



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

DATE: May 26, 2020

TIME: 5:00 pm via Zoom

1. Attendance

Commissioners Attending:

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

Commissioners Absent: Steve Feller; Jeremy Freid; and Jack Leader.

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

Also Present: Councilor Pam Wright; Greg Reibman, President of the Newton Needham Regional Chamber; and Allan Cohen.

2. Approval of Minutes of May 12, 2020

Due to time constraints, this item was not reached and will be included in the meeting on June 9th.

3. Discussion Item: Review draft report to Mayor

Mr. Plottel referenced the circulated draft documents and asked for general comments on the letter. Ms. Nicklas thought that there wasn't any need to go into the details of the health impacts of COVID-19. Mr. Barnstone agreed and suggested the letter simply start with the sentence beginning "Pursuant to your letter..." Ms. Nicklas felt that the subgroups and their members should go in the body of the letter and not in an appendix. Ms. Jackson noted that she already sent specific suggestions to Mr. Plottel and didn't think there was a need to discuss them.

There was an interim discussion by Ms. Wood about how the interviews were going. The members were asked to send summaries of those discussions to Ms. Wood. It was noted that businesses seemed pleased with the follow-up. Members were encouraged to keep following-up with their interviewees.

The Commissioners went through the draft letter's "Summary of Ideas", starting with:

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
Chuck Tanowitz

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Business Outdoors. Members discussed whether use of the word “pilot’ was inequitable and too timid. They discussed the urgency of the need and the importance of equality among the City’s villages in offering programs. Because of varying conditions and the need to expand outdoor seating, whether by allowing it on sidewalks, parking spaces, private parking lots, City parks or parking lots, or closing streets, it is imperative programs offered meet those conditions. Ms. Rahman noted that outdoor dining could be either takeout or service. Ms. Bailin was asked to explain the Needham model, which was to open various Town Common areas to takeout, including wine and beer from restaurants, by placing picnic tables and tenting at various designated locations on Town property near restaurant clusters.

Support was expressed by Ms. Wood to closing off appropriate streets for dining and vending. Mr. Tanowitz noted that there are multiple types of restaurants and all will need outdoor opportunities. Ms. Bailin mentioned that for some restaurants there is the opportunity to use private parking lots for extension of service areas or for takeout for patrons. It was noted that there are issues in implementation which need to be addressed. Ms. Plotkin noted that we need to be careful not to limit ideas to village centers; commercial areas like The Street and Newton Nexus should be included in ideas. Ms. Wood agreed that recommendations need to be inclusive. Ms. Nicklas noted that using portions of the streets requires input on safety, making the need for clear guidelines to be created for restaurants to follow.

With regard to organizing an outdoor dining task force, Greg Reibman noted that the Chamber had a group of restaurants involved in this issue and could be of assistance in facilitating. Mr. Heath added that the Mayor asked for a meeting later this week with restaurant representatives and that various City Councillors are very invested in the efforts to assist restaurants. The City staff are working to understand what City ordinances and/or regulations would need to be changed or suspended in order to proceed with various ideas. Mr. Barnstone noted that he had one restaurant request that the City relax the requirements for licensing outdoor seating and to do something about the high cost of delivery services. Mr. Heath pointed out that the City’s ability to direct private delivery fees was questionable legally and for that reason the Mayor sent a letter to the State’s Attorney General for action.

Ms. Merino mentioned that outdoor concert series, when allowed, should include private parties like M. Steinert & Sons. This would be done in connection with Cultural Department and the template Ms. Bailin is working on with that Department. Another suggestion was outdoor drive-in movies which was suggested for the Street where they have large flat walls.

Transportation/Parking

There was discussion as to whether free parking should be included. The key is to make sure that curbside and central public parking areas are available for customers and that the City creates a plan for employee parking. Ms. Plotkin noted that free parking was an issue raised by a large number of people. Mr. Heath commented that this has been a complicated issue and perhaps best to

stay out of the parking plan issue at this time. He suggests simply saying that supporting businesses with a parking strategy that make sense for particular areas. Ms. Wood agrees with Mr. Heath—since so many businesses mentioned parking, the EDC needs to say something.

Market, Mentor, and Shop Newton Businesses

There was discussion about how one would track success of any of the initiatives and Mr. Tanowitz noted that the EDC would need baseline numbers in order to do so.

With respect to mentoring, due to advice from the Law Department, this would have to run through the Chamber. Mr. Reibman pointed out that they have received many folks volunteering to mentor but not many asking for the services. The challenge is to match people up and the Chamber will need assistance. Mr. Reibman agreed that the Chamber would open up the program to non-Chamber members.

Ms. Merino explained that the marketing subgroup wanted to be sure we focused on ways to strengthen outreach. The City should provide marketing to the businesses for shopping and dining local. It was noted that this is also a Chamber function. Ms. Bailin suggested a flyer to remind residents of the importance of shopping, dining and banking local—the importance of keeping money in our local economy.

Re-opening & Safety

It was discussed that there may be a need to differentiate programs for restaurants and then for other businesses. Ms. Rahman agreed and indicated it is crucial for there to be clear guidance to each industry sector. Ms. Bailin noted that the Governor has been and will be providing same for each industry and she felt it was unlikely the City would be adding anything to those requirements. Mr. Plottel suggested the City provide bulk buying of PPE; Ms. Nicklas noted other communities were doing that. Mr. Heath said he would check with Josh Morse. Ms. Merino noted that many local companies are manufacturing PPE and hand sanitizer and we should recommend a shop local regarding these. Mr. Reibman commented that the Chamber has a list of PPE providers.

Post COVID-19 Regulations

Ms. Rahman asked that the title be changed to something like “Regulations for Local Economic Recovery” and where we used “post COVID-19”, it should be replaced with “Recovery”. There was a discussion between Mr. Plottel and Mr. Heath about virtual inspections. Mr. Heath indicated that IDS did not feel they could do inspections properly by performing them virtually. Ms. Jackson noted that it did not preclude the EDC making the recommendations and giving examples of other cities doing so. Mr. Tanowitz noted that restaurants in particular have been negatively impacted by slow inspections. This is compounded by understaffed departments.

With respect to the zoning recommendations, Mr. Plottel asked Mr. Heath to review them for accuracy. Mr. Heath said he would have the Chief Zoning Official do so and get back to the EDC. Ms. Rahman asked Mr. Heath about the status of zoning redesign. Mr. Heath explained that the work has started with residential zoning. Ms. Jackson asked about whom to contact if one has zoning questions. Mr. Heath said that would be the Chief Zoning Official.

Support Newton's Childcare Programs

The needs of this group were clearly identified in the survey responses. Ms. Bailin noted that the regulations and licensing for these businesses come from the State.

Financial Support for Newton Businesses

Ms. Nicklas commented that the fund proposed is a great idea but a tremendous amount of work. The City and the EDC couldn't take on such a massive task. Mr. Plottel noted that this is why it was pushed to a task force. He is continuing work to see about local banks getting involved.

The second grant program, Ms. Rahman explained, is a community-based placemaking/beautification program of which a group of businesses working collaboratively could take advantage. It was concluded that there was too much detail about the program in the letter and it should be more briefly described in the text and the details outlined in the appendix.

Create Newton Recovery Council

It was discussed whether to combine this recommendation with the ones regarding financial support and marketing—just one council recommendation. Ms. Rahman noted that conceptually that would make sense but that the work of marketing, running a fund to support businesses, and other work would be difficult.

Additional Ideas and Information

Ms. Nicklas suggested that the language of this section be reworked; it should be noted in the letter that more information and details are provided in each of the appendices. It was discussed that important ideas should be in the letter, as they may get lost in the appendices.

Steps for getting letter in final form

There was a discussion of next steps. Mr. Plottel will revise the letter per the discussion tonight and asked for volunteers to help him with the draft. Ms. Rahman, Ms. Wood, Ms. Jackson, and Ms. Merino volunteered. While that core group works on the draft, all subgroup leads are responsible for getting their appendix in final shape.

4. Other Business

No other business was discussed.

5. 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**. At the June 9th meeting, there will be a final vote on recommendations.

7. Adjournment

Upon motion by Ms. Wood and seconded by Ms. Rahman, the meeting was adjourned by unanimous vote at 6:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Devra G. Bailin, Economic Development Director