

Minutes
Council of Economic Advisors
Wednesday, February 8, 2023, 8:30 AM
Zoom Webinar ID: 885 5150 4402
Adopted April 13, 2023

Members Present: Adam Block, Tina Burgos, Lise Elcock, Heidi Frail, Dan Goodman, Liz Hay, Jeremy Halpern, Adam Meixner, Rick Putprush, Matt Talcoff, Michael Wilcox

Members Absent: Stuart Agler, Bill Day, Robert Hentschel

Others Present: Amy Haelsen, Economic Development Manager; Lee Newman, Director of Planning and Community Development

Introduction and Roll Call – Mr. Block, Chair, opened the meeting at 8:30 a.m. He announced that this meeting of the Council of Economic Advisors was being held remotely, consistent with current state regulations, and was being recorded.

Minutes of the January 11, 2023 Meeting – Mr. Goodman moved to adopt the minutes of the January 11, 2023 minutes and Mr. Halpern seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

Zoning Review: Needham Center and Chestnut Street – Mr. Block referenced the review of the current zoning in the Center Business District, the Chestnut Street Business District, as well as their respective overlay districts, by the District Focused Subcommittee last year. He inquired if this is something the CEA wants to continue to study or seek any changes to the zoning. At its last meeting the CEA discussed the potential redevelopment of 888 Great Plain Avenue and the developer's interest in revising the zoning to allow for greater density. Ms. Hay shared that as a small business owner she supports the idea of increased density as it will help generate foot traffic for the businesses in Needham Center. She added that the eight units currently allowed by zoning seems low but the proposed thirty-four units seems a little high. Mr. Putprush shared that he is a proponent of having a large residential component in the immediate downtown area but added that it is all about balance. Mr. Block added that the Planning Board has not taken a position on this proposal as the plans have not been formally submitted to the Town.

Ms. Frail, a member of the Housing Plan Working Group (HPWG), shared that this property is included in the HPWG's report as they relate to recommended changes to zoning. The HPWG was tasked with addressing how the Town would meet the requirements set forth by the state's Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) as part of the multi-family zoning for MBTA communities. She added that the HPWG recommended that the Center Business District (CBD) be exempted from the areas of town that would need to allow housing by right as part of this new zoning as it would have to permit stand-alone housing and the group didn't feel the CBD was appropriate for this as it would decrease the vitality of business in the downtown. Mr. Halpern voiced his support for increasing density in Needham Center. Ms. Elcock shared that she believes we should take into consideration the great time and effort the HPWG put into the zoning plan and not second guess their recommendations. Mr. Talcoff added that while he believes that the CEA's role is to consider density, he agrees with Ms. Elcock and

thinks we should leave it up to the HPWG and the Planning Board to recommend what the appropriate amount of density should be. Mr. Block summarized by stating that the consensus of the group is that the CEA would not be taking a position on amending any zoning in Overlay District A, Overlay District B and the Center Business District. He suggested that the CEA write a letter to the Select Board stating that we've studied Needham Center and Chestnut Street extensively and discussed these issues at several meetings, and that the CEA firmly believes that greater residential density will support the commercial activity in the downtown but we leave it to other boards to determine what that mix is. Mr. Putprush reiterated that it would be helpful to speak to developers informally to get a better sense of what they need in order for a project to be economically viable.

Small Business Initiative – Mr. Block revisited the discussion surrounding ways the Town could support the small businesses in town. Ideas that were discussed at previous meetings included a networking meeting at town hall and an organized effort to bring office workers throughout Needham to the downtown on a given day to support the merchants and restaurants. Mr. Goodman shared that he is in favor of a team-building type of activity whereby employers organize an afternoon for employees to come to Needham Center to support the merchants such as “Small Business Wednesdays” during the warm weather months. Ms. Hay suggested that businesses display product out on the sidewalk during organized efforts like this. Ms. Haelsen added that this would need approval from the Select Board but she could help facilitate that request. She added that it is critical to get a core group of businesses to commit to participating in an effort like this to make it successful. Mr. Block added that he would like to see if there's a way to utilize the Town's transportation to help bring people from the offices to the downtown.

Ms. Burgos added that while she thinks these ideas are good, she believes some of the smaller businesses in town need a different kind of support such as assistance with social media or increasing their online presence so they can get to a point where they are marketing themselves and are more sustainable. She suggested coming up with a holistic plan so that there is cross-promotion and not just a weekly event to bring people to the downtown. Ms. Haelsen commented that she has spoken directly to several of the small business owners and there does not appear to be an appetite on their part for this type of support. Ms. Burgos thinks it's not necessarily a lack of interest but rather a lack of time on the business owners' part. Ms. Frail inquired about the possibility of setting up a business mentor type of program. In order to make it work, we have to acknowledge the amount of limited resources businesses are working with and bring the support to them as opposed to having the businesses come to us for the support they need such as a workshop or technical support.

Ms. Hay added that every small business is very different and what could be challenging for one small business – such as bringing their business to a larger business to increase their exposure – might be very doable for another such as hers whereby she would welcome the opportunity to have an exercise class at another location. She supports the idea of creating a mentor program with other small businesses and cultivating relationships among businesses to encourage more partnerships and cross-promotional opportunities. Ms. Elcock shared that the Chamber has a lot of offerings for training and support of small businesses and that she could help recommend people with various skill sets if we want to set up workshops. She added that she doesn't believe there is a critical mass of workers back in the offices yet and wonders if it's premature to plan an event to invite employees to come to Needham Center because we may not get a great turnout.

Mr. Block suggested we survey some of the large businesses in town to inquire what volume of employees they have back in the office such as NBC, Shark Ninja and what days have the highest number of employees there. He suggested that members of the CEA each reach out to a few of the large businesses in town to collect this data.

Needham Site Selection – At the last CEA meeting, the group discussed developing marketing materials to aid with site selection to attract new business to town which might include producing a series of short videos. Ms. Haelsen suggested that the CEA create an ad hoc subcommittee to put together an outline of what the marketing materials might be and define what the objective of the campaign is and define the target audience as well. Mr. Halpern, Ms. Hay and Mr. Block volunteered to serve on this committee. Mr. Halpern shared that he has done some research on what other cities and towns around the country are doing to market their communities for site selection and that there is a vast difference in quality. He added that he believes it should be done well and done professionally then it will be a positive reflection on the town whereas if it is done cheaply and unprofessionally then it is worse than not having any materials at all. The quality of the materials reflects how a prospective business will think about the town and whether they might be interested in locating here and he believes we should budget properly for this.

Ms. Haelsen added that a project of this size would need to be budgeted well in advance and that drafting a budget in the coming months would be necessary to better understand how it would be funded. While there is funding for travel and tourism type of marketing campaigns such as the campaign the Charles River Chamber produced last summer “A Trip Up the Charles”, she has not found any grant funding that will underwrite site selection type of promotional materials but will follow-up with Representative Garlick’s office to see if they have any suggested resources.

Economic Development Manager Report – Ms. Haelsen reported that the Needham Parking Study focusing on Needham Center and Needham Heights is wrapping up soon with the consultant, Stantec, presenting their recommendations to the Select Board at their March 14th meeting. She shared that there has been extensive community engagement in this effort with a public survey that received over 1,000 responses as well as an Open House held in late January as well as two focus groups specific for Needham Heights and Needham Center businesses.

She also reported that the effort to develop an arts and cultural plan through a collaboration with MAPC is ongoing. The working group for the plan, comprised of thirteen residents who are engaged professionally or as volunteers in the arts and cultural sector, is scheduled to meet later that week and begin working on an arts and culture vision statement for the town. There will be opportunities for public engagement in the coming weeks and months with a public survey and focus groups. This effort will be ongoing until fall of 2023.

In other updates, Ms. Haelsen reminded members that the Housing Plan Working Group’s Housing Study and Report is posted on the town’s website and that both French Press and Masala Art will be going in front of the Planning Board soon to seek approval for permanent outside dining.

Adjournment Roll Call - The meeting was adjourned at 9:57 am.