

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, February 3, 2022

Area Council members:

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

Ex Officio:

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

Guests:

Lisa Gordon, Shawna Sullivan, Jim McGonagle, Kathy Pillsbury, Jeremy Freudberg, James Fitzgerald, Amy Wayne, Marc Hershman, Rena Getz, Carol Carroll, John Rice, Lisa Monahan, City Councilor Pam Wright

Meeting called to order at 7:05 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell presiding. The meeting was held using Zoom videoconferencing technology.

Administrative Items:

Approval of December Minutes: The draft minutes were submitted for review from the December 2nd Area Council meeting. The minutes were approved 6:0.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory provided an update. No transactions, but there may be some expenses coming up for zoom fees and there may be preliminary expenses related to Village Day. The zoom account costs about \$15 per month.

Local and City Updates:

Area Council Elections:

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell noted that the Area Council will need to elect Area Council officers next month. The Area Council will also consider nominating and voting to have new members at that time. This topic will be discussed at the NHNAC meeting in March.

Clark Street Inclusion into the Highlands Service Area:

Newton resident Jeremy Freudberg, who lives on Clark Street, provided some background information. Maps on the city of Newton website currently show that all of Clark Street is included in the Newton Highlands Area Council service zone. However, according to Board of Alderman and City Council orders, officially the east side of Clark Street had not been formally added to the

Area Council. Therefore, Mr. Freudberg and Area Council member Srdjan Nedeljkovic circulated a petition in December to residents of this section of Clark Street and adjacent homes on Athelstane Road and Halcyon Road to add this section to the service area. The required number of signatures were obtained to officially add these addresses to the service area. The signatures have been submitted to the City Clerk's office for signature verification. There will be a public hearing on February 23 at the Program and Services committee meeting of City Council to discuss the proposal.

The Area Council held a vote for to approve the proposal for Clark Street and adjacent houses to be included in the NHNAC service area. The vote was 6:0 to approve. A letter will be sent to the City Clerk's office and to the Program and Services committee in support of the petition. The Area Council subsequently held a second vote on whether to write and send this letter, and this was voted 6:0 in favor of sending the letter.

Lincoln Street redesign

Newton Department of Public Works Commissioner Jim McGonagle presented information about the planned Newton Highlands Enhancement project. The city has appropriated \$250,000 of ARPA funds for conceptual design of streetscape improvements in Newton Highlands. The Conceptual Design team will include Environmental Partners, an engineering design firm with experience in village enhancement, with a focus on community needs and values. This firm has experience with public outreach and was the firm that worked on enhancements in the village of Newtonville. The Conceptual Design team will also include Stoss, a landscape architect firm with a focus on creating village streetscapes that are multifunctional and active year-round. The goal is to provide an ecologically functional and inviting space. At the city level, the Planning Department and Department of Public Works will be involved with this project from beginning to end.

The design evaluation process will take into consideration transportation, intersections, traffic signals, create shorter and safer crossings, update signals, streetscape lighting, landscaping, benches, and stormwater enhancement. Public engagement will include a kickoff meeting with all stakeholders. There will be two community meetings at key points in the conceptual design process, a public awareness campaign, a presentation of draft concept designs, and a project website that will enable users to provide comments and suggestions. A presentation of Conceptual Designs will be made to the community once they are ready. The design evaluation process will start in mid-April, after the snow season ends. Pending the situation with Covid-19, meetings may take place in person, virtually, or hybrid.

The project area limits include Walnut Street from the Hope Fountain to Centre Street, Lincoln Street in the village center, and portions of Hartford Street from Lincoln to Erie, Floral Street, and Centre Street. No design work has been started yet. Prior to the start of the process, the engineering consultants will be provided with surveys. The first community kickoff meeting will take place after mid-April.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked about feedback that has been received about work that has been done by this design firm for Newtonville and some other intersections. Mr. McGonagle responded that one negative they've heard is that people now need to drive slowly in the village

center of Newtonville since the streetscape reconstruction was completed. The Newtonville project included bump-outs, shortened crosswalks, and narrower travel lanes, leading to reduced speeds. Mr. McGonagle pointed out that this result is accomplishing what was intended for Newtonville, which was to improve safety for pedestrians and cyclists and to improve pedestrian accessibility.

Mr. McGonagle noted that the Newton Highlands project will incorporate MBTA Green line access, as well as access to shuttles and buses. One of the goals of the project is to focus on outdoor gathering areas. In Newtonville, a section of Bram Way has been closed to car traffic, which has been successful in attracting outdoor seating. In Newtonville, the focus on gathering areas has been the biggest success. Ornamental lighting has been successful in Newtonville. There have been strong feelings about the design of benches, which some people prefer and others dislike. A community process was conducted, and the non-traditional benches were preferred. Mr. McGonagle noted that from village to village, there will likely be differences in opinion about aspects of the design.

Area Councilor Groot Gregory asked about the time frame for the concept design. It will take about 12 months for the conceptual design to be developed. It is important to get public feedback, and Village Day in June is expected to bring people to the Highlands, so this may be a good opportunity to gather input. A suggestion was made to have in-person meetings during the summer at the bandstand at the Hyde. A booth will be set up at Village Day to provide information about the project and to solicit community feedback. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin noted that Station Avenue is not a part of the project area and suggested that this should be part of the project area. Nathaniel noted that more lighting is desired and that the Hartford and Lincoln Street intersection needs to be improved. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell also agreed that Station Ave should be included in the project area.

Jeremy Freudberg suggested that the Blue Bikes area on Station Avenue should be evaluated as part of the project in terms of roadway improvements. The sidewalks also need attention on Station Avenue. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic asked how much funding is available for construction and over what time period. Mr. McGonagle responded that no other funding has been identified for construction at this time. Once there is a conceptual design completed, then funding will be identified. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell mentioned that good points about the village center were raised by residents as part of the Envisioning sessions that took place last summer. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin stated that he will e-mail this information to DPW. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell asked about parking needs in the village center. Mr. McGonagle responded that this will be a large topic of discussion. He noted that when bump-outs are placed, some on street parking may be lost. DPW will look to increase parking and try to make additional parking available outside the area.

Feedback will be sought about Lincoln Street redesign in the next few months, and a booth to provide information about the project will be placed at Village Day. Area Councilor Bob Burke mentioned that a study that was done as part of the historic district proposal includes a review of the historical buildings on Lincoln Street and that this should be considered as part of the proposal. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted that there is a historic trolley pole on the corner of Lincoln and Hartford, and hopefully this will be preserved. DPW Commissioner McGonagle responded that in Newtonville the old bus stop was preserved.

Carol Carroll noted that she and others have had difficulty accessing tonight's Area Council meeting. She suggested that the city should reach out to the MBTA to coordinate with them. Mr. McGonagle confirmed that the MBTA will be involved in this project, as well as the Parks & Recreation Department with regards to the Officer English Garden area.

At the conclusion of the discussion about Lincoln Street redesign, Area Council members complimented Mr. McGonagle and the entire DPW on their efforts in clearing snow during our recent storm.

Developing Village Centers (Marc Hershman):

Barbara Darnell introduced Marc Hershman, an architect from Newton, to give a presentation regarding development of village centers. Mr. Hershman introduced himself as an architect. His experience and training brought him to a point of interest on issues of village centers. He grew up in Brooklyn, in a place with a high density development. He then went to Cornell University and Harvard College and studied architecture and urban design. Mr. Hershman stated that village centers are a big issue and that he intends to discuss what it is in the village centers that is important, interesting, and what it is that is right.

Mr. Hershman made a slide presentation of village centers:

Wellesley, Massachusetts. A picture was shown of a main street in Wellesley, Central Street, which is characterized by primarily one-story buildings, attractive retail stores, and a great deal of individual character for the stores. He then showed another section of Central Street which has two-story buildings which fit well and are tastefully done. The upper level of these buildings does not distract from the main retail façade on the first floor. There is individual character to each of the buildings, but there is also a general uniformity of presentation to the street.

Del Ray, Florida. The streetscape looks clean, bright, and contemporary. It is a very active main street in a village center. It is a popular draw in that it gathers people from across the region. The interesting aspect of this section of Del Ray is that it was once a depressed area. The town planners rehabilitated the structures. They did not demolish the existing structures and build new. There are infill pieces in the streetscape. The rest of the buildings are rehabilitated, and the street is incredibly active. The scale of buildings is 1 and 2 stories. The businesses and property owners are successful. They did not need to build bigger structures on this street, but instead chose to rehabilitate their existing small-scale buildings.

Santa Barbara, California. The main street is characterized primarily by one and two-story buildings. This area is also very active and vibrant and serves as a regional draw. Another view of the main street shows attractive one and two-story buildings. A large building is noted down the street. It is an 8-story building that disrupts the flow of the 1 and 2-story buildings. This one larger building seems to be eclipsing the others. The building casts a shadow, darkening both sides of the street. Mr. Hershman noted that the height of this building is what was approved in the Northland development on Needham Street. The large building does not engage at the ground level, as the eye and mind of the pedestrian picks up the entire structure. The interest of retail is minimized, and the

building detracts from the main event of the streetscape. The larger building does not add to the village feel and experience, which is the retail experience.

Brooklyn, New York. King's Highway was shown. Mr. Hershman pointed out that in one of the densest cities in the country, there are one and two-story buildings on main streets. There is lots of street traffic. Property owners and businesses do well by maintaining their 1 and 2 story buildings. The second story is typically active with the first floor. It can be retail or office, or residential. But in a dense part of Brooklyn, the property owners manage with 1 and 2-story buildings. In each of these examples of towns and cities, the streetscapes have a feeling of openness, inviting people to linger and shop, to meet someone. These kinds of streetscapes are orderly and welcoming.

Waltham, Massachusetts. The area around Moody Street is incredibly successful. It consists of mostly 1 and 2-story buildings and retail that is active. This contrasts with the newer block that includes Cronin's Landing, which is not a storefront but a long monolithic multistory structure. The Cronin's Landing section leads to a feeling of being closed in and overwhelmed. A taller building creates shadows. Along Moody Street, there are areas of 2 and 4- story buildings. In the area of the 4-story buildings, there is a totally different feel with retail now a subset of the building. It is a different experience and not as appealing as the simplicity of the 1 and 2-story retail areas. The apartments at Cronin's Landing represent an example of a bigger building. Although there is retail on the ground floor, it is challenging for retail to succeed. The sense of appeal, sense of place, and sense of unique character for retail is not easily achieved.

Let's look at Newton. Waban Center has 1 and 2-story buildings. Newton Highlands has 1 to 3-story buildings. The 3-story building in Newton Highlands abuts a plaza in front of it. A 3-story building can work where there is room in front of the building to accommodate the perspective of the higher floor. In Newtonville on Walnut Street, there are 1 and 2-story buildings. Then there is the Masonic building, which creates a sense of juxtaposition of proportion. The building is beautiful but out of scale to the village center. It was set adjacent to the street, whereas it would have been preferable if it had a plaza around it. Higher is not necessarily better in this situation.

Across the north side of the pike, there is a traditional one-story retail block on the east side of Washington Street. On the west side of Washington Street, the new development Trio is very large. The ground floor is not focused on retail. The glazing is set in a solid surface, lost in the anonymity of the larger structure. The prior block that was demolished was a two-story block of buildings that had more of a human scale. This had been a well-proportioned piece of architecture in our community. In Newton Centre, there are many one-story buildings. On Union Street, facing the MBTA, we have an example of a two-story building with a prominent cornice with a partial story above. What we see in these examples are buildings that say, "We want to be two stories" and the additional story does not take away from the focus of 2 stories and ground floor retail. In Framingham, there are 3-story buildings adjacent to a roadway in which there are 4 lanes of traffic. If this was a two-lane traffic road, the streetscape would appear as if it were a canyon. However, in Framingham, there is a new structure on the street that is taller at 5 stories and presents an experience similar to that of Trio.

Human Scale Design. What is it? How do we measure it? Empirically we looked at examples of representations of human scale design. Designing to human scale means design that is optimized to

human use, and that generates the most positive response among pedestrians. How do we measure it? Human scale is expressed as a ratio between the height of the building and the width of the street. A 1:1 ratio of street width to building height was favored in the 1970s. Now most urban designers favor a 1:2 to 1:3 ratio when aiming to achieve a human scale design. Let's look at Walnut Street. At 62 ft wide, when we have a 1-story building that is 15 ft tall, it gives a ratio of 1:4. With a 2-story building that is 25 ft high, we get exactly a 1:2.4 ratio. A two-story building is fine there. On Lincoln Street, the street is 44 ft wide. A 1-story building creates a 1:2.9 ratio. A 3-story building creates a 1:1.3 ratio. The maximum height for human scale on this street would be 18 ft, or one story. Lincoln Street is pushing the limit when it comes to human scale design, but we can accomplish it tastefully by having a plaza and establishing a second-story cornice.

A discussion ensued after Mr. Hershman completed his presentation. Kathy Pillsbury suggested that the images that Mr. Hershman presented were cherry picked, and that retailers have been lost in many of these communities. She noted that Santa Barbara is attractive because it is a college town. Some main streets in New England have 4-story buildings and are very inviting, like those in Northampton and Salem. Mr. Hershman responded that he chose photos of many places that he's seen and that he's experienced. He has lots of pictures of other places, including Salem and Montpelier, and most of the streetscapes in these communities include 1 and 2-story buildings. Ms. Pillsbury mentioned the retailers in Newtonville are doing well since the new development was built, and that the new development led to improved business activity there.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic commended Mr. Hershman on his presentation and noted that the attention to human scale has also been described by architect Robert Campbell in his 1992 book "Cityscapes of Boston" and by Allan Jacobs in his book, "Great Streets." Area Councilor Nedeljkovic suggested that as we consider both new and old development in Newton, we should pay more attention to human centered design and that our focus should not be only towards zoning issues. Lisa Monahan, an architect and planner, took issue with a number of the slides that were presented. She stated that although the slides of Brooklyn that Mr. Hershman showed had 2-story buildings, this is not typical of Brooklyn and is actually misrepresentative of Brooklyn. In Waltham, she noted that there is quite a bit of new construction that is 4 and 5 stories. In our village centers where there are 1 and 2-story buildings, Ms. Monahan pointed out that there are empty storefronts that are not thriving. Ms. Monahan was curious if economic and market data was used by Mr. Hershman to prepare his analysis. Mr. Hershman stated that his talk was not an economic analysis. Ms. Monahan stated that she had hoped that Mr. Hershman's presentation would have been more even handed.

Mr. Hershman responded that he wanted to focus on a theme, and that with one or two-story buildings we can have a reachable ideal in design that is comfortable and succeeds. We need to have more dialogue on what kinds of streetscapes people will feel comfortable in, and we should not settle on choices based only on economic drivers. Communities should be able to choose their look and feel. Kathy Pillsbury pointed out that everybody involved in these kinds of discussions cares about Newton and its villages. There are different perspectives on what will make the community better. Design is important. She noted that Montpelier, Vermont has a great main street with taller buildings. Mr. Hershman pointed out that on its main street, even with some taller buildings, there are many smaller buildings in Montpelier.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic gave the example of the design of Main Street at Disney World, where the second stories were built at $\frac{3}{4}$ scale to give the Main Street a more human feel. Area Councilor Bob Burke thanked Mr. Hershman and stated that he hopes that people will think more about human scale when development decisions are made. Area Councilor Burke stated that the primary role of a village center should be commercial, and that it should be a place to gather. It should be a place to congregate for many things. Mr. Burke noted that in the past, people came to village centers to shop and meet friends and neighbors. Bob noted that Newton Highlands has stayed relevant while maintaining its historical architecture. Bob asked about the best vehicle for a village center to create the dynamism to sustain itself, and stated he doubts it is by having large scale buildings like some of the newer developments. Bob thanked Mr. Hershman for bringing forward a much-needed discussion.

Lisa Gordon thanked Mr. Hershman for his presentation. She stated that she feels attached to the scale of our village centers and doesn't enjoy seeing buildings get higher. She noted that in Northampton, the main street is very wide and it creates more of an urban feel to the place. Ms. Gordon noted that we need to have more discussions about how our villages should feel, and we need to have these kinds of conversations to be able to compromise on differences in ideas. Issues such as shadows and the scale of new development need to be discussed. Ms. Gordon wondered if Trio had put its courtyard in front of the building, if it may have made a difference in the feel of the development. Also, setting the top stories back may have helped mitigate its large scale. Rena Getz thanked Mr. Hershman for talking about design and scale. Ms. Getz expressed her concern about the redesign of our village centers. We are at a juncture at which we need to appreciate our historic assets and should demand excellence in place making and design. It's a level of complexity and planning that needs to kick in. Mr. Hershman wrapped up by thanking everyone for their points of view. The interesting thing is to discuss how important certain paradigms are to people. We all have the same goal to make our places attractive an inviting.

Zoning Redesign Update: Rena Getz

Ms. Getz presented information about a preliminary discussion of the impact of the Housing Choice law in Newton. This initiative is part of the 2021 Economic Development Bill. Cities and towns are being asked to create zoning in which at least one district is created for multifamily housing by right. The district needs to provide at least 15 units per acre, and half of it needs to be within a half-mile of a rail station. If cities or towns do not comply, they will not be eligible to submit for state grants.

Under this legislation, a by right multifamily zone needs to be designated with a minimum density of 15 units per acre within half a mile from a rail station. Multifamily housing must have 3 or more residential units or 2 or more buildings with more than 1 residential unit in each building on the same lot. Under this law, Newton is required to provide the zoning for new housing units of 25% of its housing stock reported out in the 2020 Census, as new by right development to meet this requirement.

Therefore, Newton is required to create the zoning for over 8330 new units. A Planning Department analysis was done which finds that there are 4340 acres of land in Newton within 1/2 mile of a rail transit stop. Within a quarter mile, there are 1260 acre of land. Based on the Pattern Book exercise, a village center boundary in Newton is 240 acres. The law states that

zones need to be a minimum of 50 acres. Under the plan, Newton would have to create the zoning for a capacity for over 8000 new dwelling units. The public comment period for the law will end this March 31st.

Pam Wright, City Councilor in Ward 3, commented that City Council still has lots of questions about the impact of this law in Newton. Because Newton is considered an MBTA community, the law states the city will need to zone for over 8330 units of new housing. However, we don't know how big these housing units need to be. That will determine how big the area to be rezoned will be. We need to create zoning that will allow at least 15 units per acre of the zoned area. However, in West Newton Square and other similar village centers, about 1/3 of the land is not buildable. In West Newton, if the goal was to zone for 30 units per buildable acre, we would need to increase the allowance to 40 units per acre on buildable land to account for the unbuildable areas. Village Center density would need to be higher for that reason. Another question is how much of the new development would need to be allowed by right. If the new law were implemented as it now stands, there would be no special permit negotiations. The city will need to consider at what level of development it would be desirable to limit what can be built by right. Perhaps developments of more than 100 or 75 units may still be subject to a special permit process.

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell asked what amount of funding would be lost if Newton didn't implement this new legislation. City Councilor Wright responded by saying that over the past 5 years, Newton has received about \$460K per year in funding, but that the level of funding is inconsistent from year to year. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic commented that the proposal is unacceptable in its current format as most towns and cities would not favor removing local control over land use and zoning based on potentially losing such a relatively low amount of state funding. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic suggested that the state could also accomplish the goal of high-density housing near transit by building a larger network of transit to extend to high density areas. For example, extending rail along the Needham Street corridor would enable high density development at Northland and along the entire Needham Street corridor to be transit accessible.

Lisa Monahan stated that the state has passed this as a law, and that communities should accept the fact that they are required to comply. City Councilor Pam Wright responded that yes, this is the law. But there is no way to force communities to implement it. Councilor Wright noted that in recent years, Newton has approved many more new housing units compared to prior years. And there have been hundreds of new units proposed even in the past few months. Even without the new law, Newton is meeting a commitment to increasing housing availability under current the current zoning process. Kathy Pillsbury mentioned there will be a special meeting about this issue at City Council in March. Jeremy Freudberg commented that compliance with the law may be mandated.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted that even if compliance with the law is necessary, it is unclear under what mechanism the law will actually be enforced. The residents who own properties subject to the new zoning will not necessarily sell their properties to be developed into high density housing. The people who live in this housing won't necessarily use the MBTA and this will lead to a requirement to expand roadway infrastructure. High density development will increase traffic more than it increases transit ridership. Area Councilor Bob Burke agreed that many people won't even use the MBTA, even though they live close to transit, as their jobs will be outside of downtown Boston. Kathy Pillsbury disagreed with Area Councilor Nedeljkovic and said that Newton would

never allow for overly high density near the transit stations that could lead to such stress on roadways and neighborhoods. City Councilor Pam Wright stated that the City will probably set a limit for what amount of development will require a special permit, perhaps at 75 units or 100 units.

City Councilor Wright once again pointed out that a requirement of 15 units per acre will lead to higher density in a village center where 25% of the land is not buildable. To achieve this level of density, a three-family development per 6000 SF of land would be needed. Six units may go on a typical 12,000 SF lot. This would likely lead to tear downs of existing houses, and the new units would not likely be affordable. On larger lots, the new zoning may allow for 8 units to be built, but a developer may choose to build only 6 units and avoid inclusionary zoning requirements.

Rena Getz expressed concern about allowing such a large amount of by right, without additional oversight. If existing housing stock is demolished, this will have a large environmental impact. Zoning redesign should be more sensitive to the nuances of each community. Lisa Monahan stated that overly large development near T stations based on this law couldn't happen. Ms. Monahan noted that the city will have the opportunity to participate in planning where these 8000 units will go, and we will have a great opportunity to design the way this looks. Kathy Pillsbury commented on the issue of house demolitions, and noted how there are open areas, like the CVS parking lot on Route 9, that could hold more housing. Councilor Wright noted that the zoning will require 25 contiguous acres per area, so the impact of the new zoning will likely spill into the neighborhoods. She gave an example of how the City of Somerville took properties by eminent domain in Union Square and sold the land to a private developer. Lisa Gordon questioned in what way implementing this law is a good opportunity for Newton. What are we getting, other than being forced to do something that we could do better locally? If we had better transportation options to various communities around Boston, better access to transit could help solve the housing problem by distributing development in a greater number of areas. She noted that we need to be thoughtful about how this new law and the zoning changes it could lead to will affect our existing neighborhoods.

New Business:

Village Day. Area Councilor Groot Gregory reported that Steve Feinstein has been getting inquiries about renting booths for Village Day. This year, the date for Village Day is the second Sunday in June, which is June 12th. We will invite Steve to our next meeting to discuss Village Day.

Area Council Meeting Announcement: Jeremy Freudberg commented that our meeting announcement could reach more people if it were placed on the city website by Friday.

Winter Soup Social: John Rice noted that the Winter Soup Social will be taking place at the Hyde Playground on Saturday February 12. There will be two bands playing, and soup and ice cream will be served. This will be an open-air event. Lincoln Kitchen and Grape Leaf will be serving soup. The new Dining Car restaurant will be there with soup as well.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30 pm.