

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, February 4, 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:

Mitch Fischman, J David, Michael Ross, Ted Fire, Lisa Monahan, Amy McNamee, Sonya and Dick McKnight, Kathleen Hobson, Katie Enright, Jonathan Freedman, Yvette Niwa, Lisa Gordon, Tahira Rehmatullah, Andreae Downs, Mark Shooman, Jennifer S, Deborah Allen, Loumona Petroff, Brian Beisel, Marie St. Fleur, John Rice, Hal Lichtin, Donnalyn Kahn, Peter Bruce, Jane, Newbury Terrace, Robert Fizek, Julius Starkman, Alicia Bowman, Tyler Kirtley, Gerlinde Munshi, Matthew Skelly, Judi Burten, Kate Crowther

Meeting called to order at 7:32 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.

New Coffee Shop at 1021 Boylston Street (Route 9)

A proposal was presented for a new coffee shop at 1021 Boylston. This location is on Route 9 westbound between Woodward Street and Dickerman Road. Mitch Fischman presented the proposal on behalf of the proponent, Starbucks. He introduced other team members: Ted Fire representing the building owner, Katie Enright, a civil engineer from the firm Howard Stein Hudson, Jen Shultz-Sullivan, project counsel. The proposal is for a drive-through Starbucks coffee shop at 1021 Boylston Street. The existing building would remain on the site but would be remodeled as a drive-through. Prior to tonight's meeting, the proponent has met with Ward 5 City Council members and has sent letters about the proposal to 12-14 abutters along Boylston Street, Dickerman Road, and Woodward Street who are within the immediate vicinity of the new proposal.

The proposal is to convert the existing retail building into a drive-through restaurant or coffee shop that would be exclusively used as a drive-through. Renovations will be made to the existing building, which will have exterior changes on all 4 sides, and there will also be changes in the landscape on site and on the perimeter of the site. There will be hardscape changes to the paved area. The project is required by the city to improve drainage on the site. Mr. Fischman stated he has lived in Newton for 40 years and that he was active in city government, although not in the past 6-7 years. He is quite familiar with the neighborhood and lives in Newton Highlands. He presented an aerial view of the site.

There is currently a hardware store next to the site on the east, then a two family house further east, and then a UPS store at corner of Route 9 and Woodward Street. The current building floor area is about 3000 SF, and it is currently used as a retail store. Access and egress to the site comes off of Route 9 with two driveways on each side of the building. To the west of the property, there is a house with a white fence that surrounds it. Mr. Fischman noted that a traffic study has been completed, and that the proponent will file for a Special Permit in March or April.

Ted Fire stated that he represents the owner of the property. Starbucks has expressed an interest in operating a drive-through at this site. The in-store café concept has become a secondary consideration to Starbucks during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many people want to be distanced and prefer to pick up coffee via a drive through window. Mr. Fire believes that the proposed coffee shop will be a great amenity for people heading west on Route 9. The exterior of the existing building will be preserved, keeping with the character of what it is now, but there will be some modifications to facilitate operations. The proposed new business will incorporate Starbucks signage in a way that is consistent with city regulations. Katie Enright reviewed the site plan from a civil engineering standpoint. She noted that access to and from the site will be “right in” and “right out.” The new entrance will be in the same location as the current eastside driveway, but the westside driveway exit will be wider. Although the overall gross floor area of the building is 3000 SF, the building footprint is 1500 SF. To accommodate the drive-through, the existing deck off the rear of the building will be removed. In addition to the drive-through and pickup areas, there will be parking for 4 spaces on site for employees. Ms. Enright noted that the site is sloped and that it dips down 9 feet to back of site. Soil testing has been done, and the proponent will provide a new storm water management system. What is considered currently as open space on the site will be reduced to provide more pavement. New fencing will be introduced all around the side and rear of the property, with some evergreens along the rear fence. There will be pedestrian access from sidewalk on Route 9 to the pick-up window. In case traffic backs up due to queuing, a driver may exit the site right away via a driveway in the front setback of the building. Jenn Schultz then introduced herself as the permitting counsel. The project will seek Special Permit exceptions for three items: conversion from retail to a drive-through restaurant, parking lot with increased paved areas, and continued non-conformity of parking space setbacks from adjacent properties. The project will reduce permeable area on site and decrease open space.

Questions and comments followed from meeting attendees. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic recommended rejection of the proposal. Allowing a drive-through coffee shop is inconsistent with many stated city goals regarding climate and environment. The project should be rejected based on loss of open space on the site, its impact on traffic, and its impact on safety of cars entering and exiting on Route 9. City Councilor Andreae Downs asked what could be developed on this site by right. There are nearby multifamily residential structures, and mucho of the immediate area is zoned commercial. This is an MR-2 zone. Although zoning does not allow multi-family apartment buildings on this site, a two-family home would be allowed by right. Julius Starkman noted that in prior years, the building was used as a pottery shop, and it is currently a home and garden shop. He commented that the building lends itself to a sit-down coffee shop. Mr. Starkman noted that a Starbucks in Natick is a traffic nightmare, and expressed concern that the proposed Starbucks at this site will cause traffic to back up in front of houses and driveways on Route 9. He questioned why entrance to the site from the west side driveway isn't being considered. Mr. Starkman does not believe that this site should have a drive-through coffee shop.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory asked if the traffic study will consider how people will access this site if they are going eastbound. Most likely, someone going eastbound would make a U-turn at Woodward, go to the site, and then take a right on Dickerman, then a right on Lincoln Street, and return towards Route 9 on Woodward, and then take a left back onto Route 9 eastbound. Brian Beisel, a traffic engineer working for the proponent, acknowledged that customers heading eastbound would return to Route 9 by driving on Dickerman and then out on Woodward. However, he stated that most traffic to this site will be going westbound on Route 9, as the site is considered a “pass by” trip. Westbound trips will encompass 89% of the trips to the site, most of which will not be new auto volume. Area Councilor Groot Gregory questioned whether there would be large numbers of people driving westbound in the morning to support this business, as most potential customers in the morning would be going eastbound. Mr. Beisel noted that the auto volume on Route 9 is 2000 vehicles per hour inbound and 1530 vehicles per hour outbound. Mitch Fischman noted that there will be a peer review of the traffic study.

Lisa Monahan commented that this project should not go forward. Ms. Monahan noted that the site is currently zoned for housing by right, and that with the current housing crisis, it would be more favorable to building housing at this site. The site is already zoned for multiple family, it is near an MBTA stop, it is near shops, and it is not a far walk from Newton Highlands. Ms. Monahan also expressed concern that a Starbucks at this location will not help village center businesses, many of which are struggling tremendously. Ms. Monahan is also concerned about traffic backups that may occur if the drive through is approved. The fact that the site plan needs a special permit based on four claims indicates that this proposal is not the best use of this site. Area Councilor Larry Rosenberg expressed additional concerns about the backup of cars that may occur, blocking other driveways, and being on Route 9. He noted that at some other coffee sites, traffic is known to back up onto the roadway. Larry is concerned that cars trying to get into the coffee shop may be backing up traffic on Route 9. Mr. Beisel noted that there is an “escape lane” for people to immediately eject from the site if the traffic was backing up at the drive-through window. He mentioned that there may be 7-9 cars in the queue at any time waiting for their order. Larry thinks that this is a poor proposal for this site.

Julius Starkman noted that the breakdown lane in this section of Route 9 is not a full car width. Although the Newton Decorative Hardware business has its own curb-cut, cars will not be able to access this business site if the traffic is backed up going into the coffee shop. Some drivers may go up on the sidewalk. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked if the cars queuing up will be emitting greenhouse gases or pollutants in the neighborhood. Sonya McKnight mentioned that the back of the site is a wetland area, and that water collects in the rear. Katie Enright, civil engineer, noted that there is a couple of feet of fill currently at the rear of the site, and that there is a dry well that takes the runoff from the entire contributing area. The new development will upgrade the drainage system at the back of the site. The property owner is required to keep any run-off on the site, and will provide a storage system on back of site that will put water back into the ground. At the close of the presentation, Mitch Fischman thanked the Area Council and all of the participants. The proposal is still in the process of being finalized. The proponent is considering supporting a number of public improvements, including improved walkways on Route 9, snow removal on Dickerman Road, and will make insure that sidewalks are cleaned of snow to the Eliot MBTA stop.

Union Twist proposal at Four Corners

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin opened the discussion of the Union Twist marijuana dispensary proposal by noting that the permit for this project cannot be rejected solely due to the proposal being a marijuana store. He asked that during the upcoming conversation, meeting members should try to keep comments focused on issues related to the site plan, parking, and traffic.

Ms. Donnalyn Kahn introduced herself as co-counsel for Union Twist along with counsel Mike Ross. The location of the proposed dispensary is at 1158 Beacon Street, the site of the former Jaelyn Cleaners business. Other members of the Union Twist team at this meeting include Marie St. Fleur, Tahira Rehmatullah, Amy McNamee, and Matt Skelly. Ms. Kahn noted that Union Twist's prior proposal had initiated lively discussions about this location. Based on comments and concerns raised by community members, Union Twist went back to the drawing board. Mr. Kahn stated that Union Twist would like to present two new options that are being considered that take into consideration comments about lighting, parking, and access to the site. Union Twist would like to know if members of the community have a preference for one of the two new options being considered.

Mike Ross proceeded to show the re-imagined site plan. Mr. Ross noted that Union Twist had taken comments from the community to date and evaluated them. He noted that Union Twist considered the option of walking away from this site, but then came together and considered what the community said and came up with a set of new preliminary ideas. Mr. Ross showed the previous site plan. There were two entrances from the site which posed a potential auto conflict with each other. The parking area in the front setback with 4 parking spaces created a conflict area. There was an issue of a blind spot for cars at the front corner of the building. There was also an issue of headlights shining into a house across the street from the project. Another problem was the width of the access driveway, and the need for an easement in order to have a 20 ft wide driveway. Also, there were issues of pedestrians using a narrow alley on the east side of the site to access the rear entrance. Problems were pointed out having multiple tenants on the site, which had room for 3 tenants, including a restaurant. Some community members expressed concern about the amount of parking on the site, which had 16 parking spaces for the marijuana business and 2 for the restaurant. There were 14 parking spaces in the back, and 4 in the front.

As a result of these problems, Union Twist is proposing to redesign the site. The new proposal (Option 1) has one driveway, places a new building on the east side, removes the old building and creates a new 2300 SF facility that will have no other tenants. The site plans eliminate the former blind spot. All pedestrian access is from the parking lot, and there is no longer a narrow alley along the building. The revised proposal includes 25 parking spaces instead of 16 spaces. An alternate proposal (Option 2) was also presented with a wider building that relates better to the nearby retail environment, with a 22 ft wide driveway, and a total of 22 parking spaces. Option 2 has more landscaping and more buffering on the site. Some preliminary design schemes were presented. Overall, both options presented address the concerns previously brought forward by the community.

Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen asked if the size of the store is the same as in the prior proposal, and Mr. Ross responded that the size will be exactly the same. Ms. Theunissen expressed concern is that this store is too large for this location. She noted that the new parking design proposal is better than the prior proposal. Ms. Theunissen believes that a smaller store would fit better with the local community. Mr. Ross responded that the proposed store will be 2290 SF. The existing building has a floor area of 5000 SF, and the new proposal will be a much smaller building. Mr. Ross noted that the

average size of dispensaries elsewhere is larger. Ms. Theunissen expressed concern that this is a 2300 SF business that needs 22 parking spots, indicating excessive driver throughput. She feels that the proposed dispensary would be a pass-by business that does not fit into this site. Mr. Ross noted that the site actually requires just 12 spaces, and that Union Twist is proposing 22 spaces due to concerns from the community. He doubts that all parking spaces will be filled.

A question was asked about the number of employees and how they will get to the site. Mr. Ross responded that most employees will park on the site, but that Union Twist will provide incentives through Transportation Demand Management for employees who take bikes or transit. There will be 12 employees at this site. There is a city requirement to have 1 parking space for every 3 employees, so Union Twist will need to have 4 employee parking spaces. Ms. Gerlinde Munshi asked about how many points of sale are planned, and noted that if there are 9 points of sale, there may be a lot of in and out driving to this site. Mr. Ross stated that Union Twist will reduce the number of points of sale to 6, and that this will have an overall effect on customer throughput. Mr. Ross also pointed out most orders are now on-line. There are a lot of product options, and most customers know what they are looking for. Customers go on-line, then order and pick up. It is expected that over 50% of people will order on-line. Patrons are now allowed to purchase product directly from wholesaler to the customer, and no longer need to go to a store. The days of many people going to a store may be behind us.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked if a mixed-use could be developed on the site, such as one that includes housing and retail. Mr. Ross responded that a mixed-use project on this site could cost over \$10 million, and would require bank financing. Currently, banks will not invest in anything project that is associated with a cannabis business. Therefore, it is difficult to develop a mixed-use project at this time that includes a cannabis business. City Councilor Alicia Bowman also pointed out that current city zoning excludes having a mixed-use cannabis business with residential use on the same site.

Ms. Donnalyn Kahn asked if there is a preference for the site plan. Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen stated she preferred the second option. Area Councilor Groot Gregory commended Union Twist for their effort in addressing prior concerns. He noted that additional parking spaces on the site may allow for better throughput, and that reducing the number of on-site businesses to one will reduce traffic burdens. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic expressed support for Option 2. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin also expressed support for Option 2, noting that it had less impervious surface. Area Councilor Bob Burke agreed that Option 2 was preferred. Ms. Gerlinde Munshi stated that she remained concerned about the use of the site, and its proximity to Cold Spring Park and people lingering in the park. Tyler Kirtley noted that he preferred Option 2, noting that parking on the site is more usable. Mr. Kirtley noted that he lives across the street from the proposed project, and that Option 2 provides a design that creates less focus on the parking lot. Kate Crowther, a consultant for Union Twist, noted that the front façade of the new building will be designed as a street-facing building to make it look like the forward of the building. Even though the entrance to the building will be from the rear, the front of the building will be consistent with the aesthetic of the neighborhood. In addition, concerns about headlights leaving the facility will be addressed by placement of entrance so that it is not directly across from the house opposite the planned access driveway.

Lisa Gordon asked if a courier service will be offered. Mike Ross noted that there will be no courier service. He pointed out that licenses for delivery services are going to the wholesalers, not the

retailers. Therefore, in order to provide deliveries, Union Twist would have to contract with a delivery company. Setting up a delivery process would be a cumbersome process. Therefore, Union Twist will not be contracting with a company to deliver product to Newton customers.

Councilor Alicia Bowman pointed out that Newton has 3 retail marijuana locations approved, one of which is currently operating. There are 3 additional locations in process of approval by the City. Ms. Bowman believes that it is unlikely that there will be a large number of patrons for only the Union Twist site by the time it has opened. Tyler Kirtley asked a question about delivery of product to the proposed store, and whether deliveries would take place outside of store hours. Mr. Ross responded that Union Twist would have 3 deliveries per week. These would be randomized and would not occur during peak hours, and they could be at various times. He noted that as a condition of the Special Permit, limitations could be placed on the time of deliveries. Union Twist is proposing operating hours from 9 am to 9 pm six days per week and 9 am to 6 pm on Sunday. Matt Skelly, engineer for Union Twist, stated that the new plans have a better loading zone and that it will be easier to make deliveries to the site during normal hours.

It was pointed out that the retail floor space of the proposed facility will be only about 500-600 SF, with the rest of floor space being used as vaults for storage of product. It was noted that with the new building, the lease for the current IQ Kitchen business would not be renewed and that Union Twist would be the only business leasing space in the new building. It was noted that the initial plan is to allow customers on an appointment-only basis for a 6 months trial, then then to remove this requirement based on approval from the City. Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen expressed concerns about the operating hours, and pointed out that Garden Remedies has hours of 10 am to 8 pm Monday to Saturday, and 12 noon to 6 pm on Sunday. Mr. Ross noted that taking down the old building will entail new concerns and expenses for Union Twist. There is a use limitation on this site that would prohibit a day care facility, but that the site is fine for retail. Lisa Gordon asked why Union Twist is attached to this location, and why the company does not look at Needham Street or other commercial areas for their business. Mike Ross responded that this location remains a very good location for this store. Union Twist have a long-term lease, and they have made a decision to proceed at this site. Mr. Ross pointed out that zoning requirements dictate where marijuana dispensaries could be sited in Newton. There were initially 4 applicants for this site, and Union Twist was selected by the City of Newton for this location.

Matt Skelly commented on environmental issues related to this site, noting that the main issues are with the condition of the soil and concerns that existing pollutants in the soil do not permeate into the building. It was pointed out that the building is now owned by a family. When Union Twist obtains its permits, an investment partner will purchase the building and then lease it to Union Twist. Mr. Ross pointed out that there is a general agreement between all parties to redevelop the site. Mr. Kahn then outlined next steps. She noted that it seems like there is a preference for the Option 2 site plan, which has less parking. Going forward, the Union Twist team will meet to consider the comments made in tonight's meeting, and then file for a Special Permit with the City. A traffic study will be conducted. Another meeting with the community will take place, and the proposal will go to the Land Use Committee prior to going before the full City Council for approval. This process may take at least 6 months.

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted that the Area Council does not have authority over this project, but will continue to collect information and provide feedback on the community response. If asked, the NHNAC may decide to take a position on the project once the Special Permit application is filed. Mr. Ross noted that Union Twist is not planning on meeting with the Waban Area Council, as this area is in the NHNAC zone. However, Union Twist will be glad to meet with Waban Area Council if requested. Nathaniel thanked Union Twist and the Union Twist stated that they appreciated the feedback received at tonight's meeting.

David Olson Letter of Appreciation

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin announced that a draft letter was sent to Area Council members and to the Newton Highlands google group for a certificate of appreciation to David Olson, Newton's City Clerk who is retiring tomorrow. Area Councilor Groot Gregory moved to approve the text of this letter. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell seconded this motion. The Area Council voted in favor 7:0, with one absence.

Area Council members expressed their thanks to David Olson, noting that he has been a great help to the Area Council with elections and during the process of area council expansions. The cost of the framed certificate is \$23.00, paid for by the Newtonville Area Council. The NHNAC agreed to allocate up to \$25 to cover the costs of the certificate with a vote of 7:0 with one absent.

Zoning Redesign Update and Letter

Area Council President Lichtin provided an update about Zoning Redesign. At the last meeting of the city's Zoning and Planning committee, there was a discussion about feedback from the community from the December community engagement events. The Planning Department developed a report after these sessions and from survey responses. As a result, the Planning Department is suggesting that Zoning Redesign goes on a slower track. Instead of going article by article from residential to commercial and other zones, the Planning Department is considering orienting the process by geographic area. Each village center will be considered, but reviews of all of the villages will be run simultaneously. As part of the review process, there will be 5 steps. First, there will be an internal planning department review of issues, scope and values as they pertain to zoning redesign. Then Planning Department staff will go to the community and obtain input about concerns, issues, and values for each area. Based on this feedback, proposed zoning solutions will be drafted by the Planning Department. Then the Planning Department will go back to the community for further engagement. The process may include presentations by experts and planning department staff. Proposed changes and solutions would be discussed with community members through further engagement meetings. Then finally, the Planning Department staff would finalize zoning redesign for each geographic area. The process will start with village centers, and then continue with transit corridors, public use areas and golf courses, Boston College and the hospital, and finally conduct a review of residential neighborhoods. At this point, the Zoning and Planning Committee is considering whether to support this new workflow. Even when the village to village process is taking place, general city wide issues related to zoning will be discussed. Some have questioned whether a complete zoning redesign process is needed, or if it may be more feasible to revise the existing zoning code.

The Newtonville Area Council drafted a letter requesting that the Mayor Fuller pause the zoning redesign effort, create a committee to create a community-based “New Vision” for Newton, and amend the Comprehensive Plan to develop goals and objectives that zoning redesign can implement. Peter Bruce, President of the Newtonville Area Council, provided background thoughts regarding the letter. Mr. Bruce noted that the mayor had previously indicated that zoning redesign should happen with initial community input, as it had in Somerville. He expressed concern that there were “false starts” with the zoning redesign process and that if more community input is obtained, zoning redesign may be more successful. Mr. Bruce feels that zoning redesign goals and objectives should be developed by the community, with input and support from planning experts, rather than by the planning experts. There is a need to broaden the process and involve more people. Peter is advocating for more community input as the process goes forward.

Councilor Bowman suggested that the work done by Somerville’s planning process was actually driven by the Planning Department in Somerville. Ms. Bowman noted that a broad community engagement process had been conducted in 2006-2007 when Newton developed its Comprehensive Plan. Councilor Bowman questioned whether there were “false starts” regarding zoning redesign and stated that prior meetings referenced by Mr. Bruce were part of the ongoing informational process regarding zoning redesign. Councilor Bowman agreed that the process has been frustrating this year considering challenges brought on by the pandemic. City Councilor Bowman stated that we need to make sure we are hearing from people who represent all of the many facets of life in Newton, including community members who did not respond to survey and meeting requests. Councilor Bowman believes we need to move forward with the overall zoning redesign process, and that we should use the existing Comprehensive Plan as its basis.

Lisa Monahan stated that she agreed that the Zoning Redesign process was planned to go forward as described by Area Council President Lichtin, geographic area by geographic area. Ms. Monahan stated that she thought that rather than coming to a final design stage for each area before moving on to the next, the planning process will be brought up at a conceptual level considering all geographic areas together. She expects that this process will identify ideas, concepts, and visions of what people want to see for village centers, transit hubs, and corridors. Ms. Monahan believes that while this is happening, the planning department will provide ongoing studies and research that will inform the process. This data, along with community input, will be used to create early schematics and then to form plans. Area Council President Lichtin confirmed that he had recently met with Planning Department staff and that the village-to-village process is now being considered. Once the village centers have been assessed, then the Planning Department will move on to assessing the corridors, and then will go to the next set, concluding with the residential zones. Ms. Monahan stated that the Comprehensive Plan is a living document and that its use should be continued as a basis for planning, rather than developing a new community-based plan as proposed in the Newtonville Area Council letter. Newtonville Area Council President Peter Bruce questioned the process of the development of the Pattern Book as an example of whether community goals were being considered, and whether the need to develop form-based zoning was discussed on a community level. Mr. Bruce questioned if Newton may be better off by keeping the current zoning code and refining it rather than completely replacing it. Perhaps community supported policy goals could be pursued more directly by redefining the current zoning plan rather than developing a new plan.

Kathy Pillsbury noted that there were many zoning redesign meetings that took place over the past 2-3 years where community members could talk about issues. Then there was a pause and a break, which led to a perceived disconnect in the process. Ms. Pillsbury does not feel that the Washington Street vision plan was a “false start” as it led to a decision to create one zoning code applied over the city rather than different codes applied to different areas. Ms. Pillsbury stated that she has been impressed by recent efforts made by the Planning Department for community outreach.

Councilor Downs asked meeting members to consider the comments made by City Council President Albright, Councilor Crossley, Councilor Bowman, Ms. Pillsbury, and Ms. Monahan. Councilor Downs reminded everyone that under the current zoning code, we are still seeing teardowns of modest homes that are being replaced by large by-right single family homes. We are losing the shape and character of our neighborhoods. What would be most constructive for Zoning and Planning to hear is ongoing feedback from Area Councils about goals and preferred outcomes of the zoning redesign process, and for community members to understand that the Planning Department will very carefully consider all of the input it receives. Zoning is a gradual instrument, and changes to the code will be evaluated over many years. Uncertainty is part of the planning process.

Area Councilor Bob Burke stated that he is pleased that there are a number of good points in Peter Bruce’s letter. Bob feels that all voices need to be heard in the community, including older homeowners. Bob would like to see facts guide decision making, and not process for the sake of process. Bob noted that it is wrong to assume that all people think the same way about the zoning process. City Councilor Alicia Bowman indicated her concern that homeowners, especially older folks, tend to vote against more new housing in their community. Area Councilor Bob Burke responded that people should not be stereotyped by group, as not all people in a group think alike.

Lisa Monahan pointed out that data show that there has been a > 60% increase in community participation at ZAP meetings since meetings have gone online last spring. Rather than the pandemic hampering civic engagement, the data suggests that community involvement has been greater. Area Councilor Amy Wayne challenged the assumption that participation and civic engagement has been robust during Covid, and feels that if participation is higher, it is because people are incensed about the zoning process and feel compelled to be involved. Area Councilor Wayne noted that some prior planning exercises were not well executed and not as democratic as one would hope. Simon French noted that during some of the previously held planning meetings, people were asked to watch, not necessarily participate.

In summarizing the discussions regarding the Newtonville Area Council letter asking for a reconsideration of the zoning redesign process, Area Council President Lichtin noted that consensus by Area Council members on this topic is unlikely. Mr. Lichtin suggested that individuals may provide their responses separately if they choose to. Area Councilor Groot Gregory stated that the Area Council has served the purpose of informing the community about this letter, and that no further action was needed. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic commented that the discussion we have had about this topic is a complicated one, and that additional careful consideration needs to be given in deciding how to proceed.

Local and City Updates:

Special Election:

The four Area Councils are hosting a debate for the City Council candidates from Ward 1 and Ward 2 on Feb 21 from 2 pm to 4 pm. Questions for the candidates can be submitted via the home page of NHNAC, where there is a link to send questions to the moderator. The debate will be held virtually by zoom. A link will be posted.

Lisa Monahan mentioned that a prior debate was moderated by an area council representative. Amy Wayne announced that this debate will be moderated by Marjorie Arons Barron.

Winter Photo Contest:

The Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council is running a winter photo contest. All are encouraged to submit pictures of winter scenes. There will be a drawing and winners will receive a gift certificate to local businesses.

Zoning and Planning updates:

The garage ordinance hearing was held and the Zoning and Planning Committee will be voting on approval on Monday, February 8, after which the ordinance will go to City Council. Discussions are also being held regarding changes to the marijuana ordinance relating to categories of businesses and to delivery services, as required by state law and the cannabis control commission.

The Land Use Committee will be discussing the 1149-1151 Walnut Street project on Tuesday, February 9th.

Administrative Items:

Approval of January Minutes: The draft minutes were submitted for review from the January 7th Area Council meeting. No changes were proposed. 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 March 2021 Meeting:

The Area Council will be considering a proposal for the Area Council banner.

New Business:

There was no additional new business to discuss.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 10:18 pm.