

Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council

Meeting Minutes, August 6, 2020

Area Council members:

Bruce Blakely (not attending), Bob Burke, Barbara Darnell, Groot Gregory, Nathaniel Lichtin, Srdjan Nedeljkovic, Larry Rosenberg, Amanda Theunissen, Amy Wayne

Ex Officio:

City Councilor Bill Humphrey, City Councilor Brenda Noel

Guests:

John Rice, Kathy Pillsbury, Rena Getz (Waban Area Council), Mark Shooman, Lisa Monahan, Pam Wright (City Councilor), Carol Carroll.

Meeting called to order at 7:35 pm. Srdjan Nedeljkovic taking minutes. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin presiding. The meeting was held using Zoom videoconferencing technology due to the Covid-19 health crisis.

Zoning Issues Discussion:

Area Council President Lichtin noted that the city Zoning and Planning Committee took a break for a little while during the summer, and that work on zoning redesign will be starting back up next week. A new draft of the zoning ordinance will be coming out soon, with some changes to the proposal to what was last produced in February. One of the issues that have raised public attention is a potential proposal to allow multi-family zoning (at least 2 family houses) throughout most or all areas of the city. City Councilor Bill Humphrey questioned if this proposal has been officially endorsed. It was noted that there is no proposal being considered that would actually evaluate the elimination of single-family zoning. A discussion ensued about the status of this proposal.

City Councilor Brenda Noel stated that the proposal to allow multi-family zoning in certain parts of the city has been an idea that has gotten some attention among City Councilors, focusing on areas within a ½ or ¼ mile radius from existing transit routes. Area Councilor Groot Gregory noted that it is important to understand which areas of the city might be exempt to this new zoning proposal, pointing out that there are only a few areas that are not within ½ mile of train or bus routes. There was an acknowledgement that the planning department is considering scenarios in which multi-family zoning would be allowed by right in transit-accessible areas that are defined any area within ¼ or ½ mile from bus or rail stops. Public feedback will be sought by the Planning Department as this discussion moves forward.

City Councilor Pamela Wright joined the meeting. She noted that the question of making the entire city zoned for multi-family came as a directive from the planning department. The term “multi-

family” was not defined, and could range from dwellings that are two-family or up to an 8-unit apartment building. In initial discussions, most city councilors felt that more feedback was needed from the public. City Councilor Wright noted that about 83% of the current residential lots in Newton are within ½ mile of transit, and that some councilors had suggested that the entire city should be considered for allowing multi-family zoning. The only areas of the city that are not within ½ mile of transit are parts of the south side of West Newton Hill, some areas of Oak Hill, Chestnut Hill, and a few other pockets. Councilor Wright mentioned that the latest zoning proposal for residential districts will be distributed on August 7, and updated zoning maps will come out at end of August. The Planning department has updated their website. Kathy Pillsbury confirmed that the Planning Department asked for input about the issue of multi-family zoning a certain radius around transit, and that City Councilor Markiewicz and one or two other councilors had suggested that the entire city should be examined.

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin noted a few other zoning-related topics are being considered. The planning department is considering whether to allow new components on building lots including side and rear additions that would exceed the currently allowed maximum footprint of building. The new proposal would allow property owners to build an additional structure onto the main structure while still being compliant with the square footage allowed on the property. Kathy Pillsbury added that in the initial version of zoning article 2, the components that were being considered were very small, such as a porch or turret that was going to be part of the footprint of the house. However, after talking with architects and builders, there were discussions about allowing side and rear building additions up to 2/3 the size of the existing house. Discussions about this will be taking place at future Zoning and Planning Committee meetings.

Lisa Monahan noted that much of the recent discussions about zoning of residential districts have been highlighted by the situation we are in regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. There seem to be more people now living in multiple generational households with more need for an extra bedroom or bathroom. Ms. Monahan noted that framing the question of multi-family zoning as if there will be an elimination of single-family homes across the city is inaccurate. She is concerned that using phrases like “elimination of single-family housing” or “abolishing single-family housing” in discussing multi-family zoning may be a scare tactic and misnomer. City Councilor Pam Wright stated that having multi-family zoning may add options for homeowners. Lisa noted that even if multi-family zoning is allowed everywhere, this will in no way eliminate single family homes in Newton. If people do not want to change their homes, they will not be required to do so. The new zoning will simply give people additional options. There have been many examples in Newton in which single-family homes were converted to two-family homes and then became single-family again. Lisa noted that she lives in such a home, and that she believes it give people lots of flexibility in uncertain times.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic noted how in recent years, some single-family homes have been demolished in Newton and replaced by much larger two-family structures that have been sold for much higher prices. This had led to the loss of more affordable homes, leading to a loss of socioeconomic diversity in the city as the new structures are often priced over \$1.5 million. In addition, often these new duplex homes tend to have forward facing driveways that are not architecturally consistent with streetscapes and that are aesthetically displeasing. Area Councilor

Nedeljkovic wondered how the new proposal for multi-family zoning would address issues of bulk and design of new housing, as well as potential loss of affordability.

Ms. Monahan responded by stating that the new zoning code could include incentives for adaptive reuse of existing properties and disincentives for tearing down structures. The code may include limits on the footprint of a new structure when there is a teardown. It seems that developers tend to tear down existing properties when a new structure can be built that is over 3800 SF. If the new house that can be built is larger than that, a teardown is more likely. Therefore, if the new zoning code limits the size of house that could be built, it may discourage teardowns. Currently, the zoning allows up to a 3500 SF house in the R2 and R3 zones in Newton. The new zoning code could potentially be permissive of future additions to smaller new homes, so that their size could go higher than 3500 SF at some point after they are built and occupied. Another control to consider would be a penalty or demolition fee for construction debris. The debris from teardowns has a negative environmental effect. In addition, new zoning requirements could require new construction to not exceed 125% of what the current house size. We could also consider increase time of the moratorium to delay demolition for historic properties, making it longer, or requiring a demolition delay for all properties that are being considered for tear down, making it less palatable to speculators and developers to demolish these homes.

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin mentioned some other items related to zoning redesign. The Planning Department will be forming subcommittees to consider revisions to the fence ordinance, the sign ordinance, and the lighting ordinance. City Councilor Wright noted that it has not yet been decided as to who would be selected to sit on each of these committees.

Nathaniel also noted that the next Zoning and Planning Committee meeting will be taking place on August 13 and that there will be Planning Department office hours for 6 people to ask questions related to zoning on August 19th at 12:30 pm. He also noted that the state legislature is in the process of finalizing state law on the way changes to zoning will be implemented. Currently, cities and towns require a 2/3 majority vote to implement zoning related decisions. There is now a proposal being discussed that would require a simple majority of a legislative body to implement zoning changes.

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic made a comment regarding the proposal to allow for increased housing density based on proximity to transit. There is certainly agreement that higher density development could be supported by high frequency transit, with the development supporting ridership that makes the transit more successful and ultimately decreasing reliance on single person automobile trips. However, we should be cautious about considering that all development within ½ mile of Newton's bus lines would meet criteria for transit-oriented development. Bus service in Newton is of low frequency and has low ridership, as routes are generally not accessible to major employment centers. Also, the commuter rail line runs very infrequent service in Newton with only one track boarding currently available. Transit-oriented development may be much more appropriate to consider along the high frequency, high capacity Green line, especially in existing mixed-use village centers. Discussions about increasing the supply of multi-family housing is an important topic that may be more appropriately considered separately from proximity to low ridership bus lines in Newton.

Postcard to neighborhood:

Area Councilor Amanda Theunissen presented a finished version of the postcard that the Area Council will be sending to residents in the Area Council service area. The Postcard is intended to increase engagement of the community with Area Council meetings and activities. She asked the Area Council to consider when the postcard should be mailed. Ideally it would be taken to the post office on a Monday so that it would be delivered on a Tuesday, as people are more likely to see it if it is delivered mid-week. Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin asked if we may want to mail it during the week of Labor Day. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell noted that the mailing may not get much attention the week of Labor Day since there is an election taking place that Tuesday. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic suggested that it could be mailed the week after Labor Day. Amanda then suggested that the Area Council could mail the postcard on the Tuesday before the Area Council's October meeting. A suggestion was made that the postcard could also be distributed via local restaurants. Area Councilor Amy Wayne volunteered to ask some of our restaurants to distribute the postcard to customers in the few days before the Area Council's October meeting. Area Councilor Bob Burke proposed make a press release to the Newton Tab. City Councilor Brenda Noel offered to distribute the postcard to customers at O'Hara's Restaurant. A consensus was made to mail the postcards on October 5th, prior to the Area Council's October meeting. Area Councilors thanked Councilor Amanda Theunissen for spearheading this effort.

Local and City Updates:

Newton Highlands Trivia Contest:

Area Councilor Amy Wayne gave an update about the Newton Highlands Trivia Contest. Thus far, 5 entries have been received. Information about the contest has been posted on various social media accounts. There are 37 questions in the contest. Amy thanked the councilors for helping put this project together. Bob Burke suggested that we could advertise the contest in the Newton Tab. Srdjan Nedeljkovic suggested that another outreach via social media could be made announcing the survey. Amy noted that there are 10 prizes for people who answer the questions correctly, and another 10 prizes for everyone else who enters the contest. Winners will receive gift cards to local restaurants for \$20 or \$25 each.

What academy award-winning actress went to high school in Newton in the 1920's and starred in *All About Eve* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*?

Amanda Thieunissen offered to bump up posting about the contest on Village 14 to bring it to people's attention. Information about the contest recently went out on the Hyde Community Center's e-mail list. Amy offered to contact local churches to see if they can let folks know about the contest. We will also see if information about the contest could be sent out via the Parks and Recreation department's contact list. City Councilor Brenda Noel offered to send information about the contest in the Ward 5 and Ward 6 councilor newsletters. A suggestion was made to contact Sam Nighman, the Mayor's assistant, to see if Mayor Fuller would be willing to put a link to the Trivia Contest into her weekly newsletter. Area Councilor Wayne noted that anyone in Newton can participate in the contest.

Newton Public School Plans:

Area Council President Nathaniel Lichtin provided an update about school opening plans considering the Covid pandemic. On Monday this week, school superintendent Fleishman sent an update that the earliest start date for school will be September 14. The school district is planning to implement either an all-remote or hybrid model in which students will spend two days in-person in school (Monday-Tuesday or Thursday-Friday) and two days remote learning out of school, with Wednesday left undefined. When the students are engaged in remote learning, it will be live synchronous learning with mandatory attendance and grading. The Newton School Committee will be meeting on August 10 to have a discussion about the proposal, and a vote on what will be the final plan will take place on August 12. Students will be scheduled by their last name or by family, so that siblings will be on the same schedule in terms of attending in-person instruction.

Land Use Projects:

Area Council President Lichtin informed the Area Council that the proposal for 26 new apartments at 1149-151 Walnut Street was filed this week. Plans for the proposal have been distributed to Area Councilors, and they will be posted to the Newton Highlands google group and placed on the Area Council website. No date has been set yet for a public hearing. Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic expressed support for the proposal and asked that the architects do more to improve the architectural consistency of this project with the historic streetscape of Newton Highlands. Potential improvements to the project would include remove the utility pole and undergrounding the overhead utilities along the streetscape in front of the proposed building. In addition, the curb cut into the parking area could be decreased from 26 feet to 20 or 22 feet, making for a shorter and safer pedestrian crossing.



Improvements in façade design may be considered such as a more defined cornice line, lintels above windows, awnings, and other façade ornaments to make the building more consistent with nearby homes and buildings. Area Council President Lichtin stated that he will place discussion of the 1149-1151 Walnut Street proposal on the Area Council September schedule. The Area Council will reach out to the business community to inform them about the project. Area Councilor Bob Burke stated that based on prior interactions he feels that the developer would likely be open to receiving more community feedback.

MBTA update:

The MBTA is no longer sending out notices to the signal and track replacement e-mail list when buses are replacing Green line trains. No additional work is planned on the D line in August. There have been no updates on the ADA accessibility project at Newton Highlands. Area Councilor Barbara Darnell asked if anybody knows why the MBTA buses come in groups of threes. Nathaniel suggested that it may have something to do with matching capacity of the trains and buses.

Christina Street Bridge:

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic reviewed a recent article in the Newton Patch about a state grant to study the feasibility of making the old rail bridge across the Charles River near Christina Street a multi-use patch. This is something that the Area Council had been very supportive of last Fall when it was brought to our attention by nearby residents who were concerned that the bridge access had been blocked. Funding in the amount of \$56,700 has been awarded to perform this study, which will also include an alternative analysis in case the bridge cannot be reopened. Issues about the title and ownership of the bridge need to be sorted out, but the hope is that the bridge will be transferred to the jurisdiction of the DCR (Department of Conservation and Recreation). Hopefully the bridge will be restored.

City Councilor Bill Humphrey added that the funds from the grant will be used to conduct a feasibility study to evaluate what will need to happen to restore access to the bridge or to evaluate alternatives. He noted that this is a state grant to evaluate a project that is between counties and municipalities. One of the issues is confusion over ownership of bridge. The original rail connections were part of an industrial park and various chains of ownership. The state grant will help establish who owns the bridge. Most likely, the MBTA will agree to say that they had owned the bridge and then transfer the bridge to DCR. This will depend on the outcome of the feasibility study and if the bridge will indeed be used for a multi-use path.



Woodward Street Eversource Project:

Area Councilor Srdjan Nedeljkovic expressed disappointment that the current project by Eversource to replace underground electrical conduit in the section of Woodward Street between Route 9 and Lincoln Street did not also include undergrounding of existing overhead utilities. City Councilor Bill Humphrey reported that he had attended a community meeting with Eversource. There were a number of issues that could have been addressed as this project was being considered, including replacing a leaky gas main at intersection at Erie and Woodward. However, the gas line will need to be redone by National Grid. After Eversource is finished installing the new conduit, this section of Woodward Street will be repaved. At some point there is hope that the utility companies will better coordinate projects with each other and the City DPW. A brief discussion followed about some sewer replacement and re-lining projects in the neighborhood.

Administrative Items:

Approval of July Minutes: Some minor edits were made to the original draft minutes. A motion made to approve the amended minutes. The minutes were approved 8:0.

Treasurer's Report: Area Council Treasurer Groot Gregory reported on several updates. These included payment for installation of the Hope Fountain pump, payment for expenses related to the Postcard, and payment for costs related to the trivia contest.

New Business:

Hyde Community Center director John Rice informed the Area Council about plans to hold two movie nights at the Hyde Playground in the next 1-2 months. Based on the success of drive-in movies at Marshall's Plaza sponsored by Newton Pride, the movies will be shown in the Hyde Playground: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *Groundhog Day*. Appropriate social distancing will be maintained and registration will be required in advance. Since it is unclear if the current limit for outdoor gatherings (100 people) will be continued or reduced by the governor, registration will not occur yet. Srdjan Nedeljkovic congratulated John Rice for taking the initiative on this effort. John pointed out that although the drive-in movies at Marshall's Plaza were a big success, a 40 ft screen was needed, which cost \$7000 for rental. Having movies at the Hyde Playground again will be much easier and less expensive to manage.

Bob Burke announced that by the next Area Council meeting, he intends to provide the Area Council with an outline based on information from the Newton Graphic newspaper about the historical buildings in the Highlands.

Meeting Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 8:46 PM.