



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: May 12, 2020

TIME: 6:30 pm via Zoom

1. Attendance

Commissioners Attending:

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

Commissioners Absent: None

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

Also Present: Allan Cohen

2. Approval of Minutes of April 7, 2020

On a motion made by Chuck Tanowitz and seconded by Beth Nicklas, the Minutes of the April 7, 2020 meeting were unanimously approved.

3. City Updates

Riverside: Mr. Heath explained that the current focus of the Land Use Committee is on plaza areas and discussion of revised programming for the site in light of the current fiscal picture. Upcoming meetings include May 26 (focus on Urban Design Guidelines) and June 2nd (focus on Transportation). It is anticipated that a draft Board order will be ready by the end of May with a few meetings in June to finalize the Board Order and bring to City Council vote.

40 B Projects: Mr. Heath explained that hearings regarding Dunstan East project will continue (on May 20th). [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 is also continuing hearings on The Residences on the Charles (15 Riverdale Avenue). The current focus is on transportation. The ZBA is expected to vote soon. [This proposal includes 204 units of rental housing, 7000 sq. ft. of retail, and community and amenity space—the 17,782 sq. ft. for office/innovation space has been removed.] Mr. Leader commented on the excessive focus on Dunstan East opposition on parking, especially when a project is a transit-oriented development.

Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

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

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

Howard Barnstone
Stephen Feller
Robert Finkel
Jeremy Freid
Jack Leader
Marcela Merino
Beth Nicklas
Joyce Plotkin
Sarah Rahman
Matt Segneri
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Mayor's Release of COVID-19 Small Business Recovery Grants: Mr. Heath explained that the Mayor will be announcing the roll out of the grant program, which is available to microenterprises (5 or fewer employees) and job retention or creations for employers with 6-20 employees. 50% of the \$10,000 microenterprise and \$15,000 other employer grants must be used for rent or mortgage payments. Ms. Plotkin expressed concern that the EDC was not consulted on the program before rolling it out. Mr. Plottel explained that the Mayor appointed two members of the EDC, Mr. Leader and Ms. Wood to serve on the selection group. Mr. Tanowitz asked if the requirement that the money be spent on rent was a HUD requirement; Mr. Heath explained that it was not, but it made a portion of the grant at least quickly dispersible. Ms. Bailin explained that, since this is a HUD program, the focus is on low/moderate income owners and/or clientele and flexibility is limited.

4. Discussion Items

a. Report from Survey Subgroup and Discussion Thereof

Ms. Wood, as the subgroup leader, reported that there were 245 responses. The overarching message is that we came up with the right focus for our subgroups. Principle concerns: attracting customers, marketing, and clear guidance (space reconfiguration, how to operate safely, etc.) In terms of how the City can help, marketing, providing posters about guidance for businesses to post, allowing signage (sandwich signs) on sidewalks, etc. City Services, including inspections and permitting, came up numerous times. Mentoring and partnering came up a lot. Ms. Wood noted that over a hundred respondents agreed to be contacted, so we need all members to assist with follow-up. Daycare centers and pre- and after-school programs (many in the public schools) responded and noted that without their being able to come back online, parents will not be able to get back to work. The subgroup will prepare a guide to speaking with respondents. Mr. Plottel noted we will save assignments to the end of the meeting.

Ms. Merino suggested that, if possible, those who responded with email address be notified of the grant program. Ms. Bailin noted that we do have that list and she will send it out to that group as well when the grant notice is finalized. Mr. Barnstone commented that the survey was well conceived and executed. What the City can do is drive customers back to our shops and restaurants and can provide a protocol for PPE—how customers need to behave. Mr. Tanowitz commented that it was a very well-done survey and we should use the survey to impress upon the City the need to expedite or do away with permitting constraints.

b. Report from City Services Subgroup and Discussion Thereof

Mr. Leader, the subgroup lead, thanked Ms. Bailin for getting answers to questions from appropriate departments, including the information that neither retail nor restaurant establishments will need to be re-inspected prior

to reopening. Daycare is under State control and guidance will come from there. The City has now reopened construction sites per State guidance, so that issue has been eliminated. The group remains disappointed in the City's response to virtual inspections, which other towns are using, but the group will continue to recommend it. On zoning redesign, ZAP is still dealing only with residential zoning, but the EDC needs to be involved when they get to village center mixed use and commercial. The subgroup memo includes both long-term ideas and more immediate ones which we may be able to expedite as a result of the state of emergency. Examples of issues: zoning doesn't allow surgicenters, R & D, which is not defined, appears limited to Rdna and marijuana research; the City should allow mobile ice cream trucks around parks and give them clear administrative guidance; remove landmines in the zoning. Members of the public suggested the City should provide education on how to become State and City authorized vendors.

The members took some time to review forwarded personal suggestions from a member of the City's staff, which Mr. Plottel advised that all subgroups should review the list and should incorporate any ideas appropriate to their subgroup. There was discussion of gift card programs and disagreement of their efficacy, especially where we have no way to fund them. Ms. Plotkin commented that the idea of free parking in Village centers is an excellent one as businesses reopen.

c. Report from Marketing Subgroup and Discussion Thereof

Ms. Merino, as subgroup co-lead, explained that it is critical to re-incentivize the consumer to return to stores and restaurants in a safe way. Marketing is key to that. The subgroup's recommendations are quite detailed, and Ms. Merino provided a short summary. The key to success is to be flexible in responding to unknown future conditions. The subgroup divided its recommendations into those to be adopted within 1-3 months (clear health guidelines, marketing, mentoring); 3-12 months (venture funds, training, etc.); and 1 year+ (long-terms ideas like changing the delivery model for brick and mortar businesses). Recovery plans should be inclusive and be geared towards all types of businesses. The subgroup felt a strong component of the recovery will be outdoor popup markets—street fairs, outdoor seating for restaurants. Ms. Merino noted that Ms. Bailin was working with the Cultural Department on a template for such outdoor activities and the City should establish a pilot, perhaps in Newton Centre. Community business participation is important.

Mr. Tanowitz, subgroup co-lead, talked about the grant program they envision. It envisions small grants from the City with matching funds, to preferably be used for placemaking. It could provide an expedited process to create community building and would be a later piece of the recovery plan.

Ms. Rahman spoke about shop local campaign options. She did significant research on best practices. Ms. Bailin noted that there is already a "Newton

Together” cultural department brand and that could be a great link to shop local. She noted that such campaigns are part education (economic benefits of shopping/dining/banking local) and marketing (what we have to offer). Ms. Rahman explained, although detailed in the subgroup’s written recommendation thus far, that usually there must be a steering committee comprised of local businesses and community groups. The City cannot run such a program indefinitely. There must be continued stakeholder involvement. Ms. Wood asked how such a program gets off the ground. Ms. Rahman noted that there needs to be a partnership among businesses, community groups and the City. There was discussion of possible brands like Newton First, Newton Together (Ms. Merino thought that could be a great and consistent umbrella), etc. Mr. Tanowitz noted that the Mayor, in the past, shied away from the City’s involvement with such programs.

Ms. Merino talked about two other recommendations in their written document and there was discussion that some might belong in another subgroups work.

d. Report from Mentoring Subgroup and Discussion Thereof

Mr. Finkel, as lead of the mentoring subgroup, noted that the survey confirmed the importance of providing some mentoring and/or partnering opportunities. After consultation with the Law Department, the City/EDC could not offer a mentoring program of its own. As a result, the group will recommend partnering with the Newton Needham Chamber and lobby that group not to require membership to participate, at least during these times. Ms. Rahman noted that the EDC should also refer businesses to SCORE, ICIC, Center for Women, Enterise, etc.

Mr. Finkel explained that they also considered creating a recovery fund for businesses. This was discussed below. Ms. Bailin noted that putting together a program to educate businesses as to how to become an approved state and municipal vendor was one the City could do.

e. Recovery Fund Proposal

Mr. Plottel explained that the idea started with a venture capital fund, which as he and Ms. Plotkin discovered, didn’t really work for the needs of businesses. It morphed into a grant making fund to assist businesses. The draft ideas have been shared. It may not be tax deductible. He will be contacting banks to see how this could be set up. Ms. Rahman asked if he had looked at revolving funds? The problem is collateral. Ms. Bailin noted that Boston’s fund, into which Vertex recently seeded money, is set up as a nonprofit which gifts money to small businesses. Mr. Heath commented that one avenue which resonates is to use the large number of local banks the City has to organize a program to assist our village center small businesses. Mr. Plottel will meet with bank leaders to discuss this. Ms. Plotkin noted that Citizen’s Bank just announced \$480,000 in grants to small businesses. Mr. Tanowitz mentioned that Metrowest might be of assistance and noted that this is a huge project. Ms. Bailin noted that we do

have the Newton COVID-19 Fund already in existence with the United Way—could it provide a mechanism? Mr. Tanowitz mentioned contacting Susan Paley of the Village Bank; Mr. Plottel mentioned Eastern Bank, which had responded favorably to the survey in offering to help businesses.

f. Next Steps

i. “Interview” of survey respondents and incorporate survey data into subgroup section.

Ms. Wood explained that we need volunteers to respond to survey respondents. She’s asking everyone to volunteer to help. The survey group will try to assign mentoring/partnering respondents to that group, marketing to marketing, etc. The group will also come up with guidelines for the interview and suggested questions. Members should review their assigned respondents to see what they said. The purpose Mr. Plottel noted is to listen to see what concerns or suggestions they want to talk about. Members were polled on the number of people they could realistically interview before our next meeting. Phil 5-10; Marcela 5; Howard 5; Sarah 5; Jeremy 5-10; Rob 5-10; Joyce 5; Beth 5; Debora 5-10; Chuck 5; Jack 5-10.

Ms. Wood will assign the calls and provide the guidelines and questions for the group to use. Mr. Plottel advised that if the respondent’s real concerns have to do with the City, send the information to Ms. Bailin.

ii. Process to finalize the letter of ideas to the Mayor

The subgroup leaders and officers will prepare drafts and get out to the EDC before our interim meeting

iii. Need for interim meeting to review draft letter (perhaps week of May 25th)

There is a need for an interim meeting during the week of May 25th. Members were polled for availability during that week. Because of other Planning Department meetings requiring zoom, the meetings had to be held from before 6:30. It was decided that the best day was Tuesday May 26th and the meeting would start at 5:00 and go to 6:30. The only item on the Agenda will be the review of the draft Report to the Mayor, including information from the follow-up interviews.

iv. Approval of recommended ideas and the letter to the Mayor (June 9 or sooner)

The format will be a letter to the Mayor with attached appendices with the reports from the various subgroups.

5. Other Business

Ms. Wood commented that we've done a great job within the past few weeks.

6. Date of next regularly scheduled meeting—June 9, 2020

The date of the next regularly scheduled meeting for the EDC will be **June 9**, 2020, with an interim meeting to be scheduled on May 26th. At the June 9th meeting, there will be a final vote on recommendations.

7. Adjournment

Upon motion by Mr. Leader and seconded by Mr. Tanowitz, the meeting was adjourned by unanimous vote at 8:21 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Devra G. Bailin, Economic Development Director