

Council of Economic Advisors
January 10, 2025
Meeting Minutes
Minutes Approved at June 13, 2025 CEA Meeting

Call to Order

Chair Heidi Frail called the January 10, 2025, meeting of the Council of Economic Advisors to order at 8:00 AM. The meeting was conducted in a hybrid format.

Members Present:

Heidi Frail, Lise Elcock, Bill Day, Dan Goodman, Adam Block, Jeremy Halpern, Adam Meixner, Rich Putprush, Mike Wilcock

Members Absent (Excused):

Matt Talcoff, Bob Hentschel, Bhuren Patel

Staff Present: JP Cacciaglia, Economic Development Manager

Adoption of Meeting Minutes

A discussion was held regarding the adoption of meeting minutes as a consent agenda item for future meetings. A motion was made by Lise Elcock, seconded by Dan Goodman. The motion passed unanimously.

Members discussed the importance of having a tangible impact on local businesses. The focus is to improve conditions for Needham businesses, particularly in retail and restaurant sectors, and identify strategies to help them succeed.

The group discussed the need for increased foot traffic to support storefronts. One solution raised was adding residential units above commercial spaces. There was concern expressed over community resistance to residential development, and if addressing housing fall under the committee's purview. Previous initiatives such as sidewalk plowing, and sidewalk sales were mentioned as examples of past efforts to boost foot traffic.

Suggestions and discussion were held on the pros and cons to add committee seats for retail and restaurant representatives, particularly from the Center and Avery Square areas. Additional ideas included including a youth member and a representative from the "no organization crowd" to bring in alternative perspectives. Heidi Frail acknowledged the suggestions and noted that expanding the committee would require a formal proposal to the Select Board. Some concerns were raised about making the committee too large.

Heidi Frail encouraged community listening sessions to collect updated feedback. Members noted that this had been done in the past, but it may be beneficial to do again given the time that has passed. Challenges identified include securing both funding and community participation to implement change.

Heidi Frail suggested starting with a review of the committee's charge. Members discussed exploring grant opportunities through the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) for economic development planning. This would require Select Board approval to amend the committee's scope.

Discussion on if the CEA should create a formal mission and vision statements. The mission could emphasize enhancing the town's economic viability and vibrancy and articulate the long-term vision for community success.

Discussion held on potential for outreach campaigns to expand committee membership. The goal is to include more representation from retail businesses and restaurants. Despite past efforts, there have been difficulties attracting small business owners in the downtown area to fill committee seats.

There was a consensus that the committee has not yet delivered on its potential. Members emphasized the need for clearly defined goals and outcomes. While the committee initially focused on zoning, its role has evolved, particularly with increasing attention to business health and the Needham Center working project.

The committee acknowledged ongoing issues at the Route 128 Business Park, including the physical condition of properties and several vacant retail spaces near Restaurant Depot. Members suggested outreach to property owners to encourage revitalization. Zoning was identified as a barrier, particularly the exclusion of institutional medical uses that may be in demand.

The committee discussed creating subcommittees to streamline efforts. A significant need was identified for small business resources, such as a "Getting Started in Needham" manual outlining necessary steps and contacts. A working group is needed to narrow the committee's focus and develop an actionable agenda. Dan Goodman volunteered to contribute ideas.

The committee continued to discuss effective strategies for supporting small businesses in town. Recruiting volunteers has proven difficult due to time constraints, particularly for small business owners. A proposed solution was to host short, low-commitment forums once or twice a year to gather feedback and foster communication.

- JP and Lise will work offline to refine the vision statement.
- Dan Goodman will assist in narrowing the vision and mission statements.
- Subcommittees will be created for idea generation.
- Forums with relevant businesses will be explored.
- Recruitment efforts will continue, with a focus on adding retail representatives.
- Adam Block will reach out to Dave Downing for potential involvement.

Motion to Adjourn from Adam Block, Seconded by Adam Meixner. Motion Carried Unanimous, meeting adjourned at 8:57am