacities.

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Riverside: The special permit and site plan is expected to be heard tonight by the Land Use Committee at approximately 8:00 p.m. in the Council Chambers. Ms. Bailin explained that the focus will be the fiscal impact report and peer review thereof.

40 B Projects: Hearings regarding Dunstan East before the ZBA continue after the initial hearing on January 22nd. This project includes 243 units of rental housing (25% affordable/80% of area mean) and 12, 521 sq. ft. of ground floor retail. The initial ZBA hearing on The Residences on the Charles (15 Riverdale Avenue) was opened on February 5th. This proposal includes 204 units of rental housing, 4600 sq. ft. of retail, and 17,782 sq. ft. for office/innovation space. Ms. Bailin noted that one member of the ZBA expressed concern about using the 40B process for allowing the use of innovation space. Members asked Ms. Bailin to seek clarification from the Law Department about whether there are limits to using the 40B process for commercial/nonresidential uses; are the latter uses also excused from zoning requirements?

MassWorks Application: Ms. Bailin noted that she worked on a MassWorks grant application, which was recently submitted for design and engineering of the Greenway extension from Easy Street to Curtis Street and Pettee Square. The City should hear shortly about the grants.

Transportation Grants: The City received two transportation grants recently. One in the amount of \$250,000 is for a Wells Office shuttle, which includes the possibility of expanding operations to other areas as well. One is shared with other municipalities in the amount of \$340,000 to expand Blue Bike into Newton and other communities. (LimeBike decided not to provide service this year.)

Landmarking before the Historic Commission: Ms. Bailin noted that two of the seven properties proposed for landmarking by one of the City Councilors have been marked for hearing on February 27th; three of the seven have had reports written on them by staff and are on for hearing in March; and two of the seven were not recommended for landmarking. It should also be noted that an item was docketed by other Councilors to put a hold on landmark nominations; ZAP approved a seven-month delay during which a working group will work to update the ordinance. That hold is expected to be on the City Council Agenda in March.

5. Discussion Items

a. EDC 2020 Priorities/Role of EDC

As a starting point to this discussion, Mr. Plottel directed the members to the priorities highlighted in the draft 2019 Annual Report (which simply listed those set out in 2018 Annual Report). Mr. Plottel read Ms. Merino's comments, which had been provided in an email to Ms. Bailin. Ms. Merino noted that the mission of the EDC captured the essence of the group.

That mission, Ms. Merino, noted was to “promote and develop business and industry for the purpose of strengthening the local economy, providing jobs, and expanding the City’s tax base. The Commission promotes, assists, and encourages existing and new business, industry, and commerce in Newton and advises and makes recommendation to City officials and staff.” She opined that the EDC could add value by providing advice on how to improve the business environment for Newton in the following areas: assessing business needs/resources (i.e., talent and capital), ease of doing business (i.e., zoning, streamlining licenses), stimulating market demand (i.e., shop local), and strengthening related industry/public-private partnerships (i.e., business incubators).

Ms. Nicklas thought the priorities listed were more akin to a mission statement. They don’t really spell out what the EDC intends to accomplish. During the discussion, the members agreed that one of the priorities which should be established was to increase engagement with the Mayor and City Councilors to advocate for expanding the City’s tax base. It was also agreed that another should be to make Newton an easier place to do business by proposing/advocating changes to rules, regulations and processes.

Members noted that the EDC has been most successful in taking on discrete issues, like food trucks, reducing parking requirements for restaurants in the Centre, and in getting rid of language in the Ordinance which effectively precluded new hotels. One idea, in keeping with that history, is that the EDC could work to allow breweries (currently businesses can brew but not bottle); essentially work to remove barriers for certain types of businesses. It was also thought the EDC could do more to help businesses understand the permitting process.

Mr. Barnstone noted that there is simply not enough pressure on developers to increase the commercial side, which is important since the residential side provides very little tax benefit. It was noted by Mr. Tanowitz that the financial pressure on developers is to propose and push residential, for which demand remains high.

Upon motion by Ms. Jackson and seconded by Mr. Tanowitz, it was voted to amend the 2020 priorities in the 2019 Annual Report as discussed. The 2020 Priorities will read:

1. Increasing engagement with the Mayor and City Councilors to advocate for expanding the City’s commercial tax base.
2. Identifying a more activist role in implementing recommendations from the Economic Development Strategy including greater advocacy on economic issues and exploration of economic benefits resulting from the opening of UMass Amherst at Mount Ida.
3. Continuing to engage with commercial developers to encourage alignment with the City’s Economic Development Action Plan.
4. Advocating for the needs of businesses in the zoning redesign process.
5. Attracting life sciences companies to the City and helping to move the City to the Platinum Level of readiness, according to Mass Biotech Council standards.
6. Increasing direct interactions with the business community.

7. Making Newton an easier place to do business by proposing/advocating changes to rules, regulations and processes.

b. Meetings with Elected Officials

Mr. Plottel reported that the Mayor is planning to attend our meeting next month at 7:00. It is critical that the EDC have a clear understanding of what the members wish to discuss. Mr. Plottel outlined a possible format: introduction of members (each member would have 10-15 seconds), presentation of priorities for 2020, discussion of the Mayor's plans for economic development, and any questions the members have for the Mayor.

Ms. Wood would want to express the concern that the EDC does not have the impact or platform it should have to promote economic development. Mr. Barnstone noted that perhaps the EDC should make presentations to the City Council and its various committees. Mr. Plottel noted that, whatever we think, the key to making a difference is to establish relationships with individual Councilors. Mr. Segnari thought we should definitely ask the Mayor what her economic vision is. The suggestion was made that the EDC try to prioritize its work accordingly.

Mr. Plottel restated the possible format as follows: introductions, presentation of EDC priorities, what are the Mayor's priorities for the City economically, what is the Mayor's economic vision, what are the economic challenges to the City, and how can the EDC assist with those challenges. These should be shared with the Mayor.

c. Riverside Project: Discussion of Task Force Draft Letter

The draft letter received from the Task Force earlier today and shared by email and copied for the meeting was discussed. The Task Force is tasked with creating two letters; one letter will address the Riverside Project and the second will focus on procedural matters and recommendations to increase the commercial tax base.

The Task Force (Mr. Tanowitz, Ms. Rahman, Mr. Leader and Ms. Jackson) was thanked for their hard work. Revised drafts will be prepared for review and circulated by Ms. Bailin for individual comments back to her. The drafts will be discussed at our next meeting.

d. Northland Project: Update

This was discussed during the City Updates. Folks were reminded to send any questions they may have regarding their participation to Ms. Bailin for clarification by the Law Department.

The Members were advised of the upcoming February 13th Newton Needham Regional Chamber event about the project at 281 Needham Street at 8:00 a.m. The Mayor will be speaking, along with others in favor of the project.

e. Restaurant Liquor Licenses: Update

Ms. Bailin explained that, due to the heavy volume of work in relation to the ballot question, Maura O’Keefe was unable to complete the memorandum she promised to the EDC. She will get it to us ASAP.

f. Annual Report: Review and Approval of Draft

This was discussed in connection with the Priorities discussed above.

6. Other Business

Mr. Tanowitz noted that Lumiere is closing at the end of March and a new restaurant will be coming in. There is a wine bar across the street.

7. Confirming Next Meeting

The date of the next meetings for the EDC will be March 10, 2020.

9. Adjournment

Upon motion made by Mr. Finkel and seconded by Ms. Nicklas, the meeting was adjourned by unanimous vote at 8:35 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Devra G. Bailin, Economic Development Director