

**City of Newton Planning and Development Department
Needham Street Area Vision Plan Community Engagement Group
Open Space, Recreation and Sustainability**

January 22, 2018

5:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Barry Price Center

27 Christina St

Newton, MA 02461

Meeting Summary

Welcome and Meeting 1 Summary

Barney Heath, Director of the Planning and Development Department opened the meeting and welcomed the Community Engagement Group members. The goals of the January 22nd meeting were: Community Engagement Group identifies and evaluates open space, recreation and sustainability ideas for the Needham Street Area to inform City of Newton Planning Team.

The Planning Director brought up the charter and meeting ground rules discussed in the previous meeting, and there were no objections from the engagement group. Second, he referenced the meeting topic ideas brought up by engagement members in the previous meeting, and how they will be integrated into future meetings. Mr. Heath acknowledges the members from the engagement group who had participated in the homework that had been sent out prior to the meeting. The group had been asked to identify and discuss points on the boundary map specific to open space, recreation, and sustainability that they loved, as well as what was missing.

Review Goals of Vision Process

Long Range Planner Rachel Blatt, Department of Planning, reviewed with the group what a vision plan is and the timeline. Ms. Blatt explained that it is a guide for public policy action regarding a particular geographic area. A vision plan is ultimately about place-making: enhancing the unique features that distinguish a given location from any other. Ms. Blatt provided examples of other vision plans to the group including Medford Square, MA, Farmington Hills, MI, and Springfield, OR. She stated that the City of Newton will be pulling from different approaches while completing the Needham Street Area Vision Plan. Lastly, Ms. Blatt discussed the anticipated results from the process which included, but are not limited to: Comprehensive Plan amendment, new zoning for Needham Street, guidance for future development, potential city investments and grant sources, and the listing and prioritization of improvements to the Needham Street Area.

Open Space and Recreation Existing Conditions

Chief Environmental Planner, Jennifer Steel, Department of Planning, presented to the group by defining terms, and reviewing the Needham Street Area existing conditions including rivers and streams, conservation land, parks and playgrounds, cemeteries, and trails. Next, the group was shown challenges specific to sustainability and ecological health in the boundary area. The list included loss of habitat and native species, disruption of water cycle, pollution, and heat. Lastly Ms. Steel discussed the current open space and sustainability initiatives that the City was working

towards including the Newton Upper Falls Greenway, Newton Highlands Playground redevelopment, MassDOT Needham Street Corridor Redesign, and other local trail connectivity efforts.

Idea Generation

Community Engagement Manager, Lily Canan Reynolds from the Planning Dept. opened this section of the agenda with a map of the results from the group's homework. The first was "Community Engagement Group's Places We Love." Responses included:

- The Greenway
- Charles River
- Newton Highlands Playground
- Railroad Bridge
- TJMaxx
- Hemlock Gorge
- DCR Charles River Pathway
- Eliot T Stop
- Northland Site as an opportunity
- Goddard/Christina Conservation Area
- Riverwalk Conservation Area
- Hyde Playground
- Emerson Community Playground
- Walking and Bike Trails
- Cutler Park
- Newton South Track
- Cold Spring Park
- Echo Bridge
- Newton Centre Green

Photographs provided by the group in the homework responses were shown, followed by a map of recreation routes accompanied with what is most enjoyable and what could be improved. Ms. Reynolds noted to the group that all transportation routes identified by respondents in the homework would be gone over at next week's meeting. It was noted that the next meeting's topic would be Transportation.

Next, Ms. Reynolds went over the results of the question: "What is missing?" and pointed out that the results provided had already been written on sticky notes, and posted on the wall under relevant categories. The categories included trails, design, Charles River, Greenway, playgrounds, parks and community space, water and streams, bridges, streets and parking lots, MBTA, and green infrastructure.

Responses provided in the homework included:

Trails:

- Better access to and from bike and walking trails
- More attractive and up kept landscaping and seating areas on the greenway

- Better access to Eliot St
- Trail loop to connect all open and green spaces
- Connect Charlemont St to the Town of Needham's trails
- Formal access to aqueducts

Design:

- Formal entrance into the corridor at Highland Ave and Needham St.
- A theme for the corridor
- Outdoor eating area
- Seating under the Echo Bridge with better railings and stairs
- For proposed development – fewer, taller buildings creating more green and open space

Charles River:

- Parking locations
- Viewing platform on river and easier access to banks on both sides
- Bike access to the Charles River
- Access to the riverfront from Needham St
- Stock the river and allow for fishing

Greenway:

- Extensions from the Greenway
- Access to and from the Greenway

Playgrounds:

- Enforcement of dogs on leash rule at Countryside
- Playgrounds with more shade and water features
- Spray parks

Parks and Community Space:

- Outdoor recreation space
- Better and safer access to and from
- Labyrinth parks
- Skating rink
- Pocket parks
- More tennis and basketball courts
- Environmental education facility

Water and Streams:

- Urban stream
- Wider paths along the stream

Bridges:

- Overlook at Sunset Bridge
- Safer access to and from
- Pedestrian bridge by Christina St

Streets and Parking Lots:

- Storm water improvements
- Nicer landscaping

MBTA:

- Easier access and connections to the Eliot T stop (shuttles)
- Path to the Highlands T stop

Ms. Reynolds next asked the group to think about what is missing from the lists, and on a sticky note, write it down and add it to the wall under the relevant category. Based upon the responses a new category, green infrastructure, was created. Added items included:

Trails:

- Connection to railway bridge at Christina to Stark chemical trail running parallel to Needham St
- Pathways to include Charles River, old rail and bridges to the Town of Needham

Design:

- Open space is not just a leftover but has a purpose and should be designed into the plans
- Disability access
- Change zoning and open space requirements for large parcels
- Age friendly trails with lots of seating
- Role of the golf course
- Coordinate the streetscape to include lighting and hardscape furnishings
- Maintenance plans
- Facilitate public awareness of open space locations
- Open space and signage awareness
- Signage that is easier to read
- Better and more frequent signage to include other languages and brail
- Better signage with connections to major points of interest
- Higher density in center of lots and scaled down in pedestrian areas
- Ensure dense developments have adjacent recreation such as playfields
- Trees along Needham St.

Greenway:

- Primary route for pedestrians and bikes
- Long term investment plan to restore the greenway as well as other open space areas to include nice pathways and connections to both private and public properties
- Public art and murals

- Presence after the rail in re-established
- Terminus at the north end
- Proper connection from the Greenway to the Newton Highlands Playground

Parks and Community Space:

- Community gardens
- New one acre park by Chandler Place
- Park at Eliot St. DPW
- Flexible arts space for dance, art galleries, and a theater
- Community center with access to the Charles River with canoes, kayaks, indoor and outdoor sports courts and rinks and meeting space

Water and Streams:

- Build on stream corridors as wildlife corridors
- Open stream to Charles River
- Re-route South Meadowbrook along the Greenway to run to the Charles River with ponds and waterfalls

Streets and Parking Lots:

- Needham St itself as a green corridor
- Landscaping parking lots
- Adjust the DOT 60' wide paving vision to include green relief zones

MBTA:

- Increased bus frequency
- Landscaped and lit connection from the corridor to the Eliot T stop

Green Infrastructure:

- Energy efficiency measures and renewable energy
- Sustainable waste and materials management relating to all new construction and retail business
- Electric vehicle charging stations

Idea Evaluation

After a discussion about the categories and possible mergers of some of the items, the members were invited to select their top ten items for “what is missing” in the Needham Street area in terms of open space, recreation, and sustainability. The ten items with the most checks were then used in a community engagement group exercise, in which the group members were divided into five groups and each group were given two items to evaluate. The groups were provided with blank evaluation matrix sheets, and asked to evaluate both items based upon impact, cost, demand, and feasibility.

When reporting out their conclusions, the groups were asked “If you had to pitch your best idea to your neighbor, what would it be?” and to provide a few points regarding their answer. This meeting

summary does include the items that the groups chose not to discuss, but were assessed through the collected evaluation matrix sheets.

Group 1:

- Item chosen to discuss (merged item): Connect Charlemont St to the Town of Needham's Trails and pedestrian bridge by Christina St. The group stated they would fix the pedestrian bridge for potential recreational and services such as hotels, shops, daycare, and medical employment. This would allow for additional foot and bike transportation opportunities. The impact would be medium, the cost would be high but was noted that it would be a one-time price, the demand is low now, but high in the future, and the feasibility was not answered due to a question about the political aspect of who owns the bridge.
- Item not chosen to discuss: Access to the riverfront from Needham St. The group wrote that the impact would be high with a complete Blue Heron trail and access to the Charles River, the cost would be medium, the demand would be medium now and high in the future, and the feasibility would be low with obstacles pertaining to the cost of private land.

Group 2:

- Item chosen to discuss (merged item): Proper connection from the Greenway to Newton Highlands Playground, path to the Newton Highlands T stop, Greenway extensions, and access to and from the Greenway. The group discussed that they wanted to expand the Greenway to provide access to and from the T and village areas. They noted that this item hit on all the areas discussed. The impact was very high and beneficial, the cost was dependent on the various ways it could be done and levels of investment regarding lighting, extent of landscaping, construction, etc., the demand would be high, and the feasibility would be high.
- Item not chosen to discuss (merged item): Environmental education facility, flexible areas space, and a community center with access to the Charles River. The group wrote that the impact would be high, the cost would be high in respect to indoor scope and medium for outdoor, the demand would be high, and the feasibility depended on the location.

Group 3:

- Item chosen to discuss: Easier access and connections to the Eliot T stop. The group stated that the impact had potential to be very high due to increased use of transit and more pedestrian activity, the cost would be low since it would be repurposing an existing resource, the demand would be medium with respect to thinking about reverse commuting for employees, and the feasibility would be high.
- Item not chosen to discuss: Trail loop to connect all open and green spaces. The group wrote the impact would be medium as a regional connection to Needham for pedestrians and bikers, the cost would be medium depending on land takings and potential grants, the demand would be medium but would increase once the corridor was built out and more people were aware, and the feasibility would be medium and require cooperation and other communities' participation.

Group 4:

- Item chosen to discuss (merged item): Given a certain density, fewer but taller buildings might achieve that density with less lot coverage and thus the potential for more, and more high value, open space. The group discussed that Needham St could possibly support changing building designs to shrink horizontally and expand vertically, without changing the number of proposed units, allowing more open space to be created. This included a wildlife corridor and the restoration of south meadow brook valley. The impact would be high, the cost was unknown, the demand was unknown, and the feasibility would be medium due to possible political challenges.
- Item not chosen to discuss: Pathways to include Charles River, old rail and bridges to the Town of Needham. The group wrote that the impact would be high, the cost would be high for a connection from the Greenway but unknown for a connection from Christina St to the Town of Needham, the demand would be high, and the feasibility would be low due to political challenges for a connection from the Greenway but high for a connection from Christina St to the Town of Needham.

Group 5:

- Item chosen to discuss: Trees along Needham St. The group discussed that the impact would be high providing shade and ecological and aesthetic benefits, the cost was uncertain due to private property issues and the moving of above ground utilities, the demand would be high, and the feasibility would be medium, possibility unknown due to the same issues noted regarding cost.
- Item not chosen to discuss (merged item): Facilitate more public awareness of existing and future open space locations, better and more frequent signage to include other languages and brail, and better signage with connections to major points of interest. The group wrote that the impact would be medium with trail and area maps, the cost would be low, the demand would be medium, and the feasibility would be high.

Summary of Public Comments

Ms. Blatt opened the public comment section of the meeting to the audience. A summary of comments from the members of the public included:

- A desire to see the steps to the Eliot T stop on the southside of Route 9 rebuilt due to them being an eyesore, as well as a drainage and safety issues.
- Recommendations to be considered that included bike share stations along greenway stations in the corridor, recreational fitness stations along the greenway or trails, ice cream at the depot, and vending stations along the trails in the summer
- Concerns were brought up regarding Emerson playground, the aqueduct, the park along the Charles River by the steam above ground on Tower Rd, and the wetlands behind the Countryside School and Playground. Additional concerns included the snow mountain on the Eliot S DPW parcel that creates a steam extending to the Greenway.
- It was noted that Nahanton Park was left out of the trail that connects Kenrick and that Mann Bridge needed sidewalks and was unsafe in its current condition.

- The Stark trail was brought up and called to be connected, however that Stark has said in the past that it is a security risk, but the question regarding who owns the property was brought up. It was noted that at least the rails, like the Greenway should be improved and part of the Greenway.
- The MassDOT plans were discussed regarding their plans for lighting on Needham St, and if people wants bikes and pedestrians then there needs to be solution to the lighting.
- It was noted that the Town of Needham showed no interest in connecting the Greenway with spaces between the Charles River and 128, and they would have had to be the municipality to have the bridge over 128 replaced with a bike or walking bridge. It was suggested it might be worth revisiting.
- Recommendation that the street names signs along Needham St for one way and dead-end streets have their own color scheme, and strongly identified along the corridor.
- The time of the meeting was brought up and it was asked to be moved to a later time due to it being difficult for members of the public to get there at that time of day.
- Suggestion to expand illumination on Needham St, as well as incorporate a design that integrates Needham St, Oak St, Winchester St, and Christina St. This could develop into a branding for the corridor.
- It was noted that while the removal of over ground wires is expensive, the wires should not be ignored. Instead, creative new ideas and designs for them should be explored while keeping the use.
- The point about the impact development might have on schools was raised, followed by the suggestion of reintegrating the community while redesigning Needham St.
- Statement regarding that the rises in ocean levels should motivate a plan for possible flooding from the Charles River.
- Concerns were raised regarding the development on Needham St and Highland Ave, and its impact on Walnut St, as well as how future development will address traffic in other areas.
- The question regarding additional density was asked and people should consider what could be created and if a new village should be identified. In addition, it was noted that history of other villages should be considered in terms of stores disappearing.
- It was pointed out that impacts on other areas should be considered during future development.
- It was recommended that a relationship be established with the NWRA so that facilities and easements could be utilized for open space and recreation opportunities.
- Further concerns regarding the MassDOT plan was brought up, specifically utilities.
- Issues regarding sewage back up next to the Greenway, as well as the need for a resolution of traffic gridlocks before new development were stated.

A member of the community engagement group addressed the public comment regarding undergrounding utilities, and stated that a consultant should be brought in to address the issue. A second member of the community engagement group brought up the importance of the meeting's topic of open space, recreation, and sustainability and that connections in the area, as well as all over the city is critical.

Meeting Adjourned

Community Engagement Group Attendees

Rebecca Schwartz

Ben Waltuck

Ellen Katz

Glenn Vanaman

Jean Klugman

Peter Standish

Beth Wilkinson

Dennis Tourse

Claudine Ellyin

Leo Hannenberg

Deborah Crossley

Jo-Louise Allen

Linda Green

Alex Zamsky

Srdjan S. Nedeljkovic

Marian Knapp

William Roesner

Greg Reibman

Robert Finkel, in place for Joyce Plotkin

City Staff Attendees:

Barney Heath, Director Planning and Development Department

James Freas, Deputy Director Planning and Development Department

Nicole Freedman, Transportation Director Department of Public Works

Jennifer Caira, Chief Planner for Current Planning

Jennifer Steel, Chief Environmental Planner

Rachel Blatt, Long Range Planner

Lily Canan Reynolds, Community Engagement Manager

Shubee Sikka, Urban Designer

Valerie Birmingham, Planning Associate