

Newtonville Area Council
Minutes of the meeting held on April 23, 2020

Members Present: Peter Bruce, Jessica Aker Archer, Kartikey Trivedi, Martina Jackson, Susan Reisler, Kirill Alshewski, Carolyn Gabbay, Pamela Shufro

Invited Guests: Ruthanne Fuller, Beth Smith, Barney Heath, Gabriel Holbrow, Josh Morse, Zachary LeMel, Shubee Sikka

Members of the Public in Attendance: Susan Albright, Julia Malakie, Pam Wright, Lanie McGovern, Tarik Lucas, John Oliver, Lou Taverna, Peter Harrington, Joane Belle Isle, Jim McGonagle, Beth Smith, Alan Bufferd, Devin Ballin, Deidre, Chris Love, Debbie Sussman, Kathy Pillsbury, Rena Getz, John Vasilakis, Helen Nayar, Kathleen Kouril, Janet Sterman, Fred Arnstein,

Peter Bruce called the meeting to order and recognized Mayor Ruthanne Fuller, who had requested the opportunity to address the NAC with general comments, as follows:

- In general, there is compliance amongst residents with social distancing and staying home, and it seems to be working.
- She thanked Newton residents for their kindness, especially those checking in on those living alone.
- However, COVID-19 has now become personal, with most people knowing someone who has become ill or died, including residents of nursing homes and assisted living facilities (even well-run ones) which have been especially hard-hit.
- Newton needs to continue collecting data about sickness and death and needs more in-depth data about populations that are becoming sick. The city and state are releasing more detailed data.
- Caseloads are continuing to rise, and testing, especially from long-term care facilities, sometimes has had long delays, and come back “in clumps.”
- Paychecks for many people have been “stopped cold,” and many individuals and businesses are at risk because they do not have the ability to pay rent/mortgages or for food.
- Steps are being taken in Newton and at the state level to help remedy these problems. But the pandemic affects “all of us.”

A question period followed the conclusion of the Mayor’s remarks, including:

- Question: What proportion of workers and residents in long-term care facilities have been tested for CV-19?
 - Response: While some facilities have volunteered this data, many have not. The Mayor reassured us that she and the Health and Human Services Department were doing “everything possible” and that they were “all over” PPE, testing, and protocols. “We are very aware of the depth of who's been tested,” but then asserted that she was not free to share this information publicly due to the confidentiality requirements of the HIPPA laws and *Maven* reporting system.

- An NAC member who had worked for many years in the Executive Office of Elder Affairs for the state urged more transparency and pointed out that while personal identifying information could not be disclosed, there was no privacy requirement barring the disclosure of the statistics that had been requested. The Mayor then conceded that the member might be correct.
- *Maven's* COVID-19 surveillance system, has been used for flu reporting, according to the Mayor, but is not designed to automatically collect data and run lots of reports. It reports when symptoms started, not when testing was completed and has incomplete information, especially due to changing requirements in reporting. All COVID-19 cases are updated on the City of Newton website. *Maven* is also being used for contact tracing. There is still incomplete information regarding age, race, and income, because this information is not always available to healthcare workers, and patients do not always volunteer it. This is also a national problem in reporting.
- Question: What are the sources of the virus in long-term care facilities?
 - Response: The populations are usually frail and vulnerable people who are living in close quarters, while staff go in and out. Transmission is rapid under these conditions.

The draft minutes of the March 2020 meeting (which has been circulated prior to the meeting) were reviewed and a few minor spacing and wording errors were corrected. A link to a news article that was “chatted in” at the meeting was deemed worthy of inclusion in the minutes. On motion duly made and seconded, it was unanimously:

- **Voted** to approve to the minutes of the March 2020 meeting, as corrected.

The first item discussed under “Burning Issues” was plans for Washington Place (now dubbed “Trio”) introduced by Beth Smith:

- We discussed possible uses for the \$700,000 owed to the City pursuant to that project’s Board Order. Ms. Smith said the Liaison Committee was asked about a year ago to review and comment on a list of ten suggestions, which included streetscape and beautification efforts extending onto the bridge and MBTA line, as well as transportation improvements for all modes of travel.
- Relatedly, Planning Department representatives commented that Marc Development LLC is also making improvements to the intersection of Washington and Walnut Streets separate from the \$700,000 in mandated mitigation funds. As for the latter, the following proposals were considered:
- Possible mitigations of the noise and air pollution from the Mass Pike by landscaping and screens, with a new chain-link fence with live plant material vines and a sidewalk. The Planning Department estimated that this would cost \$287,000. A question was raised as to whether living vines will be viable or would just die off.

- Other mitigation ideas included planting trees, fixing sidewalks, having a more solid barrier against the Pike, traffic calming to increase safety. and extending the latter to the intersection of Lowell and Washington St.
- A comment was made that it would be preferable to concentrate spending on a limited number of improvements to have the most impact with the limited funds. The City has yet to provide cost estimates for such additional ideas.
- A question was raised about the relationship of these mitigations to the Walnut Street Enhancements Project. The Planning Department commented that these activities would be sent out for bid.
- The Planning Department noted that the sidewalk bordering the Mass Pike from Lowell Avenue to Walnut Street is limited for possible tree planting by the City and that the sidewalk needs repairs.

The second “Burning Issue” discussed was construction workers not being masked and not observing social distancing.

The NAC next received an update on NewCAL from the Public Works Department.

- This project has been in the feasibility phase for several years, with hundreds of meetings having been held for community outreach.
- Over 150 possible sites around the City were considered, with 2 sites now being the focus, namely the Newton Centre triangle parking lot and the existing Senior Center site at 345 Walnut Street. Pros and cons of these sites were presented 6-8 weeks ago, and a meeting was held with Newton Center businesses and outreach was made to Newtonville businesses and NAC.
 - The Newton Centre triangle presents a number of challenges, including traffic and parking and the need to take 150 parking spots out of service and replicate them later.
 - The existing site of the Senior Center is smaller and has the existing facility in situ. The building is on the National Register of Historic Places. Possible approaches include renovating the existing building, erecting a new building, or something in-between. There are only 13 parking spaces at this site currently that would need replication or possibly expanded by 2-4 times as much as at present. The current site/use blends in well with the Newtonville community and businesses, are acclimated to its proximity.
- Parking study and parking management plans using existing data can be undertaken right away.
- Such research needs to consider employees, residents, deliveries, and patron parking to analyze the entire parking ecosystem. The community and NAC should be involved.

The NAC received an update on Walnut Street Enhancements from the Planning Department.

- Newton’s DPW website updates weekly.
- There is a full-time inspector.
- Construction is ahead of schedule, but there have been delays in delivery of materials.

- Access to front or back doors is being maintained during sidewalk removal and reconstruction.
- Work is being conducted hand-in-hand with business owners during the day so they can continue curbside pickups.

We discussed the rezoning of Washington Street and Newton.

- First, members of the Planning Department were asked about their overall goals for rezoning. Gabriel Holbrow replied that it was largely to align zoning with the Comprehensive Plan and make neighborhood zoning align more with patterns identified in the “Pattern Book.” Peter Bruce said that while preserving neighborhood character and scale having been past goals of planning, and that this sounds much like that, that other goals, such as adding a lot of density and maximizing real estate values have also often been goals in city planning. What about them? And was the pandemic changing goals?
- Goals apparently, have not been revised by Planning in the wake of the ongoing pandemic, even to consider the pandemic’s ramifications for increasing density.
- The pandemic is slowing down the process of planning, however, by making meetings and face-to-face communication more difficult.
- Instead of focusing on overall goals, selected case studies have been given at presentations by Planning. City Councilors are being asked to consider cases in their wards, looking at the current and proposed new zoning case studies to identify issues.
- The residential section of the zoning code has been the initial area of review and it still is. Planners went out to the community last year and before, talked about residential zones, got useful feedback and made adjustments.
- Appreciation was expressed that recent proposals seem to fit better with existing neighborhoods than earlier ones did, even if needing further adjustment.
- There are robust outreach efforts. ZAP has virtual office hours and is unveiling a new, more user-friendly website. Memos are issued 7 days in advanced for review by ZAP committee members.
- Questions about increased density persisted, as the planners were asked how much overall density they were planning for, not just in terms of the residential districts, but including large, multi-use developments of which thousands of housing units are already being built or in the pipeline. Vague words like “modest” growth were criticized and specific numbers or other quantifiable tools were requested.
- Barney Heath admitted that the numbers for large complexes were being treated separately from the residential projections. There had been “build out” analyses last year comparing the current zoning code with the one proposed then. Since today’s proposals are very different, a new build out analysis will be reviewed with ZAP at an upcoming meeting, though judging from last year’s experience, that could take months of work.
- There is a need for a common understanding and vocabulary according to Planning Department reps.

- The rezoning process should be complete by December 2021, including feedback and working with the City. This drew criticism for scheduling another key vote in a lame-duck session.
- As to what happened to zoning for the Washington Street Vision Plan, the response was that the focus turned to the plan itself, which was adopted. Its zoning will be addressed when we discuss village districts. More detail will be provided later.
- Considering the pandemic, the desirability of increased density may decline, with people moving away from it, as a recent article in the New York Times reports: “*America’s Biggest Cities Were Already Losing their Allure. What Happens Next?*” “*The urge among some residents to leave because of coronavirus may be temporary. But it follows a deeper, more powerful demographic trend.*”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/us/coronavirus-moving-city-future.html>
- Concerns were expressed that most meetings in wards have been conducted in a “top-down” fashion and that ZAP is moving ahead to rezone properties against the public’s wishes. Audiences at previous planning meetings with the public were often highly critical.
- It was noted that current conditions will make it a favorable economic environment for developers to “buy low and sell high” with reduced financing and carrying costs, while individuals whose jobs and payrolls have been destabilized by the pandemic economic shutdown will be at a disadvantage. Many small businesses may be forced to close and sell.
- Since affordable housing is an issue already, the solutions to that issue are unclear.
- A question was asked about whether citizens will have the opportunity to vote on the zoning plan. The response was that zoning legislative is a process by the City, though citizens have the right to petition for a referendum.
- A question was asked about whether property owners will be permitted under the new zoning code to “opt out” of the redesigned zoning as a matter of individual choice.
- A comment was made that our current zoning, with its heavy emphasis single- or two-family zoning with large lot sizes and large houses is inherently discriminatory against the less affluent due to high home costs. A question followed as to whether it would be fairer to have a single zone for all residential areas, with a standard lot size and standard floor-area ratio, to allow the building of more small- and medium-sized houses. This would allow more density, while promoting affordability and geographic balance, but at a reduced scale (safer in pandemic times).
- A resident argued that allowing more housing by-right, not subject to inclusionary zoning (7 or more units), would make it more difficult for Newton to attain a safe harbor from 40Bs.
- A comment was made that the proposed “courtyard clusters” would add more density than is currently allowed, and that the Planning Department’s analysis has not taken that into account.

Regarding its own responses to the pandemic, the NAC discussed:

- Seeking matching gifts from corporations; buying and donating gift cards from local businesses to the Newton Food Pantry and to healthcare workers for use when businesses reopen.
- Investigating donating funds more than once since many NAC events have been or are likely to be cancelled for the remainder of the year.

On motion duly made and seconded, the NAC unanimously

- **Voted** to donate \$2,500 to the Newton Food Pantry.

Finally, NAC decided to discuss administrative issues regarding letters to City officials that are in the process of being drafted at the next meeting so that they can be read, reviewed/commented upon and voted upon by the NAC.

On motion duly made and seconded, the NAC unanimously

- **Voted** to adjourn the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Jessica Aker Archer, Secretary