

**City of Newton Planning and Development Department
Needham Street Area Vision Plan Community Engagement Group**

December 11, 2017

5:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Barry Price Center

27 Christina St

Newton, MA 02461

Meeting Summary

Welcome and Overview

Barney Heath, Director of the Planning and Development Department opened the meeting and welcomed the Community Engagement Group members. He introduced Mayor-elect Ruthanne Fuller, who gave a welcome speech to the group and public. The goals of the December 11th meeting were:

- To get to know staff and community engagement group members
- To understand the process
- To identify key components and topics.

The Planning Director described the boundary of the study area and the importance of a vision plan for the Needham Street Area.

Introductions

Community Engagement Manager, Lily Canan Reynolds from the Planning Dept. conducted a getting to know each other exercise with the Community Engagement Group.

Needham Street Characteristics

Mr. Heath explained that planning staff were going to give a brief description of various Needham Street Characteristics. The discussed characteristics were:

- History of Needham Street, Valerie Birmingham, Planning Associate
- Built-Form, Shubee Sikka, Urban Designer
- Zoning, Jennifer Caira, Chief Planner for Current Planning
- Open Space, Jennifer Steel, Chief Environmental Planner
- Business and Commercial Inventory, Kathryn Ellis, Economic Development Director
- Transportation, Nicole Freedman, Transportation Director, Department of Public Works
- Summary of Past Needham Street Studies, James Freas, Deputy Director, Planning and Development Department

Following the presentation, Mr. Heath took a few questions from the Community Engagement Group. Members asked about the upcoming MassDOT project on Needham Street, whether or not the City will take over the street after the MassDOT project is completed, the construction process and demolition plan, and if the group would be presented with plans at a future meeting.

It was noted to the group by Mr. Heath that the MassDOT will be holding a public meeting specific to the Needham Street improvement project at some point in January 2018.

Engagement Committee Interests

Mr. Heath asked the Community Engagement Group members to respond to two questions: “What are you most excited about?”; “What is one thing you are concerned about?” Each member provided responses. A summary of responses included:

- Excited about the potential of projects to be age-friendly; concerned about the opposite that those age-friendly concepts will not be considered like housing and transportation.
- Excited to look at a corridor with so much opportunity and to be able to create a new district that can be tied into strong neighborhoods; concerned about traffic.
- Excited about various components being put together in a way to be satisfactory to a community with different interests; concerned about that there are so many different components and it might be tough to work together with all people involved.
- Excited about the process itself and looking at ideas from other communities; concern about time to finish process.
- Excited the group is in front of development as opposed to reacting; concerned about how to maximize economic development potential while balancing character of city.
- Excited about the opportunity and to improve quality of life (the example of the greenway was given), place and breathe new life; concerned about time and building but looked at them more as challenges.
- Excited about the potential of taking away cars and allowing more pedestrian and bike transportation; concerned about the influx of school age population and types of housing, and bottleneck of traffic.
- Excited about the possibility of the beginning of a new center of vitality (not village) and go back to fundamental principles of planning land use in coordination with transportation resources, as well as generate jobs and allow mixed use; concerned to squander this opportunity (fail if don't think big).
- Excited about the development and investment in area, environmental groups, green zones and park and connection to park; concerned about traffic and not changing the width of street, ways around streets and connectivity, how we are attracting businesses, and the notion that Countryside School is in need of a renovation.
- Excited about the possibility to create a long term vision based upon future events and opportunities to great advances to how we work, live, and get around.
- Excited for all reasons stated by other members and to be part of the group; Concerned about how to manage growth, the environment, and how to make Needham Street a beautiful and inviting area to come to.
- Excited about the reinvention and thinking broad, and not anchor oneself; concerned about what will the tradeoffs be? If encourage development what happens to open space. If encourage housing what happen to the schools?
- Excited about the opportunity to renew South Meadow Brook Valley and get rid of asphalt; concerned about the accuracy of projections.
- Excited about the interest and talent of group; concerned about how to channel that and the private entrepreneurs and private interests.

- Excited about the possibilities in sustainability initiatives; concerned about gases, recent construction and safety management of construction, waste management of commercial, limited green spaces, and flood water management.
- Excited that the group couldn't do any worse no matter what is planned in comparison to existing conditions; concerned about how it impacts the rest of the city, how it is cohesive with it and how to tie into entire city and master plan.
- Excited about the Saco Pettee building and to ride a bike down the street; concerned about time and that it will take too long to implement that we miss the currently strong economy.
- Excited about the possibility to increase commercial tax revenue; concerned about the development of housing and implications on schools, as well as about aesthetics in particular the above ground utility poles.
- Excited to make the street a great place to walk around; concerned about existing conditions including the mess of utility wires, concrete, and traffic; as well as that it is disconnected from everything.
- Excited to see Needham Street go from suburban sprawl to main street with pleasant things with economic development and allow people to want to come; concerned about traffic and the overcrowding of schools.
- Excited about the greenway and spurs possible to come down to the street; concerned that with so many independent parts it will be tough to get overall plan done in time.

What is a Vision Plan?

Long Range Planner Rachel Blatt, Department of Planning, reviewed with the group what a vision plan is. 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. Lastly, Ms. Blatt presented the process for City Council adoption of the plan as a formal amendment to the City's Comprehensive Plan.

Charter Agreement

Mr. Heath reviewed the draft Charter and Operating Protocols while taking questions and comments from the group for each section. The draft document was provided to the group in advance. The goal of this portion of the meeting was to finalize the Charter and Operating Protocols. Mr. Heath took initial questions from the group before proceeding. Members asked if the vision plan in general will reflect other City long term plans and strategies, if there were any strategies to consensus building, and what happens if a member cannot attend a meeting. The Mr. Heath noted that although reaching a consensus is always a positive result, it was not required. He also noted that for those members who are part of a larger elected city group, then a different member can attend a meeting in their place when absolutely necessary.

The Charter and Operating Protocols were reviewed section by section.

- Section 1: no changes
- Section 2: no changes
- Section 3: no changes
- Section 4: no changes
- Section 5: no changes

Nothing was proposed to be changed in the Charter and Operating Protocols.

Next Steps

Mr. Heath went over with the group the next steps to be taken. It was noted that draft meeting agendas would be emailed to the group one week before the meeting for comments. A list of potential future meeting topics was discussed, which were:

- Neighborhood Connections
- Open Space
- Economic Development
- Transportation
- Land Use
- Urban Design

Mr. Heath asked the group what topics were missing from the list. The following topic ideas were raised:

- Environmental Issues
- Utilities
- Sustainability
- Zoning
- Budgeting and Financing to Achieve Goals
- Impact of People and their Needs
- Construction Process
- Neighborhood Connection and Schools
- Open Space and Sustainability
- Land Use and Zoning
- Housing
- Connectivity
- Street Character
- Other Models and Examples from around the Country
- Recreation

Next Mr. Heath went over the proposed meeting schedule as well as a possible site walk with the group as a whole on either the morning of January 6 or 7. He finished by stating that group could communicate with Planning staff either through email, needhamstreet@newtonma.gov or by following website updates at www.newtonma.gov/needhamstreet.

Summary of Public Comments

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

- Concerns about transportation and green space connections; an emphasis that green spaces by transportation are also links; suggestion to consider revolutionary transportation

developments and technology such as self-driving and off line drop off stations; the question of if this was time for a rebranding opportunity for the street.

- A desire for more educated related businesses, specifically international and culture with business.
- Highlight of the challenge of MBTA being pitched as a connective solution.
- Statement that Needham Street is not their village and that they should not be attracting businesses that will go out of business due to online; parking issues were also raised.
- The point was brought up that the Town of Needham was not mentioned, nor their ideas and vision; confusion about Columbia Ave being a connection; in addition the impact of the connection streets such as Winchester and Dedham should be emphasized and transportation studies looked at.
- Concerns about how Newton Upper Falls is a small village, and it is just a street away from Northland and the lines of traffic residents are currently experiencing, as well as how development could change the character of their village.
- The noise on the street was brought up; as well as concerns about the middle and high schools and entire infrastructure that the residents pay for, not the developers; in addition the notion about if more units were to be created then where are people going to park, and what recreation accommodations would be made available.
- It was noted to pay attention to how “Waze” directs people when getting to and from Needham St.
- Traffic frustrations were reiterated and how it impacts public safety and the possible challenges for fire engines when getting through during traffic; request to look at the possibility of the removal of towers, and the need for a modern senior center.
- Suggestion that the group pull from previous studies’ objectives that are related if they still make sense and if they could be built upon or rejected. Traffic impacts on neighboring streets were pointed out, as well as a possibility for a site for a new city school.
- Current traffic and bridge infrastructure issues were stated, and that every street is a mess.
- The abandoned railway was noted, and the demand to give access and the possibility to make it a greenway.

Meeting Adjourned

Community Engagement Group Attendees:

Rebecca Schwartz

Ben Waltuck

Irina Serdobova Freeman

Ellen Katz

Glenn Vanaman

Jean Klugman

Peter Standish

Beth Wilkinson

Dennis Tourse

Claudine Ellyin

Bernard Feldstein

Leo Hannenberg

Deborah Crossley

David Kalis

Jo-Louise Allen
Srdjan S. Nedeljkovic
Sonia Parisca
Joyce Plotkin
Marian Knapp
William Roesner
Greg Reibman

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
Kathryn Ellis, Economic Development Director
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