

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, January 5, 2023

Area Council members:

Barbara Darnell, Robert Fizek, Jeremy Freudberg, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, and Larry Rosenberg. Amy Wayne joined the meeting later.

Ex Officio:

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

Residents and others:

Lisa Monahan, Bob Burke, Marc Hershman, Diane Prunte, Simon French, City Councilor Pam Wright, John Rice, Waban Area Councilor Isabelle Albeck, Waban Area Councilor Rena Getz, Carol Carroll, Loumona Petroff, City Councilor Andreae Downs

Meeting called to order at 7:05 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin presiding initially, subsequently Area Councilor Jeremy Freudberg presiding. The meeting was held in person at the Brigham House as well as via Zoom videoconferencing technology.

Substantive Topics:

Election of Area Council Officers: Barbara Darnell presided over the election of Area Council officers. Groot Gregory was nominated for Treasurer. Srdjan Nedeljkovic was nominated for Secretary. Nathaniel Lichtin was nominated for Vice President. Jeremy Freudberg was nominated for President. The Slate of Officers was thereby proposed. It was moved to elect the nominees by acclamation. All members present voted “yes” thereby the slate was elected 7:0 with one absent Area Council member (Amy Wayne). Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic and others commended Barbara Darnell for her service as Vice President over the years.

Local and City Updates - presented by Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg.

Soup Social: Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin reported that John Rice has announced that the Soup Social will be held on Saturday, January 28 at 5:30 pm outside of the Hyde Center. It will be jointly sponsored by Newton Pride and the Hyde Community Center. Last year’s outdoor Soup Social was a great success, and it is hoped that this year’s event will be at least equally successful. A number of Area Councilors stated that they will not be available to attend, including Groot Gregory, Barbara Darnell, Nathaniel Lichtin, and Srdjan Nedeljkovic.

Newton Highlands MBTA Station Accessibility Improvements: Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin reported that the MBTA has moved the proposed canopied ramp from Walnut Street outside of the boundaries of the historically protected zone and outside of the Historical Commission's oversight, such that the presentation of the project before the Historical Commission was primarily for informational purposes as the Historical Commission has no further jurisdiction over it. The project is currently scheduled to be contracted in 2023 and completed in the Fall of 2025. Area Councilor Robert Fizek asked if a letter was written by the Historical Commission about redesigning the canopies to be more contextually appropriate. It is unknown whether such a letter was written and sent to the MBTA.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic has previously advocated for an elevator instead of a ramp to access the platforms from Hyde Street. To illustrate an example of what this may look like, he presented photos of elevators on the new Green Line extension in Somerville and asked for comment. Lisa Monahan commented that the elevators look good and that they serve a purpose. Area Councilor Robert Fizek commented that at the Newton Highlands location, they may not need to be as tall as they appear at some Somerville stations. Area Councilor Groot Gregory asked why an elevator couldn't be placed at the Lincoln Street entrance. Area Councilor Robert Fizek asked if we should write another letter to the MBTA about the station design. It was pointed out how the MBTA has not been responsive to prior letters or to community concerns in prior meetings.

At the end of the discussion about this topic, the Area Council chose not to take any specific actions at this time. However, Area Council Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted that changes in leadership at the MBTA may allow some opportunities to further improve the design of the project and reduce its costs.

Area Councilor Nomination and Selection: There is still an opening for the Area Council. No new candidates have been identified.

Martin Luther King Day: Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin noted that the celebration of this holiday will be taking place on Monday, January 16 at 9 am at Newton North High School.

Police Office Exam Application: Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin reported that the deadline to apply to be a police officer is at the end of January. After January 17, there will be a late fee added for the Civil Service exam. The City of Newton is looking to enhance diversity on their police force.

Other Updates:

In a prior presentation, Steve Feinstein asked if there is anyone who could help with Village Day or take over the main responsibilities. Area Councilors Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, and Larry Rosenberg expressed interest in helping with Village Day. A meeting will be set up in the next week or so.

Goals for 2023:

Area Council President Freudberg proposed a number of goals for the Area Council for the upcoming year. The Area Council website needs to be updated, as none of the information is current. The NHNAC needs to encourage more community engagement and improving the website may help in this regard. The NHNAC needs to work to get more people involved, to get more people to attend Area Council meetings, and to fill the Area Council's vacant position. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin mentioned that putting leaflets in doors is a method that has previously been successful in getting people out to key Area Council meetings. It was noted that engagement increases when issues of interest to the community are brought forward. Another issue brought forward by Area Council President Freudberg is that of rules and parliamentary procedure. The Area Council needs to do a better job to address deadlines for getting items on the agenda and for having content available prior to the meeting, such as letters written on behalf of the Area Council. When it comes to the point of transitioning from one item to another, the Area Council should have a clear transition during our meetings.

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell agreed that more accountability for Area Council tasks is needed. Area Councilor Robert Fizek noted it would be great if more of the community were involved in some of our meetings and activities. As an example of a functional website, the Waban Area Council website was discussed as an example. It has information on it relevant to the village, and it is up to date. Also, the Waban Area Council website is easy to find.

On another topic, Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg pointed out that Area Councilors need to check their city e-mail accounts. A discussion ensued about whether all e-mails that are received need responses. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin recommended that the Area Council focuses on key issues during 2023, such as Zoning Redesign, Crystal Lake improvements, and the Village Enhancement project. A suggestion was made for the Area Council to reach out to the City police chief to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Wellesley Office Park Bridge:

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg noted that the topic of a new pedestrian bridge across the Charles River between the Wellesley office park and Waban was on the agenda two years ago. Lately, the topic has come up again in relation to the replacement and reopening of the Christina Street rail bridge. Full replacement of the Christina Street bridge comes at a high cost with an uncertain timeline. There should be consideration instead to rehabilitate the existing bridge and invest the saved funds in a second pedestrian bridge between the Wellesley office park across the Charles River to Larkspur Road, and accessible to the Waban T station.

It was suggested that the Area Council should keep the topic of the Christina Street bridge on a future agenda, especially as it might relate to the proposed Chapter 40B housing project that is being planned by the Northland company. It is hoped that there will be opportunities for support of the Christina Street bridge by the developer. Area Councilor Robert Fizek asked if Zoning and Planning is aware of this project and engaged in bringing community concerns and recommendations forward to Northland. City Councilor Bill Humphrey noted that Northland is aware of the Christina Street bridge situation and the company has aligned their plans for accessing the future bridge.

Newton Highlands Village Enhancement:

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg noted that a letter was sent from the Area Council to the city's Department of Public Works regarding undergrounding of utilities as part of the Newton Highlands enhancement project, and also improving the process of outreach to the community about this project. The Area Council has received a response from the DPW that they will be taking a preliminary step to assess the feasibility of putting wires underground in Newton Highlands. DPW must first assess the cost for Eversource to do a preliminary design of the project, and that a 10% deposit of the full costs of the project is needed from the city to do this design work. An estimate of \$5.2 million per mile was noted for the Eversource portion of the cost for undergrounding. In addition, there may be other costs related to coordination with property owners.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic recommended that the city should go forward with the design process for undergrounding utilities and pay the deposit. Otherwise, we will never know the actual cost for the project to make a rational decision on whether to proceed to bury the overhead utilities. Therefore, Area Councilor Nedeljkovic stated that the city should engage with Eversource and pay the required deposit to do a preliminary design study to understand what is required to underground. Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin asked if city money would be better spent on other more important causes. Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg noted that the cost could be bonded. Also, perhaps the city could do some of the design work and save funds. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic stated that this is a once in a generation project for Newton Highlands, perhaps once in a hundred years, so an investment of this nature is appropriate. A vote was held 7:0 (Amy Wayne not present) to send a response to the DPW to encourage further assessment of the feasibility of undergrounding utilities as part of the Newton Highlands village enhancement project, and for the City to continue to meet with property owners regarding putting wires behind buildings.

Another concern from the Area Council regarding the Village Enhancement project is that it is not clear what feedback DPW has been receiving from the community since the initial project presentation and until the next meeting that is taking place in February. Area Councilor Groot Gregory mentioned that some business owners have met with John Sisson from the city and that they provided feedback to city staff. Many businesses have concerns about parking. City Councilor Andreae Downs stated that she was present at the meeting with business owners, along with City Councilor Noel and City Councilor Crossley. There was a brief presentation of the enhancement project by the city, but it was mostly a chance to hear from business owners about their concerns and their thoughts about redesign. Their main concern is lack of parking. There was positive feedback about Lincoln Street Option B which slows traffic for the entirety of Lincoln Street. DPW will set up an additional draft proposal of what may happen in the village center.

Parking Update: Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg reported that at the December Traffic Council meeting, an item was discussed for increased parking permits in Newton Highlands in order to accommodate people working at the Senior Center. The Traffic Council voted to approve a long-term trial such that the current number of permits will increase from 32 to 42. The 10 new permits will be for Senior Center employees and volunteers. Issuing even more parking permits for business owners was discussed, as well as expanding the areas for which the permits can be used.

Area Councilor Barbara Darnell asked about there being more business permits available or expanding the area where parking is allowed. With a business permit, one can only park on a certain block or segment for each permit. A permit holder can only override the time limit typically allowed for parking in the assigned area. For Senior Center staff, the assigned area will not be the most popular section of Lincoln Street, which is from Bowdoin eastward. The business permits that were sold were only those on parts of Lincoln Street closest to the village center.

Zoning Redesign:

Area Councilor Nathaniel Lichtin noted that the Zoning and Planning Committee at their next two meetings will allow organizations to speak regarding the zoning redesign process. A discussion ensued about what the Area Council may want to say at these meetings. Further information was presented about what could be built in the proposed VC1 zone. Example were shown of buildings that could contain up to 10 units on what are now 1 or 2-family properties. Options for parking, including underground parking and surface level parking, were presented. A diagram showed how an 8400 SF lot with underground parking could accommodate a 4000 SF building. It was noted how the draft zoning proposal has no requirements for open space for lots under 30,000 SF. There is also no lot coverage requirement. It may be possible to combining lots and then develop 21 units on the combined lot. There is no minimum size for each unit.

Currently, there is a requirement for one parking space per unit, but this may be reduced to half a parking spot per unit or perhaps zero parking spots per unit. If parking is underground, then more units can be accommodated per lot. It was noted that an underground parking space may cost \$50K per space. City Councilor Pam Wright noted how in the newly approved project on River Street, parking will be accommodated on the first floor of the building. City Councilor Wright showed an image of a building at 198 California Street with parking on the ground floor.

Waban Area Councilor Rena Getz noted that visual aides are being developed to help illustrate the massing of properties allowed under the newly proposed zoning. Ms. Getz presented images that showed parcel boundaries, setbacks, and proposed structure based on the zoning envelope and what the new zoning would allow to be built on a lot. An example showing VC1 and VC 2 zoning was shown for Waban. It was pointed that how in some cases, more than one building can exist on a lot. Massing and building structure were noted in the demonstration. A potential build-out of the Waban MBTA station parking lot was presented showing two large buildings that fill the zoning envelope. These visuals were developed on Google Earth Pro.

Newton architect Marc Hershman complimented Ms. Getz and Ms. Wright for their presentations and noted that the proposed zoning changes will be transformational for the community. Mr. Hershman stated that the underlying premise of densification is destructive to our built environment and the way people can live in a community. Mr. Hershman presented a number of visuals for the proposed VC2 and VC3 zones. Mr. Hershman stated that what makes a village inviting are the 1, 2, and 3 story buildings. Newton Centre was shown as an example of buildout in a proposed VC2 and VC3 area. Langley Road was presented. A potential new building on the Newton Centre parking lot was shown. An example from Auburndale on Lexington was presented, looking at a VC2 zone. Potential new buildings were shown. Elm Street in West Newton was shown. An example of Walnut

Street in Newtonville was presented showing new buildings potentially allowed by the new zoning. An example of what Watertown Street in Nonantum may look like was presented showing significant densification. A vision of Lincoln Street in Newton Highlands was presented showing 3-4 story buildings. Additional villages were shown.

Lisa Monahan commented to Mr. Hershman that the images shown are scaremongering and to say that our villages will turn into metropolitan areas bigger than cities is unfair and alarmist. Ms. Monahan pointed out that the MBTA Communities law will require planning for more housing. There is a housing crisis, and to say that Newton should remain a Garden City of single-family homes is exclusive. Ms. Monahan also noted that the images presented by Mr. Hershman show buildings that would require Special Permits and the city would not allow streetscapes similar to what Mr. Hershman showed. Ms. Monahan stated that Newton has had the same zoning code in place instituted 70 years ago and that the City has further space to be built-out. Newton has lots of room to fill in and it will happen over generations. Ms. Monahan said that to show a replacement building in the place of a historic structure is an alarmist move. Marc Hershman appreciated the sentiments but stated that his presentation is not alarmist. If the draft zoning had concern about these areas, then the proposal would not have shown them as VC3 level zones. If we allow the growth of a town, it will become a higher density city unless we zone appropriately.

City Councilor Pam Wright noted that on lots over 30K SF, a special permit will be needed. For lots under 30K SF, there is no relief. With the new zoning plan, the only protected buildings will be the Landmarked buildings, and there are few such buildings in Newton, and none in Newton Centre, Waban, or Newton Highlands. After a demolition delay of 1 year or 18 months, these buildings can be torn down.

Area Council President Jeremy Freudberg asked what the Area Council will want to say at the public comment session at the Zoning and Planning Committee meeting on either January 9 or January 23. Area Councilor Robert Fizek suggested that we should express concerns that the planning department hasn't articulated what the zoning changes will actually mean on a village-to-village basis. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic suggested that the zoning process should include provisions for historical preservation. City Councilor Andreae Downs noted that as the zoning redesign process moves forward, the zoning will be considering adaptive reuse of older buildings. Area Councilor Robert Fizek concurred that there are currently no provisions for preservation at this time. City Councilor Bill Humphrey and Lisa Monahan pointed out that the Zoning and Planning Committee is working to add historical protections under the new zoning. City Councilor Pam Wright commented that the current proposal allows 2x more building floor area on a lot. This will most likely result in tear downs. Waban Area Councilor Rena Getz stated that the Planning Dept has not been proactive on preservation. In other cities, there are preservation zones and areas that are proposed to be densified.

A discussion ensued within the Area Council regarding main points: historical preservation needs to be promoted, the height allowances are too high, people want trees, light, and open space. A draft letter of these points will be developed by the Area Council to be presented at the upcoming ZAP meeting. The Area Council will request the January 23 date for their public

comments. A motion was held for the NHNAC to make a presentation to the ZAP and focus on feedback received during the visioning process, which indicated a desire for more historical preservation, and for allowing buildings that are not too dense and too high for the Newton Highlands scale. A vote ensued, that there were 8:0 votes in favor.

Administrative Items:

Approval of Minutes: The draft minutes from the November meeting were approved. No changes were made. The minutes were approved 7:0 with one abstention (Robert Fizek). The December minutes were tabled until the next meeting.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory noted that the Area Council spent \$663.91 over what we received in the past year. The NHNAC paid \$300 so far for Zoom for this past year, and the NHNAC will need to pay about \$334 for the preceding 12 months and for the next 12 months (24 months). This is about \$15.93 per month. A motion was made and was approved 8:0 to approve funding for the Zoom account. This will cover payments until January 2024.

New Business:

No new business was announced.

Meeting Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 9:32 pm.