

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, November 4, 2021

Area Council members:

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

Ex Officio:

City Councilors Brenda Noel, Bill Humphrey, Holly Ryan: not present

Guests:

Sonya McKnight, John Rice, Jeremy Freudberg, Rhonda, Dennis Reiske

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.

Area Council Meeting Times

As an item of New Business, Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic proposed that the meeting start time for monthly Area Council meetings be changed from 7:30 pm to 7:00 pm. Additionally, Area Councilor Nedeljkovic proposed that the meeting end time be limited to no later than 8:30 pm. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell agreed with the proposal. Nathaniel Lichtin agreed with a 7:00 pm start time but expressed concern about a firm end time. The goal is to have everyone heard. Barbara pointed out that more substantial discussions about items often take up a lot of time at the start of a meeting, and that perhaps we could start with a brief review of less substantive items first. Nathaniel pointed out that guests may not want to sit through the beginning of a meeting that is not of interest to them. The later in the meeting that an item is brought up, the less focus it may get. Nathaniel believes is better to have everyone's attention for the more important items at the beginning of the meeting.

Area Councilor Nedeljkovic agreed that items of greatest interest should be discussed at the beginning. Area Councilor Darnell suggested that since some of the substantial discussions go longer, the Area Council could quickly discuss minor items initially. Area Councilor Groot Gregory suggested that if we have 10-15 minutes of initial updates, that may be reasonable. But if these updates take longer to discuss, then people may lose some interest in the rest of the meeting. Area Councilor Gregory suggested that the Area Council should probably start the discussion of any topic with an introduction about why we are talking about it, and whether there is an action item. Having this as a goal for each discussion item will help focus the discussion of the item. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin agreed to put short updates at the beginning of the agenda for future meetings when appropriate. He concurred that the Area Council will start future meetings at 7:00 pm and have a goal to end by 8:30 pm. This will start with the December meeting. All agreed.

Zoning Redesign Update

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin provided an update. There is no item for the Area Council to act upon at this time. Nathaniel pointed out that this information is being presented because it is important for the community to know what is going on with Zoning Redesign. The city has recently published the community engagement responses, having received over 1000 responses between the Vision Kit and Focus Groups and other comments. There is a spreadsheet on the City of Newton website for zoning redesign where the feedback has been categorized based on topics and subtopics.

On November 15, the Planning Dept will hold a community meeting at 6 pm to give a presentation about community feedback about village center zoning. This presentation has already been given to the Zoning and Planning committee at City Council last week. The Planning Department has stated that based on the responses, about 78% of respondents stated they would like to see Village centers grow and support the sentiment that it should be easier to build multiunit housing in village centers. However, there was disagreement on what level of density is appropriate. About 22% of respondents were opposed to any major changes in village centers and were opposed to increased density. There was broad support for improved outdoor dining and public open space and green space in village centers. Pedestrian safety was important to everybody. Many respondents agreed that village centers should be walkable and sociable with small shops, restaurants, and public realm for places to gather. The ZAP meeting and the slides were recorded by NewTV, and this is available on-line. The Planning memo has most of the information about the public's preferences in it, and the memo is available on the ZAP page of the City website.

Other community input included requests that climate change resiliency be included in zoning changes, including requirements for solar panels and electric vehicle charging stations. Some people felt strongly that village centers needed to be accessible to cars with adequate parking. People expressed opinions that parking in the village centers is important to the vibrancy of the village centers. There was a desire for village centers to keep a small local business feel. Some people felt we should eliminate gas stations at village centers. There is an interesting difference in opinion between community members and brokers and consultants. Community members tended to feel that older, smaller spaces are important and desired in village centers. But the business community is more inclined to support new buildings and larger spaces. There was a strong support for the importance for reaching consensus between groups advocating for higher or lower density. Many people expressed support for improved accessibility in our villages, such as having elevators in buildings.

The next step for Zoning Redesign is that the Planning Department will be making a presentation to the Zoning and Planning Committee of City Council on Nov 18 with draft of prioritizations for the future of village centers. The Area Council may want to respond to that and submit a letter either in support of the priorities list, or to recommend changes to the prioritization list.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic stated that he was pleased that the Planning Department seems to be taking a more nuanced approach and taking into consideration various opinions. But it remains to be seen what proposal emerges. Nathaniel Lichtin asked what people thought about the

engagement process as a whole. Several hundred statements were submitted regarding zoning preferences, and 1250 people voted on these statements. Area Councilor Groot Gregory mentioned that reviewing the statements was somewhat overwhelming. Nathaniel Lichtin noted that some of the comments were difficult to agree or disagree with, since he agreed with part of a statement but not the other part of the statement.

Along the lines of zoning redesign, Srdjan Nedeljkovic remarked that the property at 69 Lincoln Street in Newton Highlands village center next to the post office was demolished and wondered what was going to take place there. Jeremy Freudberg noted that the new structure will be built on this site, and it will consist of two residential units, 2800 square feet per unit with two curb cuts.

Area Council Debates

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic attended all of day #1 of the debates and part of day #2, and commented that the debates were very well run. The moderators were highly professional in managing the debates, and the selection of questions covered key topics. As the debates proceeded, candidates who were scheduled to debate later in the day had the opportunity to learn about the questions by listening to prior debates. Approximately 60 people participated in viewing the debates live on the first day. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted that each Area Council has been asked to pay \$175 to support the debates. The organizers have decided that each of the 3 moderators is to receive \$200 worth of gift certificate. The Waban Area Council increased their zoom capacity limit (at a cost of \$100). The fee to each Area Council ends up being \$175 split 4 ways. A motion was made to allocate \$175 to pay for the cost of the debates, and the motion was approved 6:0. Treasurer Groot Gregory requested an invoice and stated that payment will be made upon receipt of the invoice.

Newton Highlands Village Improvements

Area Council President Lichtin announced that the mayor will be allocating \$250,000 in ARPA funds to make streetscape improvements in Newton Highlands. Nathaniel recommended that the Area Council should request being an active participant and co-host the community engagement meeting to discuss how to allocate these funds. Area Councilor Groot Gregory noted that the Mayor's announcement specified that the Area Council will be a principal partner in coordinating the public engagement. John Rice stated that this allocation of funds is intended to conduct a feasibility study, and that further funding to complete the project will require an allocation of additional funds by City Council. The funds are intended to be used to begin the design process for streetscape improvements. This funding allocation was in the City's Capital Investment Plan as part of a series of proposals to improve all of the village centers. It is hoped that the funding will be used to support improvements that make crosswalks safer and that will positively change the look and feel of the village.

John Rice suggested that the Newton Highlands Area Council may wish to reach out to folks in Newtonville and West Newton to see what worked and what created dissatisfaction with each of their village center improvement projects. There were lessons learned in West Newton that may have helped Newtonville design a better project. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell mentioned that City Councilor Julia Malakie may be a good resource to reach out to. Area Councilor Amy Wayne

suggested that as part of Newton Highlands village improvements, it would be great if the utilities could be undergrounded. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic added that he has supported the idea of undergrounding utilities for many years, and that this may be an opportunity to make these recommendations.

John O'Hara Square and Officer English Garden Landscaping

Area Councilor Amy Wayne reported that she had contacted the Parks & Recreation Department to find out more about the project to build a memorial to John O'Hara at the Officer English garden. She was unable to get any information. Area Councilor Amy Wayne feels that the residents of Newton Highlands should have input on the proposed memorial. Amy proposed that the Area Council should draft a letter about the process of approving a monument of this nature on public property, and send this letter to the Mayor and the Parks & Recreation Department. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic agreed that the process of placing a memorial on public property should be more transparent and subject to public review and input. John Rice responded that he had talked with Luis Perez Demorizi from the Parks & Recreation Department about this. Mr. Demorizi stated that he will attend the January meeting of the Area Council to discuss landscaping of the Officer English Garden. John pointed out that there is a goal is to have the memorial project finished by Village Day. He stated that the decision to approve such a monument is at the discretion of the Commissioner of Parks & Recreation, and that this project has already been approved, so there is little opportunity for further public input.

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell stated that many people were under the impression that the initial plan to memorialize John O'Hara Square was to have a sign or a plaque, and not a memorial. Area Councilor Amy Wayne stated that it seems inappropriate that a decision like this to place such a memorial on public property could be made solely at the discretion of the Parks & Recreation Commissioner. She noted that the process is a flawed if it allows a private memorial to go into a public space without community input. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin suggested that a letter from the Area Council expressing these concerns should be sent to the entire City Council. Nathaniel suggested that a draft could be written with input from up to 3 Area Councilors. John Rice pointed out that Mr. Demorizi from the Parks & Recreation Department will be at the Area Council January meeting only to discuss landscaping, and not scope or scale of the monument.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory asked if the approval by City Council to designate John O'Hara Square specified the scope or type of memorial. John Rice noted that he had written the docket item itself, and it was approved by City Council to make this John O'Hara Square without specifying details. At that point, the Area Council voted on a motion to have 3 members of the Area Council draft a letter regarding the issue of putting monuments in public spaces. The letter will be sent to City Council, the Mayor, and the Parks & Recreation Department. This motion passed 6:0.

Local and City Updates:

Union Twist Marijuana Retailer (1158 Beacon Street):

The project for the Union Twist marijuana retailer at 1158 Beacon Street was approved by City Council recently. There were a few changes made regarding the proposal. Union Twist committed \$10,000 to subsidize the NewMo transport service and Blue Bikes. Union Twist agreed to provide improved bicycle parking for employees, moving it indoors. The business also entered into an agreement with the property next door to create 10 off-site parking spaces. This would allow 10 employee parking spaces to be moved offsite in order to free up 22 on-site parking spaces for customers. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell pointed out that parking was not an issue at the newly opened marijuana store near Route 9 and Elliot Street. The hours of operation at Union Twist will be at 9 am to 9 pm Monday to Saturday, and 12 noon to 6 pm on Sunday. Union Twist has requested a traffic control officer on Tuesdays, when the Farmers Market is taking place at nearby Cold Spring Park. However, the request is at the discretion of the police department, which can decide whether to provide the officer or not.

Newton Highlands Village Day 2022:

Area Council President Lichtin reported that he had received an e-mail from Steven Feinstein confirming that Village Day is being planned as an “in person” event. It will be taking place on Sunday, June 12, 2022.

Area Council Elections:

Area Council President Lichtin reported that he has received no updates regarding the recent election. No results have been posted. The Newton Highlands Area Council will have 3 openings. No write ins were noted. Jeremy Freudberg noted that the map of the Area Council does not match the street list. Bob Burke stated that there were streets that were once in Newton Highlands which were switched to Waban in the late 1940s. Some of the streets in the Newton Highlands district were once part of the Hyde School district. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell noted that the envelope for Area Council ballots at the Hyde seemed full at the end of election day. Area Councilor Larry Rosenberg pointed out that at the Zervas School polling location, there was very little advertising about voting for the Area Councils.

Other Updates:

There were no additional updates.

Administrative Items:

Approval of October Minutes: The draft minutes were submitted for review from the October 7th Area Council meeting. No changes were proposed. The minutes were approved 7:0.

Treasurer’s Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory had provided an update. No transactions took place in the past month. Next month we will have the next installment for Zoom fees.

New Business:

John Rice reported that Newton Community Pride is in the process of planning a winter festival, possibly with ice sculptures. The Soup Social is unlikely to happen indoors this year due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, John proposes that on February 12, the Hyde Soup Social will take place outdoors. The Area Council will need to pull a permit for the event. This item will be placed for further discussion on the Area Council agenda in December. Newton Pride will pay for a band to be playing, hot chocolate will be served, and there will be ice sculptures. For this event, tables will be placed outside, and possibly tents.

John Rice reported that all of the parking meters were removed from the Brigham House parking lot. There is now a kiosk for payment, or payment may be made using the online app.

John Rice reported that he had spoken with Robert Fizek regarding a permanent water supply for the Hope Fountain. Robert had suggested that the water could come from a nearby hydrant. John noted that if a water line is put into place, it would also include a water meter on it, which will not be expensive since the fountain would be filled only a few times per year. This project will be planned for the Spring.

John Rice also reported about a plan to record stories about Newton Highlands from the 1940s and 1950s. Area Councilor Bob Burke has agreed to tell some stories he remembers from the 1940s and 1950s. Bob will be interviewed, and the stories will be documented on video.

Nathaniel Lichtin noted that in the village center, a new awning is being placed at the old Eatery location. The old pizza place on Lincoln Street is also getting close to opening.

With the planned change in start time for Area Council meetings to 7 pm, Area Councilor Amy Wayne noted that the sign on the Walnut Street bridge that announces meetings will need to be changed to 7 pm. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell stated that she would like to switch this sign to a smaller, hard sign that is easier to place. For now, a patch will be put on the current sign to reflect the 7 pm start time. Treasurer Groot Gregory stated that the current sign cost about \$100 to \$200.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 8:52 pm.