

# Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

## Meeting Minutes, March 4, 2021

### **Area Council members:**

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

### **Ex Officio:**

Bill Humphrey

### **Guests:**

Alan Schlesinger, Sonya McKnight, Lisa Gordon, Lisa Monahan, John Rice, Linda Morrison, Margaret Clermont, Laura Foote, Ned Crecelius, Chris Talanian, Kim Thurmond, Carol Carroll, Katherine Clark, Devlin Scott, Mark Shuman, City Councilor Alicia Bowman, Rena Getz, Dennis Reiske, Kathy Pillsbury

Meeting called to order at 7:33 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin presiding. The meeting was held using Zoom videoconferencing technology due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

### The Vault Community Space (1175 Walnut Street)

A proposal for “The Vault” was presented by Reverend Devlin Scott for a new community space at 1175 Walnut Street, the site of the current Orchid Dry Cleaners. Reverend Scott introduced himself as a pastor in Newton. He and his family moved here about 4 years ago to start a new city church. He has been actively involved in the Newton Interfaith Clergy Association, is the Chair of the Perpetual Benevolence Fund, and has been involved with zoning and housing issues in Newton. Reverend Scott stated that he lives in Newtonville with his wife Katie, who is Vice President of Communications at Iron Mountain. They have two sons: Alden, age 3, who is in preschool, and Ian, age 6, who attends Horace Mann Elementary School. They also have two dogs: Louie, a rescue dog, and Coach, a Boston terrier. Reverend Scott’s presentation was interrupted due to technical issues, and the remainder of the presentation resumed after the Historical Sign discussion had completed.

Reverend Scott described The Vault project as being a piece of a bigger puzzle. Initially, the process started with the *For Newton* concept. This campaign was started based on a quote from Dr. Brown, who described our society as sorting itself into bunkers while people are becoming lonelier. In this kind of world, there are no connections between bunkers, and everything is segregated and polarized. The *For Newton* concept is a call for people to return back to civility and connectedness, and to encourage people to do this fairly. The idea is that people unite around concepts of dignity and for justice. A campaign was initiated that included individuals, organizations, and businesses. Organizations and individuals were asked to pledge to *For Newton* and were asked for ways to partner

and to promote *For Newton*. People were asked to link up and have dialogues about social issues we face, to meet with people who are different, and to build bridges. The culmination of the *For Newton* campaign was to launch an organization called “New Community Incorporated,” which is a separate entity from the church. It is this corporation which will oversee the operations of The Vault.

New Community, Inc. is a non-profit development corporation that intends to partner with organizations and initiatives on a path to doing what is needed most in our community. There are many needs and many avenues to accomplish what is good. New Community, Inc. will support organizations that have the same goals and to do good work together. Some of the services New Community, Inc will provide includes resources and guidance for new charitable startups, marketing, communication resources, community focused campaigns and initiatives, and promoting charitable work for justice, equity, and inclusivity.

The Vault is a proposal for a new project at 1175 Walnut Street that will create a space that fosters support for all abilities, embraces the community, and provide a place to converge. It will be a multi-use space that will include a “pay what you can” café serving people of all economic means. The Vault will partner with the Newton Food Pantry and Lasell College to manage the café. Another entity in The Vault will be a children’s Play Place and a play zone for children of all abilities, to include accommodating spaces. The Play Place will create space for kids with special needs in mind. There will also be a Black Box Community Theater. Another part of the project is The Patio. This now looks like an alley behind the building. Currently, 1175 Walnut Street has an old vault in the rear and underneath the building, consisting of 12” thick cement walls, 4” of cork, and more concrete, There is 3600 SF of space.

The plans envision use of the rear of the building to build a patio for The Vault. Ther will be seating space for socializing and eating, with a stage for outdoor performances. The architects for the project are the firm Glenn Knowles & Associates. Within the interior space of The Vault, there will be a community Black Box Theater that will have up to 100 seats. The floor of the theater will have the stage, and the seating will be elevated. The theater will have capabilities for livestream and the space will be available for rental, in addition to shows and performances. There will be a full LED backdrop screen to create scenery. Also, The Vault will have space for a Café and Shop to promote community interactions. This space will have a kitchen, coffee bar, and the shop will carry merchandise from groups that promote social justice. The café is based on the concept of One World Where Everybody Eats. Customers will pay what they can, or people will be able to volunteer services in order to have a meal. Patrons will be able to choose their own portion sizes, and the menu will include healthy seasonal food. Much of the food will be donated, and volunteers will staff the organization. Any paid staff will be provided a living wage. There will be a community table, around which anybody can sit and eat. There will be no set menu. The Café will be open only on weekends for breakfast and lunch, Guest chefs will build the menu from donated food and a small budget. The Café will partner with the Newton North culinary program, through which students will join the Café as guest chefs. The Vault will also have a children’s play space designed for kids with special needs, that will include sensory and physical play, imagination play, with a corner stage, and tables for educational parts.

Reverend Scott concluded by saying that we can’t build a project like this alone and that a community effort is needed. He asked for support for this project.

Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen asked at which point is this project in the development cycle. Reverend Scott responded that the project is now in its fundraising stage. A fundraiser is planned for the Café in April. Currently, the undeveloped space that will become The Vault is being used as a studio. Once The Vault is developed, a portion of the building will be dedicated to community use, and the church will be a patron of this building that rents the space. In developing this property, the church wanted to find another use for the space for the 6 days per week that there are no church services. One of the goals is to make the space more usable so that people can rent it. Currently, the space does not have an occupancy permit for gatherings yet.

David Rockwell asked about role of the church once the project is completed. Will the church worship occur on Sundays and how does shared space arrangement work? Reverend Scott noted that the space will be exclusive of the different uses at different times. The area of the Play Space and Theater will accommodate the church space when church is in session. The spaces will serve the same purpose, and each space will have multiple uses for the community and for the church.

Kim Thurmond asked how many people would go through the space. She also asked about the hours of operation. Reverend Scott responded that the capacity is capped at 100 people, so there will be no more than 100 seats in the theater. The occupancy is based on number of exits, parking spaces, and bathrooms in the building. Initially, the hours of operation will be mostly weekend hours, depending on programming. The church programming will also happen on the weekends. Later, additional programming may be introduced, such as in the children's space. Initially, it will be only for children with parents, but later there may be programming where children can be with staff. Also, the space may be rented to outside entities during weekdays and weeknights. Initially, the greatest use of the facility will be on weekends. Kim Thurmond noted that during the morning, there are people taking the bus who may benefit from use of the Café.

Regarding parking, the parking for the site will be on-street parking that is complementary to that of other businesses, and the municipal lot will be accessible to provide capacity. Laura Foote asked about the total fundraising goals for the project. Reverend Scott noted that there are different tiers of cost, depending on factors such as if a full LED wall is desired (adds \$10K to the cost). Overall, the development is likely to cost about \$500K. The Vault intends to partner with Lasell College such that interns in hospitality and event planning will be able to help with develop business plans and marketing strategies. There is a possibility that with downturn due to the Covid-19 pandemic, much of the equipment needed for the Vault could be donated, but this is yet to be determined. The space for The Vault will be leased, with a plan to keep the lease for 10 years.

Councilor Bowman expressed her support for the project. She recalled her college days when she would occasionally volunteer for on-campus coop, and then in return get a free lunch. She noted that it would be nice to have a theater back to Newton Highlands, and that the Black Box experience is special. This will be an opportunity for people to walk to a performance. The inclusion piece is important, especially for children with special needs. David Rockwell noted that he lives at 13 Floral Place, and he asked if permits were needed from the City. Permitting is needed. Because space is leased to a church, some zoning limits will not apply to this project, and the main issues are related to parking and working with the neighborhood. Unique to permitting are issues such as a request for a second means of egress from the building. Lisa Gordon thanked Reverend Devlin and stated that there is a big need for this kind of proposal in Newton Highlands.

## Newton Highlands History Sign

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin introduced Ms. Laura Foote, affiliated with the Historic Newton group. Ms. Foote presented a vision of a series of engaging interpretive signs in Newton village centers. She noted that this was a grass roots effort that started with a pilot to have a historical sign in West Newton that would catch people's interest as they are walking and shopping and get them curious about architecture and history in Newton. Ms. Foote acknowledged that she was aware of prior efforts in Newton Highlands to form a local historic district, as there is a great deal of history in Newton Highlands. The challenge is what to put on a sign and where to put it.

Ms. Foote mentioned that a historical sign was put up in West Newton in December. It took 18 months to bring this to fruition. Ms. Lisa Dady from Historic Newton helped to lead the effort. The sign was placed in the little park next to Sweet Tomato pizza and was installed as part of work to improve the Washington Street corridor. The City had crews to install the sign. City Council members were present at the dedication, along with the Mayor. There is substantial historical information on the sign, including information about Horace Mann. A diverse set of information is also on the sign, including a photo from the Nathaniel Allen school from the 1800s. The idea was to find themes and to show some of the historic buildings that are still standing as an example of historic architecture. The sign has about 350 words and it has about 10 or so photos on the template. There is a template for the design which can be used for different village centers. The project starts with a mock-up of a sign, in which people try to think about the most interesting photos and stories to tell about their village. It was decided to obtain a National Parks Service cantilevered style sign design, and it was placed in West Newton with bushes in the background. The size is 24"x36".

A timetable to move forward with the historic sign initiative starts with finding people who want to be engaged in the project, identifying funding of about \$1000 to fabricate the sign, with an additional up to \$1000 to pay the graphic designer for formatting. The project needs to have a point person, who then needs to solicit input on locations and themes, and to have a researcher and writer to do a mockup. Historic Newton can check the story line and evaluate the language on the sign. Then the content is finalized, as is the design and funding. The sign will be fabricated by sign company in Pennsylvania, Pannier Graphics, at a cost of about \$1100 that includes shipping. Ms. Foote noted that she had also been in touch with Luis from the Parks & Rec Department, and that consideration is being given to have a separate sign at Crystal Lake.

A discussion ensued about what people think about the sign proposal, and what are the next steps. Lisa Gordon commented that this is an amazing and brilliant effort and that she looks forward to seeing historical signs in all of our village centers. Area Councilor Bob Burke also stated that he believes this is a wonderful project to do, and he would advocate for the signs to include the architectural styles and the historic housing. Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked if other sources of funding are available, perhaps from City funds. Councilor Bowman replied that the city budget may not be able to cover these costs as there are many competing needs. Laura Foote was interested in use of funds for historic photos that are being wrapped around power transmission boxes. Councilor Bowman mentioned this is a small amount of fundraising. John Rice stated that he loves the history of the Highlands, and he will volunteer to take a lead on this project. John also noted that the Hyde can fund the sign project. John mentioned that he intends to create a mural on the building wall next to the Hyde Bandstand. Old

pictures of the Hyde School will be used to create the mural. Rena Getz suggested that it may be important to put the sign in the village center, near the Stevens building. John mentioned that he has been talking with Parks and Rec to renovate the Officer English Garden, so there may be an opportunity to install the sign as part of that project.

Dennis Rieske noted that he was on the Upper Falls Historic Commission, and that there is a wealth of historical information that can be used. Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked if corporate sponsorship may be an option. Ms. Foote responded that if a corporate sponsor would be involved, it may affect what is placed on the sign. One goal of the sign is to drive people to a website of history articles about Newton. Historic Newton has offered to create a single place to access more information about Newton history, so that resources can be more easily found by people. Lisa Monahan stated that she was supportive of having a historical sign installed and believes that this should be funded privately rather than by city funds. Lisa wondered why the sign was manufactured in Pennsylvania and not locally. Laura noted that the supplier is a major supplier for Parks service signs, and that the durability of the signs has been tested in different temperatures and climates.

Nathaniel mentioned that the sign project is one that that the Area Council and the Hyde could collaborate on with regards to funding. John Rice will be the main contact person in the Highlands for this project. Nathaniel thanked Laura for this idea.

### 1149-1151 Walnut Street Revised Design

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin announced that Talalian Realty is proposing further revisions to their plans to develop 1149-1151 Walnut Street, the site of the current Skin Innovations business. The new site plans for 25 apartment units were presented. The look of the building has changed to include bays on the street elevation, and a 4-story wall has been reduced to a 3-story wall on the north side. The project will have the same number of inclusionary units. The building has added roof decks and a roof garden. The new proposal has the same number of parking spaces, and now some solar panels on the building.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic was supportive of the project, commenting that it includes historical aspects in its design that make it fit better in the village. He also noted that removal of the fourth floor in the building section closest to the Christian Science Church helps address concerns of massing of the building. He suggested that the small 5 feet area of open space on the north side of the project could be considered for decorative plantings and that the proposed wooden stockade fence at that location should be eliminated from the plans.

Katherine Clark read a prepared statement from the adjacent Christian Science Church. She noted that the church has been providing affordable housing in the neighborhood, with stable tenants, and high-quality housing that includes tenant parking and guest parking. She noted that nearly all tenants need a car to get to a grocery store and a drug store. The church relies on its rental income to cover expenses. The Church is concerned that a 4-story wall from the proposed development that is on the property line with no setback will decrease value of the Church property. The value of the property for the developer would increase, while the value of the church's property will decrease. If the church moves, the neighborhood would lose housing units, and the church will sell at a lower price. If the church moves, Newton would lose tax revenue from the church's rental activities. Otherwise, the church is

not opposed to appropriately sized development at this site, both for housing and retail. The Church would like the new development to be done with reasonable setbacks and height.

A question posed about the level of income required to be able to rent one of the affordable units The Newton City Ordinance requires that 4 units are rented to people up to 80% AMI and 1 unit is rented to people who are at 110% AMI. Councilor Bowman asked if the developer can respond to the comments from the Church and how this ties into the current design of the building. Katherine Clark reported on the location of the Church's rental units. The 2 bedroom unit is in the attic of the main building. The studio is next to the development. The other 4 single bedrooms are in the carriage house, which is a 4-bedroom house behind the main house.

Dennis Rieske stated that he has reviewed the project and he is in support of the zoning change and development on this site overall. He noted that in the recent past, he had proposed an alternate set of designs for the project. He noted that shadow studies indicate that there is impact of the building that is within the 20 ft setback as allowed by present-day zoning. The building could have a more compact layout and have a greater setback. Amanda Theunissen wondered if removing the unit and the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the building next to the Christian Science Church would help the shadow issue. Dennis Rieske stated that removal of this floor would not make the issue go away, but that it would reduce the shadow problem. Amanda asked about the setback that is now at 5 feet, whereas the current zoning requires 20 feet. Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted that we would not have traditional village centers if we followed the current zoning requirements within village centers.

Councilor Bowman noted that the petitioner will be seeking a special permit, and they are first asking for a change in zone from BU2 to MU4. The MU4 district was designed to create opportunities to extend village centers. Lisa Monahan commented that we really cannot judge the proposed building by the current code that is no longer modern and that will be overhauled. Lisa noted that nothing that we want today in terms of traditional village centers could be built with the code we have. She is very supportive of the project. Rena Getz wanted to clarify that current buildings in Newton predate zoning, and we should not consider that the old lots are a construct we have today. The original buildings predated the current zoning codes. Over time, streets and sidewalks were put in after the buildings. Katherine Clark commented to emphasize that the 5 ft setback includes balconies that extend to property line, so that the constructed building is still on a zero setback.

Alan Schlesinger, attorney for the developer, wanted to note that this is the fifth or sixth appearance at the Area Council regarding this project, with the first two meetings last year being in person. He noted that the most recent set of plans reflects many of the comments that councilors have made over the past year. He appreciates that the Area Council submitted a letter of support to the City Council. The project will be discussed at the Land Use Committee meeting in City Council on March 23. Ned Crecilius stated that he is supportive of the MU4 rezoning, which still requires a setback, and a noted that a special permit will be needed for a 5 ft setback. Mr. Crecilius wanted to reiterate the point about transfer of wealth, as one project decreases in value while the other project increases. He wants all to know that the plans for this site will decrease the value of the church property, and transfer value to a Boston developer. The public hearing may be on March 23 before the Land Use Committee.

### Area Council Debate Wrap-Up

Area Councilor Amy Wayne reported that the Area Council debate was held on February 21. It was moderated by Marjorie Arons-Barron. Candidates from Ward 1 included John Oliver and Madeline Ranalli, Ward 2 candidates included Bryan Barash, David Micley, and Tarik Lucas. Amy noted upon the controversy that occurred regarding the choice of background that certain candidates had chosen during the virtual debate. After the debate, a number of people commented on the Village 14 website that it was a “good debate, bad aftertaste.” Please check the Village 14 website under: “Good debate, bad aftertaste” and the Area Council guidelines under “Guidelines for the Area Councils Debate held on February 21, 2021” for further information about the debate controversy. Amy noted that the Area Councils’ debate working group had posted the actual guidelines for the debate.

Area Councilor Wayne asked Area Council Secretary Srdjan Nedeljkovic if he could post the notes he took during the debate. Srdjan stated he would post the debate notes, but that are not a verbatim recording. The notes also do not include negative comments made by candidates of one another.

Amy Wayne requested funds for a gift to debate moderator Marjorie Arons-Barron for \$50, and for \$24.75 to pay for the cost of zoom for a meeting with a larger audience.

Lisa Monahan asked who made the rules for the debate regarding backgrounds. Amy responded that the Area Council debate working group made the rules about requiring a blank background behind each candidate to simulate a stage during a live debate. Everybody was supposed to have a blank background. No political or social background was permitted based on the Area Council guidelines. Candidates had a chance prior to the debate to comment on this policy. The issue of background was not brought up prior to 10 minutes before the debate started. Barbara Darnell made a motion to allocate the funds for the debate. Motion was seconded. Bob Burke added that he was at the planning session where the backgrounds were discussed, and that a neutral background has been a staple of other debates, including national debates, in the past. Groot asked about the cost of the Zoom, to be made out to Waban Area Council. It was \$99 for the zoom meeting, to be shared between the Area Councils. An extra zoom payment was needed to upgrade for the 300 people who signed on. The vote by the Area Council was unanimous: 8 to 0 to approve the gift certificate and the zoom costs.

### Newton Highlands Area Council Banner/Sign

To increase community participation, Area Councilors Amanda Theunissen and Amy Wayne had discussed hosting a strolling art fair in the village. However, the city notified the Area Council that there was an issue with insurance, so this initiative was not pursued. Amanda noted that Newton Pride is sponsoring a Newton Our Doors event, which will have door frames painted by artists all over Newton. Amy and Amanda are thinking of having a contest to post pictures of the door frames as an idea to draw people into the Highlands.

As part of outreach by the Area Council, including postcards and contests, Amanda provided information about purchasing a banner for the MBTA bridge in the Highlands. The banner would have a QR code, so that more people could get information about our NHNAC monthly meetings. The cost for 2’ x 3’ canvas banner was \$55. For a 3’ x 5’ banner, the cost is \$120. For a plastic 2’ x 3’, the cost is \$84. There is a \$60 design fee. There are currently two signs now on bridge, including one that is 3’x7’, so going to 2’x 3’ is too small. Amanda proposed that we should purchase a banner that is 3’ x 5’ = \$120, and that it should be a canvas banner. This will help us get more recognition for our

meetings. It will be up for a week before our meeting. The banner would be the same banner each time, connecting with the postcard. It would announce the monthly meeting. A motion was made to approve up to \$200 to support this endeavor. The motion was approved: Vote 8:0.

### Zoning Redesign Update and Letter

Area Council President Lichtin announced that zoning redesign is at a transition point. The project will start out by working on comprehensive review of village center areas. Implementation may happen over time. Also, staff will be looking at whether there are specific changes that could be made to zoning in Newton, such as the parking minimum requirements. City Council typically wants less parking than what is required by the current zoning ordinance.

### Demolition Delay Ordinance:

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin gave a report about updates to the Demolition Delay ordinance. A working group has been editing this ordinance. The document will be reorganized so it is easier to read. The single biggest change being proposed is to change the requirement for Historical Review to be required for any building that is more than 50 years old to have it required only for buildings built 1945 or earlier. The 1945 date would not change over time. The thinking is that 1945 was the start of the postwar era when construction standards changed. This is a controversial change, with people are on both sides of the issue. There will be a public hearing on March 22 at ZAP.

Other changes ZAP is considering is to add 3 categories for demolition delay regardless of how old: if a building is listed on national register, if it is eligible for listing on the national register, or if it has archeological and historical assets in the state registry. There is a proposal to tweak the definition of what is historically significant. Currently, a property can be significant if it is 150 feet of historic district, and the new proposal would get rid of that criteria. Under discussion are issues such as if historic commission members need to review all projects, and discussion if the full commission would need to review all total demolitions. There are some changes being considered to the waiver process, and if a property is declared to have a demolition delay, how the property owner can get around it and change it.

Rena Getz pointed out how some of these proposed changes were controversial. Recently, the members of the historical commission voted 5:0:1 to be not in support of changing lookback period and indicated that the 50 year lookback period should be maintained. Rena noted that she will post the powerpoint from the Feb 22 meeting about the Demolition Delay on the Waban Area Council website. It was also noted that New TV has video of the ZAP meeting.

### Local and City Updates:

#### Winter Cheer Photo Contest:

The Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council continues to run a winter photo contest. The photos are on the NHNAC Instagram account. People can still submit photos. Many winners have been announced, and winners have received \$10 gift cards to local establishments. Amy Wayne noted that there was \$201 allocated to support this contest, but that another \$100 will be needed to cover the



remaining weeks of the contest. Residents are encouraged to submit pictures of winter scenes. Businesses are appreciative of these efforts because winners receive a gift certificate to local businesses. Amanda noted that the NHNAC has 188 followers on Instagram. This is another channel to reach out to people. A motion was made to approve additional funds for the photo contest. The vote was 8:0 in support of allocating these funds.

#### Zoning and Planning updates: Marijuana Delivery and Courier Zoning:

The state cannabis commission allows for marijuana deliver and courier services. The Newton Zoning and Planning Committee will take up this issue at its March 8<sup>th</sup> meeting. Under the updated rules, marijuana courier license holders will be allowed to deliver cannabis products to consumers from a retail dispensary for a fee. Meanwhile, marijuana delivery operators will be allowed to buy wholesale cannabis products from cultivators and make deliveries from their own warehouse without having to operate a retail storefront.

#### Green Lady Marijuana Retailer (Newton Centre):

A community meeting will take place on March 10 in Newton Centre. The state requires that every company that is interested in a marijuana retail site has to host a meeting in the community. The proposed location for the retailer is at the 740 Beacon Street location. It was noted that at this point, Newton has reached 8 agreements for marijuana retailers.

#### MBTA Green Line Work Updates:

Work will be resuming on the Green line starting on March 15<sup>th</sup>. There will be delays and evening shutdowns on the D line while the work is occurring.

#### 1114 Beacon Street:

At the former site of the Apgujung restaurant in Four Corners, a new development is being planned. A presentation of the revised project was presented to the Fair Housing Committee. The proposed development is now a 3 story residential building, rather than a 4 story building. It will have a roof garden. There is no retail component. It is now a square building with a small cutout on left for surface parking spaces. The proposal calls for 34 condominium units with market rates between \$700K and \$1.2 million. The project has designated 6 units as affordable. The project will consist of 50 parking spaces, with 46 spaces underground. The building will have mostly 1-2 bedroom units.

Area Council President Lichtin noted that he would invite the developer to present revised plans at our next Area Council meeting.

#### Administrative Items:

Approval of February Minutes: The revised draft minutes were submitted for review from the February 4<sup>th</sup> Area Council meeting. No changes were proposed. The minutes were approved 8:0.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory submitted an update. There was a payment to Amy for the photo contest. There were no other transactions. Groot moved to allocate up to \$150 to maintain the Area Council zoom account, which will keep us funded to the end of this year.

New Business:

John Rice talked with Parks and Rec about Village Day, which will be postponed from the usual June date. There is consideration to moving it to the fall. The placeholder date is Sunday September 12. It remains to be seen if this will happen. It was noted that this date does not conflict with other Village Days.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:50 pm.