

Newtonville Area Council Meeting Minutes May 14, 2020

Members Present: Peter Bruce, Dana D'Agostino, Jessica Aker Archer, Martina Jackson, Susan Reisler, Kirill Alshewski, Carolyn Gabbay, Pamela Shufro

Invited Guests: Josh Morse, Jayne Colino, Susan Albright, Pam Wright, Fred Arnstein **Members of the Public in Attendance:** Eighteen additional residents.

Peter Bruce began the Zoom meeting after confirming a quorum.

April minutes: After reviewing the latest revisions, a few spelling and wording issues were corrected. On motion duly made and seconded, six (6) members cast votes in the affirmative and a member abstained. The NAC: **Voted** to approve the minutes as corrected.

NewCAL/Senior Center: Josh Morse, Public Buildings Commissioner, updated us on NewCAL, with Jayne Colino, Director, Department of Senior Services:

- Community outreach has been conducted over several years, focusing recently on the current site and Newton Centre Triangle. No final decision has been made regarding location.
- Meetings were held with businesses in both places. Josh said that he had invited Newtonville businesses a month previously, but that only one business showed.
- When asked whether the NAC should circulate a survey to the Newtonville business community, Josh suggested we connect with Devra Bailin (Planning & Development Department).
- Discussing their pros and cons, Morse said Newton Centre was “more complicated” and expensive, and would take much longer, but that it was also more centrally located. Newtonville is already familiar and established, and a project here could be done more quickly, but parking and traffic would be difficult and require studies that cannot be conducted in the pandemic. They would also need to address current and future growth expectations.
- Also, although the Senior Center is an historic structure, it can be modified or razed through the permitting process, even though it would face an 18-month delay to raze it.
- As for where seniors would go in the 1.5-to-2 year building phase, once the Senior Center became unavailable, a decentralized model using existing City facilities could be used for interim programming, or commercial space could be rented.
- Added green space and 75 outside parking spaces have been proposed, but while reaching that amount of parking space would be a challenge, he said that whether the building were razed or renovated, there would still be more parking for a new center than there is now.
- The City has a limited budget, and can't afford to buy land, Morse said in response to suggestions about purchasing or renting space at the Masonic Lodge or the Church of the Open Word.
- A Walnut Place resident mentioned the likelihood of neighborhood disruption with reconstruction at the current site. Morse said that “satellite parking” away from the area with materials transported to the site could mitigate those impacts.
- With regard to the Newton Centre site:

- The size is good, but the shape is challenging.
- Existing parking capacity (155-160 stalls) would need to be abolished during construction, then replicated, with at least 100 added parking spots. Using other nearby lots, road diets, angled parking, and below ground parking are options.
- There's great opposition to this plan from local businesses, especially due to the lack of parking for their customers during construction.
- A "vision plan" for Newton Centre would be needed to engineer building, traffic, and parking holistically.
- There would be an *overall time frame of 8 to 10 years* for the project, while construction of the new building, per se, would take about as long as in Newtonville.

Planning in Uncertain Times

- The discussion was framed by noting that many local intellectuals see "smart growth" ideas playing an important role in the policy-making process and swaying elections in Newton.
- The discussion revolved around questions as to how pervasive these ideas were in our planning institutions and to what extent the pandemic and evolving large construction projects were either rendering these ideas obsolete, or in need of reform, or whether they should be adhered to as is.
- Many residents urged that the planning process be paused due to uncertainties created by the pandemic and the fact that we have not yet seen the completion and impacts of many large projects in the works. Special concern was directed toward uncertainties stemming from the facts that:
 - Nobody knows how long the pandemic will last, if it will become endemic, or if other highly virulent viruses will follow it. Dr. Fauci and other epidemiologists were cited, however, suggesting that we should be prepared for the worst.
 - We don't know how long it will take the economy to recover and to what extent tastes, especially toward dense, urban living, are likely to change.
 - We don't know what the social costs of new developments will be
 - The pandemic could produce radical changes in lifestyles, especially toward working from home and remote work in general; this, in turn could make increasing density and transit-oriented development less important.
 - It could also force potentially radical changes in engineering in heating and cooling systems, elevator construction, and other things, with economic consequences that are difficult to predict.

Questions arose as to how pervasive smart growth principles were in the Zoning and Planning Committee. The results of a recent straw vote in that committee were the topic of much discussion. They are, that: *Zoning Redesign: Must lead to sustainable community development, including wise environmental stewardship, fiscal strength, and meeting the needs of the community o Housing must serve all Newton families and individuals with a broad range of incomes, higher density housing development must be concentrated near public transit and amenities, to make the city more walkable o New development must work in context with what exists now that we want to preserve and to fit within the objectives of what we want to see.*

ZAP minutes, 4/27/2020, P. 7. <http://www.newtonma.gov/civicax/filebank/documents/103404/04-27-20%20Zoning%20&%20Planning%20Report.pdf>

- We discussed how these goals overlapped in some ways with smart growth, but not in others. [Wikipedia asserts: **Smart growth** is an urban [planning](#) and [transportation](#) theory that concentrates growth in compact walkable urban centers to avoid [sprawl](#). It also advocates compact, [transit-oriented](#), [walkable](#), [bicycle-friendly](#) land use.]
- We further discussed tensions between some of the goals, lack of clear meaning in some of them, and the ambiguous role of density in them.
- That it was just a straw vote and that further discussions of goals were likely to come up in ZAP was regarded as a good thing, offering more possibilities for dialogue between the community and its planning institutions.

COVID-19 in our Long-term Care Facilities. We discussed how almost all deaths in Newton from COVID-19 have been among residents of assisted living and nursing homes facilities. Greater data transparency from the state about these places was urged.

- Massachusetts had the sixth largest proportion of total deaths in long-term care facilities.ⁱ
- New York and other states have required the public reporting of these data, while Massachusetts had not.
- Dense living conditions, close contact between staff and residents, and the fact that large numbers of these workers are low-paid, work multiple jobs, and often live in denser, poorer communities with high infection rates all contribute to the problem. The lack of testing and adequate PPE may also play a role, though the lack of transparent data clouds the picture.

It was suggested that the NAC endorse a bill filed by State Representative Ruth Balsler (i.e., H. 4663) that mandates better reporting and data collection about COVID-19 cases. On motion duly made by Peter and seconded by Martina, with six (6) members casting votes in the affirmative and a member abstaining based on not being familiar enough with the legislation, the NAC

Voted to endorse the bill and whatever related bill emerged from joint House/Senate negotiations.

Next, we discussed issues regarding safety and COVID-19:

- Not all police or constructions workers have been wearing masks or socially distancing. No action was agreed to, though the discussion will continue.
- We decided to ask the Mayor and/or Health Department for information about what the City is doing to coordinate plans for reopening higher education institutions in the City. Carolyn Gabbay was tasked to write a letter inviting the Mayor or her designee to attend the next NAC meeting to discuss this topic.

Next, the NAC continued its previous discussion on the NAC's activities in response to the pandemic, including:

- Tentatively agreeing that Village Day will probably be cancelled.

- Using some of the NAC's available funds, upon authorizing vote, for a new donation for COVID-19 relief. Some of the possible forms of relief that might be considered included an added donation to the Newton Food Pantry, the purchase of gift cards for distribution to grocery store workers, as well as personal donations.

Administrative issues. Regarding letters that the NAC had previously voted to authorize, the consensus was that the:

- Letter to the City Council requesting a pause in development planning should be circulated in draft form with any comments due by the close of business on May 18, 2020.
- Letter to the Newton Democratic Party regarding their making endorsements in non-partisan elections should be held for added research.

The NAC will continue to discuss its protocol for issuing letters. To date, the plan has been that an initial draft would be sent to two NAC officers to approve for dissemination to other NAC members. Following a 2-day comment period, those comments would be reviewed and incorporated, as appropriate, into the final product. With the concurrence of two NAC officers, the letter would then be issued. NAC members would have the free speech right to write personal dissenting letters.

Suggestions were also made to improve hosting future virtual meetings, namely to:

- Assign a co-host for Zoom meetings in case of technical difficulties or the initial host is not able to attend.
- To continue to have Kirill Alshewski act as Zoom meeting moderator.

The NAC unanimously **Voted** to adjourn the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Bruce, President

ⁱ Karen Yourish, et.al., "One-third of all U.S. Coronavirus deaths are nursing home residents or workers," *The New York Times*, May11, 2020.