

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, April 7, 2022

Area Council members:

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

Ex Officio:

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

Guests:

Jeremy Freudberg, Peter Barrer, Alice Ingerson, Amy Wayne, Kathy Pillsbury, John Rice, Julia Malakie, Lisa Gordon, Rena Getz, Chris Pitts, Lisa Monahan, Lynn Weissberg, Carol Carroll, Fran Godine, Doris Ann Sweet, Andy Levine, Leslie, Jay Walter, Robert Fizek, Nancy Zollers, Cindy, Tarik Lucas, Dennis Rieske

Meeting called to order at 7:03 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell presiding. The meeting was held using Zoom videoconferencing technology and recorded.

Administrative Items:

Approval of March Minutes: The draft minutes were submitted for review from the March 3rd Area Council meeting. A motion was made to approve the minutes as written. The minutes were approved 6:0.

Newton Highlands Election: At the prior meeting, Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin was proposed to resume his role as President and Barbara Darnell was nominated as Vice President. Nathaniel asked if Barbara could put together the agenda and run the meetings for the time being, to which she agreed. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic was nominated to continue as Secretary and Groot Gregory was nominated to continue as Treasurer. Both accepted their nominations. A motion was made to accept the slate, seconded by Bob Burke. The elected members of the Area Council voted 6:0 to approve the above-noted slate of candidates for officers for this year.

From this point forward, the Area Council meeting was recorded. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell thanked Nathaniel Lichtin for all of the work he has done in his role as President. Area Councilor Bob Burke also thanked Barbara Darnell for her work and efforts on behalf of the Area Council.

Appointment of New Members: Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin pointed out that based on bylaws, the Area Council may need to wait two months to officially nominate new members. However, considering that the Area Council is well into the current term, a discussion proceeded regarding appointment of new members. Srdjan Nedeljkovic reported that Robert Fizek had

indicated an interest in joining the Area Council, and community members Amy Wayne and Jeremy Freudberg expressed interest in being nominated.

Amy Wayne stated that she was interested in returning to the Area Council to continue work she had done as an Area Councilor over the years. Jeremy Freudberg expressed interest in joining the Newton Highlands Area Council and stated he cares a lot about what happens in the village and near the historic MBTA station. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell asked if any others participating in tonight's meeting may be interested. No other people either expressed interest or were eligible.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic then nominated the two candidates, Ms. Wayne and Mr. Freudberg, to be appointed to the Area Council, and the nomination was seconded by Area Council Vice President Barbara Darnell. The Area Council voted 6:0 to appoint Ms. Wayne and Mr. Freudberg. Ms. Wayne and Mr. Freudberg were advised that they will need to contact the City Clerk's office to be officially sworn in once the City Clerk's office is notified by Area Council President Lichtin of their appointment.

Substantive Topics:

Party for Bob and Joanne Burke:

John Rice stated that he has reserved the Newton Highlands Women's Club on Saturday April 24th from 3 pm to 4:30 pm to have a party for Area Councilor Bob Burke and his sister Joanne. Bob has lived in Newton Highlands for 85 years and he and Joanne will be moving out of the community. Area Councilor Bob Burke expressed his thanks to John Rice for organizing the event. John noted that invitations to the event will be going out in the next week. Bob also shared some reflections of how his neighborhood on Dickerman Road has changed over the years.

Festival of the Arts:

John Rice and Area Councilor Barbara Darnell provided information about the upcoming Linda Plaut Festival of the Arts event that will be taking place over the summer in Newton Highlands. Gloria Gavriss from Newton Community Pride has been actively planning program for the Festival of the Arts. The festival will be taking place on three days July 22 to July 24. As part of the festival, there will be artwork placed on the Hyde Playground fencing. The artwork will include depictions from local artists. Examples of such fence art exist near Cold Spring Park and near Angier School. The artwork presentation has been organized by Ellen Fisher. Some of the artwork may also be placed on the baseball field fencing in the Hyde playground, and posters may be added to the Walnut Street bridge, above the flower boxes.

Regarding permitting for this event and others on the grounds of the Hyde Playground, for the past 10-12 years, the Area Council has been asked to pull a permit, and then the Hyde Center has run the events. The city is now consolidating this administrative task so that the Hyde Community Center will pull the permit and have the event covered under their insurance policy. The Area Council will continue to be a sponsor of events at the Hyde Playground. Activities related to the Summer in the Highlands program will obtain their city permits under the Hyde Community Center permit. The City will obtain the necessary permits for the Village Day program on behalf of the Area Council,

and this permit has already been issued for Village Day. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell asked about the implications of the city pulling the permit for Village Day. John Rice responded that for Village Day, there will be no change to the permit holder since the permit will be in the name of the Area Council.

John pointed out that there are over 30 events during the summer at the Hyde Center. For the Festival of the Arts in July, there are 9 events proposed, starting off with an Orchestra performance, followed by a movie, followed by concerts throughout the weekend all taking place at the Hyde Bandstand. John pointed out that an example of a prior collaboration between Newton Community Pride, the Hyde Center, and the Area Council was the recent Soup Social, which was a big success.

Administrative Items:

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory provided an update on recent transactions. Groot has been in touch with Steve Feinstein about ordering items for Village Day, including for the Road Race and the Bounce House. The budget for Village Day was presented, and it was noted that this event is the major financial component of the Area Council's annual activities. Groot noted that otherwise, the Area Council spent about \$1000 in the past year on the Candidates forum and other community activities.

Village Day Update:

Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory presented the projected income and expenses related to the upcoming 2022 Village Day with references to the most recent prior Village Day in 2019. Deposits have already been made for tents, tables and chairs, as well as bands and for the caricature artist. A reservation has made to obtain bounce houses. The website for renting booths has been set up and is ready for inquiries. Donations from sponsors and local businesses will be accepted.

A Road Race is being planned. Regarding expenses, music is one of the largest expenses projected at \$4500. Instead of two stages, there will be single stage this year. The goal is to attract local artists and support local music. There will be some expenses for promotion and flyers. The cost of rides is projected to be \$1650. There are expenses to run the Road Race, mainly for shirts and timing, but these expenses are typically covered by entry fees.

The goal is to break even for Village Day. Typically, the Area Council's income has been about \$15K and the expenses have typically been about \$12K. John Rice noted that the Hyde Community Center has received a \$2000 donation from Village Bank that will be donated to support the Area Council for Village Day. A discussion ensued regarding there being one stage, and that there will no longer be a second stage at the corner of Walnut and Lincoln.

John Rice announced that at 1 pm during Village Day, there will be a dedication of John O'Hara Square at the corner of Walnut and Lincoln. John noted that he has spoken with the owners of the 57 Lincoln pizza shop, who want to have a presence outside and serve burgers and hot dogs. John also mentioned that the owner of the new The Dining Cart restaurant would like to have a food truck next to his restaurant and to be part of Village Day.

Safety in Newton Highlands:

Area Council Vice President Barbara Darnell noticed that traffic counters were recently placed on village streets. These are part of gathering information for the village center redesign project. Barbara spoke with Shawna Sullivan from the Department of Public Works, who stated that DPW will be postponing community meetings regarding the village center redesign project until the end of May. She confirmed that a traffic study is part of village center update.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic expressed concerns that the input of the community may not be considered in advance of the village center redesign project, and that we may be presented with a finished design rather than being a part of the design process. There is a concern that a proposed streetscape design will be complicated and over-engineered. City Councilor Julie Malakie reported on feedback regarding the redesign of West Newton Square. She noted that there has been little use of the public spaces. Kathy Pillsbury pointed out that for Newton Highlands, public comment will be accepted in the late spring and summer. Carol Carroll asked if there are assumptions that DPW may be working under as part of the redesign process. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell noted that community input about the village center had already been generated in prior meetings from last summer.

In any event the DPW will be attending the Area Council meeting in May to discuss the village roadway redesign project. Ms. Shawna Sullivan from DPW will be attending our May meeting. Jeremy Freudberg noted that removal of parking spaces in the village center has already been docketed for consideration by Traffic Council. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted that following the redesign of Walnut Street in Newtonville, the village is more attractive for people who walk, and he expressed his support for that project. Robert Fizek suggested that the Area Council send a letter to DPW requesting to be involved in the design process. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin responded that DPW has already indicated that the Area Council will be part of the design process.

Zoning Redesign Community Engagement Plans:

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin reported that the city's Planning Department is putting together a group of people representing groups and organizations that will guide their engagement activities for the upcoming village center zoning redesign work. The city is in the process of appointing an engagement network to help develop their community engagement materials. There will be meetings over the summer to make suggestions about community engagement to city staff. The work of this committee will be only about the engagement portion, and not about the substance of the zoning redesign. The deadline to apply is April 10th.

Nathaniel asked if anybody would like to apply, in addition to himself. The committee meetings will take place in May, June, August, and then wrap up in November. There is a maximum of 2 representatives per group for this Community Engagement Network. Nathaniel noted that the appointed members will participate in meetings with other members of the Network and then share information from these discussion with the Area Council. Lisa Gordon mentioned that she is applying for this committee on behalf of another community group.

Zoning Update:

Rena Getz provided an update about the recent Zoning and Planning committee meeting on March 28. The committee clarified issues within the zoning ordinance, including one specific to exterior insulation to augment sustainability and to extend it to not only residential but to all other districts. The committee corrected some tables relevant to heights and building stories in certain districts. There was a discussion about last mile delivery services and where they are to be located in the city. No consensus emerged on whether to allow them in village centers. The ZAP committee heard the report of consultants regarding by-right and special permit projects applying current zoning to determine what is the maximum builds are allowed on village center lots. The consultants deduced that the current parking requirements are the biggest limitation on what could be built on a parcel, as well as the limitations due to building height requirements. Setback requirements are also limiting development and can cause floor plans to be reduced. This has an impact on the viability of a project.

The consultant recommended a tiered framework for development, with different zoning requirements based on whether a lot is in the center, periphery, or edge of a village center. The consultants also recommended considering whether to control building size through the footprint rather than by FAR. Consideration should be given to removing special permit requirement on plots less than an acre. Other recommendations to stimulate development include lowering parking requirements, increasing allowed building heights, and using building footprint instead of allowable Floor Area Ratio as a limit to density. A recommendation was made that design standards should be introduced, and that consideration should be given to setting minimum thresholds for site plan review, the minimum footprint size, and what is the maximum size of build.

With larger projects, it may be more feasible to include affordable housing, open space, and buildings with sustainability in mind. Kathy Pillsbury noted that consideration was given towards adapting existing zones MU4, BU3, and BU4 to new potential new requirements that may emerge. Jay Walter pointed out that standard for floor heights is now 14 feet, rather than 12 feet as they were in the past, so increasing height limits for buildings is desirable. Area Councilor Groot Gregory commented that wider sidewalks are needed in village centers, and that this issue should be considered when discussing lowering setbacks. Kathy Pillsbury noted that there are no side setbacks in the historical Newton Highlands village center. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin suggested that the discussion on reducing setbacks was more concerned about side and rear setbacks.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted out that many of these issues were discussed as part of the Visioning process that the Waban Area Council and NHNAC held several years ago. Chris Pitts noted that the Area Councils have gathered input over the years from community members regarding these zoning and design issues. Chris also expressed support for the recent presentation by architect Mark Hershman regarding scale of village centers that make people feel more comfortable.

Village Center Development - Lisa Monahan and Kathy Pillsbury presentation:

Area Council Vice President Barbara Darnell introduced Ms. Monahan and Ms. Pillsbury. Lisa Monahan is an architect and planner who has been following in the zoning redesign process and

Kathy Pillsbury is a researcher and MBA consultant interest in climate and sustainability. Both are interested in housing issues. A summary of their presentation follows.

Planning has been ongoing in Newton over the past 300 years, and people have been dealing with the issues of planning and development over many years. Recently, there has been a flurry of new planning efforts, including Shape the Future of Newton, Newton's Comprehensive Plan, the Washington Street Vision Plan, the MBTA Communities Legislation, and many others. The question is "what makes a vital village center?" It consists of quite a few things and must include a thriving business district. In order to achieve this, there needs to be an environment where small businesses can do well. There need to be places where people can feel comfortable to shop, eat, stay, and linger. People need to be able to get there easily, and the village center needs to be appealing.

Everyone agrees that public space is needed for people to gather. If there are places for people to linger, they are more likely to stay in stores and go to restaurants. A village must be safe and accessible for walking. Examples of climate friendly features were portrayed: electric chargers, white roofs, solar panels, transit. We need to preserve iconic historic structures, which are mostly found in our village centers. We can't imagine not having these buildings. In order to have a vital village center, we need to have people close to and living near the village centers. A collection of multifamily homes was shown, some of which give the appearance as if they could be single family homes. People are needed close to village centers in order to keep the businesses vibrant. Images of larger village center developments were shown. Larger mixed-use buildings provide an opportunity to have a wider range of living space sizes, allowing for lower cost homes, and create an opportunity for an activated first floor mixed-use building with eateries and retail space on the first floor. Larger development projects can allow us to meet affordable housing inclusionary zoning laws. Multi-family homes can lead to lower carbon emissions and can support environmentally friendly transit.

Building a single multifamily building can replace the need for many individual houses. Construction of multiple free-standing houses leads to more construction waste, more cars, more driving, and these single-family homes can cost more to heat and cool than a multifamily development. A review of the concept of "human scale analysis" was presented, addressing issues of the relationship between building heights and massing, street widths, and the feeling of a comfortable streetscape. Human scale analysis covers a range of options. Many consider a 1:1 height- to-street-width as a good ratio, creating an appropriate sense of enclosure. A chart was shown of building heights compared to street widths, noting how Lincoln Street at 48 ft wide supports 3 stories, Walnut Street in Newton Highlands is 67 ft wide and can support 4-5 stories, and Washington Street is 80 ft wide, and can accommodate 5-6 stories based on this 1:1 ratio. Images were shown of a well-enclosed street with side-to-side buildings compared to one with no street edges and open parking lots. A drawing of proposed building heights along Washington Street was shown from the Washington Street Vision Plan. The map included the 2 village centers extending from Newtonville to West Newton with higher building heights allowed at the village centers, and lower building heights in the residential section in between.

Historic heights in Newton Village Centers were up to 4 stories in the past, but many of these village centers have lower building heights at the present. Historic New England cities with greater building density such as Northampton, Portland, Montpelier, and Salem were shown. Examples of the streetscapes of Newtonville, Wellesley, and Waltham were shown. An example of Greenwich,

Connecticut was shown, including images of sizable new housing developments nearby. It was pointed out that the sites of several current parking lots could be used as a potential resource for new housing development. It was noted that people who live near transit tend to use more transit. People who live nearby rail-based transit are more likely to use transit to get to work. With that, Ms. Monahan and Ms. Pillsbury's presentation wrapped up and a discussion ensued amongst the 25 or so participants who had heard the presentation.

Jay Walter agreed that our villages need more people, so we need to support more mixed-use development that has commercial on the street and people above them to use those businesses. Chris Pitts commented how village businesses only receive about 30% of their business from the local community, and how their viability may not be primarily dependent on nearby customers. Kathy Pillsbury responded that some studies show that people who walk to village centers tend to be better customers. Area Councilor Bob Burke noted that many merchants feel that they need more parking. Yet if people can walk to a business, there may be more foot traffic in the village centers. It was noted that more shared parking is needed. Alice Ingerson noted that historically, zoning in our business districts had allowed housing in village centers. Then in the 1950s, cities began tearing down housing to build parking lots in city centers. Now a lot of places are putting housing back in central areas once again. The question is if we can we recapture what we did right in the first place.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic thanked the presenters and agreed with their point how historical buildings enhance the attractiveness of our village centers. It is sad and unfortunate that the iconic and historic Senior Center building in Newtonville is slated to be torn down and that the new senior center could not be sited on one of the many empty parking lots that were shown in the presentation. If we want to preserve the sense of place that makes our village centers special, we need to do a better job in preserving our history. Area Councilor Nedeljkovic also pointed out the reality of increased housing costs in Newton and elsewhere, regardless of how many new units are being built. He stated that there is not a clear connection between simply increasing housing supply and reducing prices of housing. Just because increased housing supply may be an intended outcome of housing policy, it is not always consistent with making housing more affordable.

Lisa Gordon noted the importance of home ownership, and how many new developments in Newton are rental properties. She pointed out that even without new large-scale housing, Newton Centre is a thriving center. We need to be thoughtful of how we take care of or program activities in the village centers. The rising rents in village centers are also a problem that causes some established businesses to move out. Design review is very important and should be part of the process of negotiation with developers. Ms. Gordon pointed out that having a large project like Cronin's Landing in Waltham did little to improve Moody Street. Robert Fizek agreed that the site decision for the Senior Center was a poor one. Preserving the past and planning for the future needs to happen concurrently. We need to have a stronger effort on preservation while we are adapting zoning for new development. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin stated that the city considered a number of sites for the Senior Center, but that there were lots of problems with each of these sites everywhere, and that he felt that the selected site in Newtonville turned out to be the best option.

Lisa Gordon pointed out that other towns have purchased land to accomplish various municipal projects, and that this possibility was not given due diligence with site selection for the Senior Center. By tearing down the current building, we will be losing both green space and a historic

building. We could do so much better as a city. Carol Carroll pointed out how multi-family housing can be beneficial for village centers, but that we have multifamily units that have been constructed outside of a formal review process. We need to do more about enforcement of rules regarding construction of multi-family units. City Councilor Julia Malakie noted that in seeing pictures of historic buildings, there is a large difference in visual interest between the older buildings and the new construction. There are a lot more details in the older buildings compared to the larger new buildings. Julia also noted how she wished that other sites could have been reasonably considered for the Senior Center project, including areas along Needham Street that the city could have acquired. It is disappointing that the selection of a site for the new Senior Center is pitting seniors against each other who either support or reject the site decision rather than unifying people in supporting the project for its merits.

Area Councilor Bob Burke wondered if the city could have done better with regards to the design of projects like the Trio development. Bob noted that when walking on Union Street in Newton Centre, the buildings were designed in ways that made it feel comfortable to walk. He stated that when new buildings are planned, their appearance and design should be made more welcoming. Jay Walter responded that form-based standards in village centers may help address some of these design issues. He noted that one of the problems with affordability of housing in Newton is that too many house sales are of single-family homes. Offering a variety of housing stock will broaden the base of who can come into the market. Carol Carroll wondered if people would want to live in apartments above certain uses, such as restaurants. Lisa Monahan responded that there are modern systems that can mitigate air quality issues in such cases.

New Business:

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic reported that the City has received \$220,000 in funding from the state to study improved transportation options in the Needham Street corridor. Community feedback is important to provide input on any proposals that may emerge. Extending the Green line from Newton Highlands to Needham would meet many of the city's goals for improved transit, creating transit-oriented development, and climate sustainability. A request was made to include this topic as an agenda item for a future Area Council meeting to have a more robust discussion and to solicit feedback.

Councilor Tarik Lucas asked about Village Day booths. John Rice put out a request to solicit volunteers to help Steve Feinstein with Village Day planning.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 9:23 pm.