

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, January 7, 2021

Area Council members:

Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Larry Rosenberg, Amanda Theunissen, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio:

None present

Guests:

Sonya McKnight, Carol Carroll, Kathy Pillsbury, Chris Pitts, Rena Getz, Dennis Rieske, John Rice, Robert Fizek, Ned Crecelius, Loumona Petroff, Beth Uhl-Israel, Walter Einstein, Katherine Clark, Andreae Downs (City Councilor)

Meeting called to order at 7:34 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin presiding. The meeting was held using Zoom videoconferencing technology due to the Covid-19 health crisis.

Election of Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council Officers

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin turned the meeting over to Area Councilor Bob Burke to preside this portion of the meeting to conduct and hold the elections for President, Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary for 2021. Nathaniel Lichtin (President), Barbara Darnell (Vice President), Groot Gregory (Treasurer), and Srdjan Nedeljkovic (Secretary) were nominated to reprise their roles as officers. Each officer was elected 8 to 0, no abstentions, except for Groot Gregory abstaining in the vote for Treasurer.

Village Day Discussion

A discussion about planning for Village Day ensued. The future course of the Covid-19 pandemic is uncertain and the situation for organizing large outdoor gatherings for June of 2021 is uncertain. Area Councilor Amy Wayne suggested an alternate idea to hold a contest themed around an architectural crossword puzzle. John Rice suggested moving Village Day to September. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell mentioned that there may be many other city activities moved to September, and that this could be a very busy month. If an event were held in October, the weather may be variable. John Rice proposed an alternate idea that Village Day could be coordinated with Taiwan Day, which will be moved from May to September, perhaps during the second or third week in September.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory noted that the Area Council is dependent on outside funding to pay for activities related to Village Day. He suggested that the Area Council could plan various activities on a

monthly basis to keep the community engaged in an ongoing manner, and to use the funds collected for Village Day to support local businesses via gift cards. John Rice stated that he is booking July and August dates for the Hyde summer concert series. Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen suggested another contest idea that would be similar to the one conducted by the Newton Needham Chamber that involved posting food images from restaurants to encourage people to patronize these establishments. Chris Pitts noted that the Waban Area Council is also considering its options for Village Day.

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell stated that while Village Day in June may not be possible in its traditional format, perhaps an event in combination with Taiwan Day in the fall may be possible. John Rice pointed out that this kind of joint event would be a very nice, large event. John mentioned that the NHNAC should consider reaching out to other Area Councils to see when they are having their own Village Day celebrations this year. Perhaps there could be a Village Day in all of the villages each weekend in September. John mentioned that he had reached out to the police and traffic department to inform them that a September date is being considered for Taiwan Day.

Carol Carroll suggested that in planning Village Day, the Area Council should consider areas outside of the village center that are within the Area Council region. Area Councilor Amy Wayne noted that these areas could be featured in the architectural contest. Chris Pitts mentioned that Waban had conducted an architectural tour of Waban, and a walk like this could be considered for Newton Highlands over the summer. Walter Einstein mentioned that he has been part of the Highlands since the 1970s, and expressed concerns about conducting activities outside of the main village center. Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen noted that there are a number of significant restaurants and other attractions at Four Corners, and that we could consider including Four Corners when planning Village Day events. The discussion about Village Day planning concluded with Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin stating that he will contact the other Area Councils to discuss September events. Nathaniel will also reach out to Steve Feinstein to get his input, as Steve has successfully organized prior Village Day events. During the NHNAC meeting in March, we will have further discussion about contests and other activities.

Area Council Banner

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin asked if any costs estimates had been obtained. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell responded that no official cost estimates have been obtained, but that she is aware of a similar banner being purchased for around \$200 plus design fees. Area Councilor Theunissen offered to reach out to Signal Graphics in Newtonville to inquire about a quote for the cost of the proposed banner.

Zoning Redesign

Nathaniel Lichtin updated the Area Council about the zoning redesign process. The City held its public comment meetings in December and a decision was made to continue the Zoning Redesign process after this calendar year. A new schedule will be announced next week. It was felt that people needed a lot more analysis and information to understand the implications of the Zoning Redesign process. Two changes in the direction of the process have been discussed. The City does not intend to pursue the concept of allowing two-family housing by right everywhere in Newton. There was also

lack of support for multi-unit conversions outside of village centers for single-family homes to become up to 6 units of housing. This had been very controversial.

On January 25, there will be a public hearing on the garage ordinance. If folks have thoughts about design of garages, this is an opportunity to comment to the city. There has been a proposal to limit the front of a garage to no more than 50% of the width of a house. The proposed ordinance will not require garages facing the front of the house to be set back from the rest of the house, but the width of the garage cannot be more than 50% of the width of the house.

Robert Fizek expressed support for the proposal that no more than 50% of the entire width of the front of the house may be a garage door. Also, a garage may not violate the front setback requirement. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic expressed concern that this was such a small change that it would not make much of a difference in terms of aesthetics in the city. Robert explained that although a modest, change, the requirement to not exceed 50% of the front width of the house will balance out the overall effect that a garage has on the streetscape. Srdjan mentioned that side entry should be considered as the preferred option in some parts of the city. Kathy Pillsbury noted that side entry garages may require more pavement. Nathaniel Lichtin pointed out that side-facing garages will continue to be potentially allowed to take more than 50% of the front of a house. Carol Carroll asked whether the garage ordinance will address the issue of width of curb cuts. Nathaniel noted that this ordinance will not address the number and width of curb cuts allowed for a parcel. These issues may be addressed in the overall zoning redesign context, however. It was noted that many existing multifamily homes in the village are older and they do not typically create issues with larger curb cuts.

Area Councilor Bob Burke asked if the zoning redesign process is considering additional two-family homes to be allowed near MBTA stations. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted that multifamily homes will likely be allowed in Village Centers. In areas near transit that are outside of village centers, this will be up for debate.

Local and City Updates:

1149-1151 Walnut Street Project:

Talanian Realty is proposing to construct a 4-story, 48 feet high, 26-unit apartment building with first floor retail at 1149-1151 Walnut Street, replacing a single story building at that site. Area Council President Lichtin noted that this project went to the City Council Land Use Committee on January 5. There were many councilors who expressed general support for type of project, but there were also concerns about the specific aspects of this proposal. City Councilors expressed particular concerns about the effects this project may have on the nearby Christian Science church and its property. City Councilors encouraged the developer to meet with representatives from the Church and come to an agreement.

City Councilors had concerns about the layout of parking on the site, not necessarily the number of spaces, but the size and accessibility of the spaces. The Planning Department had concerns that the parking geometry may not be practical. The Land Use Committee did not approve the project and the proposal was held. The plans that were presented at the meeting were the same plans as presented at the December NHNAC meeting. At the Land Use Committee meeting, the developer

suggested that some of the mandatory sewer improvement funds generated by this project should be used for undergrounding utilities. City Councilors stated that the costs of undergrounding should be borne by the developer, and that undergrounding at the site was expected from the developer. It was pointed out that there is just one telephone pole in front of the property.

City Councilor Andreae Downs noted that fees for infiltration and inflow (I+I) generated by the development will be used for upgrades to sewer infrastructure. The I+I funds may be used to repair sewer system leaks, for example. Councilor Downs noted that these funds are earmarked for sewer issues and cannot be reallocated to other community projects.

Area Council President Lichtin noted some other concerns expressed by City Councilors were that the project was too big for the site and too boxy and lacked open space. Some councilors were concerned about lack of open space, and others were concerned about the style of the building not fitting in with the neighborhood, especially the flat roof design. There were concerns that the building will have all electric heating, except for the commercial space, and that it would be preferable to have all electric power everywhere. There was a request for additional images of the project to be produced so that City Council could put into better context the relationship of the proposed project to the adjacent church.

No date has been set for the next Land Use meeting. A Fair Housing Commission discussion about the project was postponed and it will be discussed on February 3. Nathaniel noted that there was consensus on the developer removing the existing second curb cut to the site and to have just one curb cut on Walnut Street.

Ned Crecelius offered to provide additional information on the church's position. Nathaniel Lichtin and Amanda Theunissen supported the recommendation for the developer and church representatives to meet to discuss the project, including concerns about cars driving out from the parking lot to the sidewalk. Mr. Crecelius noted that the church remains prepared to have discussions with the developer, and noted that the church has thus far submitted two counterproposals to the developer.

Special Election:

Newton will have two special elections to fill two city council vacancies. The Newton Highlands Area Council will participate in organizing debates for candidates. Area Councilor Bob Burke stated that a committee of members of different Area Councils will be meeting tomorrow. They will be discussing finding a moderator for a candidates' debate, and will begin the process of drawing up questions, and brainstorm about how to advertise the event. The Special Election is being held on March 16 to fill two vacant City Council At Large positions for Ward 1 and Ward 2. The debate is being planning to take place on Sunday, Feb 21 from 2 pm to 4 pm virtually via Zoom technology. Two debates are being planned, one hour each. The planning group will be looking for a non-committed moderator. Srdjan Nedeljkovic and Barbara Darnell suggested that Steven Feinstein should be considered for moderator.

NewCal Senior Center:

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted that there was a community meeting this week on updating the plans for the Senior Center in Newtonville. The meeting focused on two design alternatives. One would keep the existing building and add an addition to the back. The second would remove the existing building and replace it with a new building. Both designs would have parking underneath and both would extend back towards the neighborhood. John Rice mentioned that he has been a member of the NewCal Planning Committee for 4 years, and the committee is now in the process of getting feedback from the community. Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked about the height of the proposed project. John Rice noted that the project will have three stories and will integrate more parking, new functional spaces, a 6000 SF gym, and a walking track. This will be an active living center. The name of the center has yet to be determined.

MBTA Schedule Changes

With lower ridership due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and loss of revenue, the MBTA Financial Oversight board voted to temporarily eliminate the Route 52 bus through Newton Centre. They also voted to reduce service on the Route 59 bus on Walnut Street and to reduce service on the Green line. The schedule for implementing these cuts will be moved up the Spring. The MBTA has stated it will not raise fares until service levels are restored to pre-pandemic levels.

Recent Incident in Newton Highlands Village Center:

A brief discussion was held regarding the recent incident in Newton Highlands that resulted in a police shooting. As this event has been described in news reports, there was no new information to present. City Councilor Andreae Downs noted that as Chair of the Public Safety Committee in City Council, she will be asking for a briefing regarding this incident to City Council. The City Council will then decide if a hearing is to take place. Area Councilor Amy Wayne expressed concern that the sound quality of police radios used for communication may make it difficult to understand descriptions made by police officers. John Rice noted that that many business owners were emotional over this event, and that the owner of the business affected is taking some time away.

Village Economic Development:

It was noted that the owner of Walnut Market is giving a 10% discount to customers shopping in his store if they are also shopping in other businesses in Newton Highlands, in order to encourage people to frequent other businesses. John Rice noted that many businesses in the village center are closed and there are more empty storefronts due to the pandemic. John brought up the idea that we can recreate a Merchants' Association in the village. Area Councilor Amy Wayne stated she has already talked with the merchants, who were not sure that an association would really work very well. Each merchant has different ideas about promotion, and organizing an association may be difficult. Councilor Wayne noted that the business owners did like the idea of promotions using gift certificates.

John Rice suggested that the Area Council should think about ways we can support these businesses and that he will initiate some conversations about this with the business owners and property owners. John mentioned that he had also talked with the mayor about better lighting in the village center, but funding is very limited. John will talk with business owners about this once again. Robert Fizek suggested that a conversation about the village business situation could also include the Economic

Development director for the City. Although city revenues are low, it was pointed out that some state funding may be available. City Councilor Downs noted that the city has done some work on expanding outdoor venues and using parking spaces for restaurants. Area Councilor Amy Wayne suggested an idea to close certain street segments at times with music and other activities, but City Councilor Downs noted that there is concern that music events may lead to an increased number of infections during the pandemic.

Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen suggested that having picnic tables at the Hyde Playground may attract more people to eat outside. John Rice supported the idea of having local restaurants provide take-out dining to people at the Hyde attending concerts. He noted that there are already two picnic tables at the Hyde Playground, but that it may be difficult to fit more items onto the field which has multiple functions, including a baseball field, a concert venue, and a playground.

Robert Fizek suggested that another place to sit may be at the Congregational Church, and wondered if the church property could accommodate a few picnic tables. Dennis Rieske replied that he would be glad to take this suggestion to the Church Council.

Administrative Items:

Approval of December Minutes: The draft minutes were submitted for review from the December 3rd Area Council meeting. Three changes or revisions were recommended. The amount of funds allocated for the recent Area Council contest was \$201. In the prior discussion about the banner, it was Amanda who had spoken with Ingrid. Since Amanda had missed the prior meeting, she was not involved in preparations for the upcoming debate. With these changes, the minutes were approved 8:0.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory had submitted a monthly update. There were no transactions. Nathaniel Lichtin asked if there were any questions. There were none.

Preview of February 2021 Meeting:

There are two proposed projects on next month's agenda. The first is a proposed 4-unit development at #27 Floral Street that would replace an existing single family home. The second is a proposal for a coffee shop on Route 9 just west of the Woodward Street intersection.

New Business:

There was no additional new business to discuss.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:06 P.M.