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# CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

## Economic Development Commission

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### Meeting Minutes

DATE: March 10, 2020

TIME: 6:30 pm Room 211

#### 1. Attendance

Ruthanne Fuller  
Mayor

##### *Commissioners Attending:*

Phil Plottel Chair); Debora Jackson (Secretary); Howard Barnstone; Steve Feller; Rob Finkel; Jack Leader; Marcela Merino; Beth Nicklas; Joyce Plotkin (by phone); Sarah Rahman; Matt Segneri; and Chuck Tanowitz.

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

*Commissioners Absent:* Jean Wood (Vice Chair); Jeremy Freid; and Peter Lew.

*Staff Attending:* Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Development; and Devra Bailin, Economic Development Director.

*Also Present:* Leila Dal Santo, Boston College Social Work

#### 2. Approval of Minutes of February 11, 2020

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

On a motion made by Debora Jackson and seconded by Sarah Rahman, the Minutes of the February 11, 2020 meeting were unanimously approved.

#### 3. City Updates

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

There was a brief discussion on social distancing and whether EDC meetings can be held virtually over Zoom or other service. Ms. Bailin explained that under open meeting laws, there must be a physical quorum of members to hold a meeting; it is not known whether the AG will issue revised open meeting guidelines in the face of COVID-19.

Northland: Mr. Heath said no update was necessary; everyone knows that the voters approved the project.

MassWorks Grant: Ms. Bailin explained that the City is in the process of filing the precontract documentation for the design/engineering work on the extension of the Greenway from Easy Street and Curtis Street and redesign of Pettee Square.

Mayor's Business Check Ins: Mr. Heath and Ms. Bailin explained that the Mayor held a business check in in Newton Centre regarding issues there, including parking (especially employee long-term parking), traffic,

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beautification and NewCal and will be holding one soon in Newtonville regarding the streetscape work which will begin around June and the possibility of NewCal expansion at the existing Senior Center location. When provided the reaction of Newton Centre businesses opposed to NewCal in the Centre, members asked about the concerns expressed and whether the EDC could do something to assuage those concerns. Ms. Bailin noted that it was explained to businesses by Josh Morse that any NewCal project in the Centre would first have to replicate the parking lost by use of the Triangle and create traffic solutions, making the project time frame between 8-10 years (twice the time frame for Newtonville NewCal and significantly over budget). Members expressed the view that, even then, wouldn't the use provide greater foot traffic and customers for the businesses? Mr. Heath explained that the businesses were not persuaded by that and were deeply concerned about the business disruption even if the parking was replicated elsewhere. Members asked about how the program to use excess spaces in private parking lots was going; Mr. Heath explained that no one signed up—issues of liability and need to use their own spaces for special events. Mr. Tanowitz noted that the business concerns are the same as those raised against the Austin Street project, solutions were created to help businesses, and now there is a welcome project enhancing the neighborhood. How can the EDC help? Mr. Plottel requested that we move any further discussion until later.

Riverside: Ms. Bailin noted that the Land Use Committee will be taking up the project at its meeting on March 24<sup>th</sup> and that, if the EDC wants to testify, they should contact either Jennifer Cairo or Neil Cronin in the Planning Department. However, it would be best to contact Rick Lipof, the Chair of Land Use, directly to be able to testify early in the proceedings. Mr. Plottel asked that this topic be held later in the meeting.

40 B Projects: Mr. Heath explained that hearings regarding Dunstan East before the ZBA will continue on March 17th. This project includes 243 units of rental housing (25% affordable/80% of area mean) and 12, 521 sq. ft. of ground floor retail. The ZBA seemed concerned about the amount of retail. The ZBA is also continuing hearing on The Residences on the Charles (15 Riverdale Avenue). This proposal includes 204 units of rental housing, 4600 sq. ft. of retail, and 17,782 sq. ft. for office/innovation space. Mr. Heath noted that members of the ZBA expressed concern about using the 40B process for allowing the use of innovation space. Members asked Ms. Bailin last month 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? She did contact Jonah Temple in the Law Department who advised that there is not a lot of guidance on nonresidential components within a 40B project; it is presumed that, since 40B is a residential mandate, the primary use must be residential and that, therefore, it's likely that at least 50% of the use must be residential. As to nonresidential uses, those elements must compliment the primary residential use and foster vibrant, workable, livable, and attractive neighborhood; nonresidential components are also subject to the waiver of local rules and regulations, including zoning, that would otherwise apply to the project.

West Newton Streetscape Design: Mr. Heath explained that drainage work has commenced in West Newton Square and the beginning of construction on the planned streetscape improvements will begin in early April. Planning will be tasked with keeping businesses (and the community) apprised of the schedule/impacts and is implementing a construction mitigation plan in conjunction with DPW and the contractor.

Landmarking before the Historic Commission: Mr. Heath noted that one of the properties for landmarking, the former Davis Hotel (which includes Sweet Tomatoes) was approved. The owner had expressed no objection to the designation. One of the properties proposed is part of the Dunstan East project and, after its 18-month demo delay ran out, the building was demolished before a hearing could be held. Three of the seven (Bank of America building, CVS building, and Brezniak Funeral Home) have or will have reports written on them by staff; one of those properties, Brezniak Funeral Home, is on for presentation/report on March 26<sup>th</sup> to determine whether a landmarking hearing should be held; 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 on March 16th.

Electrification Ordinance: Councilor Leary has proposed an ordinance to limit or prohibit the future installation of fossil fuel infrastructure, including a bar to replacing oil burners and extending gas lines. Having originally been scheduled for March, the ordinance has been put over for further study. It was noted that Brookline's similar ordinance has been challenged in court. Mr. Plottel noted that, although residential developers may willingly electrify their heating systems (as the cost to install is lower and they won't pay the high costs to operate it), lab development almost always are heated by gas. The EDC should be kept in the loop.

Increasing Biotech and Life Science in Newton: Ms. Bailin noted that she attended the BioSafety Committee meeting and members expressed interest in trying to increase biotech and life sciences in Newton. After conversation with Mr. Plottel, Ms. Bailin asked whether some of their members might be interested in collaborating with the EDC on this issue. The response was favorable. It was noted that Colliers says that there is an increase in lab space demand so we may want to discuss this with Mr. Freid. Mr. Plottel asked that we hold further discussion until later.

Beer Garden: Ms. Bailin noted that she and Mr. Heath are exploring the possibility of a beer garden in Newton. Two options have come up—Bram Way Plaza and Newton Centre Green. Mr. Heath explained that an RFP is required and anything done will be on a pilot basis. Mr. Leader asked if there is any intention of focusing on ice cream trucks and breweries with bottling. Mr. Tanowitz noted food trucks, beer gardens, ice cream trucks, and the like are all about creating a sense of place and that we should discuss this with Graffito's

Jesse Baerkahn, a Newton resident. When asked about any interest in a beer garden here, Mr. Heath explained that Lee Cooper of Hopsters is interested.

Four Corners Condo Project: 1114 Beacon Street is a proposed 27 unit condominium project. There is pushback on the design so there will be a peer review of that.

#### **4. Meeting with Mayor Fuller**

##### **a. Finalize Meeting Prep**

##### **b. Discussion with Mayor Fuller**

Due to an emergency, Mayor Fuller is unable to attend. Her office will reschedule with the EDC, possibly April or May meeting. Mr. Plottel provided members with the updated Agenda sent to the Mayor. Members noted that they approve of the Agenda not starting with the priorities, which have already been relayed. Ms. Rahman would like to understand to what extent can the EDC comment on noncommercial matters.

#### **5. Discussion Items**

##### **a. Riverside Project: Discussion and Finalization Letter**

The draft letter received from the Task Force was distributed by email and at the meeting. Mr. Plottel thanked the Task Force—Mr. Tanowitz, Ms. Jackson, Ms. Rahman, and Mr. Leader—for their excellent draft. In opening the discussion, Ms. Nicklas, asked what the purpose of urging the Council to revisit the zoning was; once constructed won't the project be relatively unalterable? It was noted that there is the possibility of additional land (which was given back to the MBTA). Mr. Barnstone noted that, if zoning is revised before all of the project is constructed, there is the possibility of increased commercial development. Mr. Leader asked that the letter be revised to recommend more than 1.5 million sq. ft. and members agreed. Subject to reformatting on letterhead, editing by the Chair, and signing by the Chair on behalf of the EDC, it was moved by Mr. Tanowitz, seconded by Ms. Rahman, and voted unanimously by the members to approve the letter. Mr. Plottel will send the letter by the end of the week. Ms. Bailin will send him a draft ASAP.

Mr. Plottel asked if any members were willing to join him at the Land Use meeting on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Tanowitz, Ms. Jackson and Mr. Leader agreed to attend. If anyone else is interested, they should let Mr. Plottel and Ms. Bailin know. Mr. Plottel will contact Mr. Lipof about testifying.

##### **b. Northland Project: Update**

This was discussed during the City Updates.

##### **c. Restaurant Liquor Licenses: Update**

Attorney Maura O’Keefe from the Law Department provided a confidential memorandum which was handed out at the meeting. Due to time constraints this will be discussed at our next meeting.

#### **d. Task Forces**

Mr. Plottel noted that there are many possible areas of focus for task forces; many of which we have discussed already—e.g., promoting life sciences, sustainability, environmental, growing green, attracting innovation and entrepreneurs, etc. Mr. Tanowitz added placemaking, walkability, pocket parks, green connections, etc. Mr. Feller noted other topics have included speeding up permitting and licensing; the timelines for opening commercial spaces, especially restaurants and food usages are prohibitive. Ms. Nicklas noted that zoning redesign for commercial uses is critical. [Ms. Bailin noted that the Planning Department is presently focused on residential; she will advise when they are on to mixed use and commercial.] Ms. Merino noted that we should be able to identify three or four clusters to focus on. Members noted high tech and professional, including health, services.

Mr. Plottel asked members to state what task forces they might be interested in serving on.

Mr. Finkel: startup entrepreneurship; food.

Mr. Feller: food and manufacturing, especially as it relates to permitting and licensing.

Mr. Leader: zoning redesign.

Ms. Merino: food; education; assisting women and minority businesses.

Ms. Nicklas: zoning and innovation economy. She asked if there was a large map of Newton so that members can have a better understanding of commercial areas subject to development. Is there a visioning map for commercial areas? [Ms. Bailin noted that there are visioning documents for various commercial areas—Needham Street, Riverside, West Newton... but is not aware of anything on one map.] It was noted that Teresa Park had one over 10 years ago. There was also a map of empty lots.

Mr. Tanowitz: the intersection of retail, innovation and placemaking; how to protect small business during emergencies like COVID-19 or recession.

Ms. Rahman: entrepreneurship (during recession and times when can’t meet); complete EDC letter on issues with the permitting process and how to improve it; 40B and commercial space—can EDC help create parameters for commercial development in that context?

Mr. Segneri: education and innovation economy; how can the EDC influence the choice to small locally owned businesses; how do small businesses navigate recessions or economic downturns?

Ms. Jackson: entrepreneurship and innovation; diversity as it relates to economic development, especially as to underrepresented groups and women; creating opportunities for such groups. EDC should have onboarding information for new members so they can be more effective from the start of their appointments.

Mr. Barnstone: like Mr. Plottel, he would like to bring life sciences to Newton—financial tech, data tech, artificial intelligence, robotics.

Ms. Nicklas: noted that she works in life science in Boston and she doesn't know what's available in Newton for such uses. Perhaps a brochure to distribute should be created.

Ms. Bailin: noted that obtaining commercial listings is very difficult; loopnet and other online services do not provide the most up-to-date listings, as many are only known to listing brokers and held closely.

Mr. Feller: create a marketing tool for EDC.

Ms. Bailin: The City just installed an economic tool created by Localintel which is now on the website. It provides basic demographic and other financial information, along with specific Newton related information.

Unfortunately, the tool did not allow for the insertion of more up-to-date and specific information contained in the Camoin report.

Ms. Plotkin: food

Mr. Plottel: life science.

There are many ideas here and the EDC members should narrow and refine the list at our next meeting. Perhaps using a flip chart to create a priority of 2-3 depending on member interest. The task forces should report by the end of the year. We need to discuss what the deliverables would be. Each task force must have someone willing to lead. Mr. Plottel asked that Ms. Wood, and Ms. Jackson, together with Mr. Heath and Ms. Bailin meet to discuss how best to choose task forces and define deliverables.

## **6. Other Business**

Mr. Plottel asked that Ms. Bailin contact to the Law Department to see if, given the State of Emergency and COVID-19, the EDC can meet virtually. POST MEETING NOTE: THE EDC IS NOW ALLOWED TO MEET VIRTUALLY

Mr. Tanowitz suggested that EDC consider how it might bring the pro-development and anti-development groups together; the Northland project laid bare a fissure in Newton. Mr. Barnstone didn't see this as a role for EDC—the voters decided the issue. Mr. Leader noted that historically there's a unity breakfast after elections—makes folks feel included.

## **7. Confirming Next Meeting**

The date of the next meetings for the EDC will be **April 7, 2020**. Because of the Passover holiday, the Clerk's Office would not permit scheduling of a meeting the following week.

## **8. Adjournment**

Upon motion made by Mr. Finkel and seconded by Mr. Tanowitz, the meeting was adjourned by unanimous vote at 8:25 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Devra G. Bailin, Economic Development Director