

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

June 17, 2025

The Needham Planning Board meeting, held in the Charles River Room of the Public Services Administration Building, and virtually using Zoom, was called to order by Artie Crocker, Chairman, on Tuesday, June 17, 2025, at 7:00 p.m. with Messrs. Block and Greenberg and Ms. Espada, Director of Planning & Community Development, Ms. Newman and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee.

Mr. Crocker noted this is an open meeting that is being held in a hybrid manner per state guidelines. He reviewed the rules of conduct for all meetings. This meeting includes 2 public hearings and public comment will be allowed. If any votes are taken at the meeting the vote will be conducted by roll call.

Decision: Amendment to Major Project Site Plan Special Permit No. 93-3: Wingate Development, LLC, 63 Kendrick Street, Needham, MA 02494, Petitioner (Property located at 589 Highland Avenue, Needham, Massachusetts). Regarding certain plan modifications, including the addition of 2 EV chargers, a Bocce court, Dog Run and extended sidewalk and 3 parking spaces.

Mr. Crocker noted the Wingate decision needs 4 members. Mr. Greenberg was not here at the time so cannot vote and Mr. McCullen is not here tonight so the hearing needs to be postponed. It will be rescheduled for when Mr. McCullen is here.

Minutes

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:
VOTED: to move passage of the 5/5/25 minutes as in the packet.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:
VOTED: to move passage of the 5/12/25 minutes as per the packet tonight.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:
VOTED: to move passage of the 5/20/25 minutes as in the packet tonight.

Correspondence

Mr. Crocker noted the following correspondence for the record: an email from Emily Pick, dated 6/3/25, with comments regarding the Bulfinch project; an email from Robin Zucker, dated 6/4/25, with comments and questions regarding the Muzi site and an email from Barbara McDonald, dated 6/13/25, regarding the Working Group Breakout Sessions.

Report from Planning Director and Board members

Ms. Newman noted there are 2 close outs following Town Meeting. The MBTA went to the state for adoption of the MBTA Communities Act so the town will stay in compliance and the certifications on the Flood Plain Zoning went to FEMA so the Town is compliant as relates to that project. The Large House Review Community meeting was held last week and was very well attended. A survey was sent out and close to 1,200 results were received. At the next meeting the Committee will look at the input from the meeting, and the survey, and make some decisions on variables they want to control such as FAR and setbacks and if there should be a special permit process or controlled through an as of right process. They are in the process of engaging architects to do some 3D modeling, taking examples of a couple of houses and modeling them under the existing framework, then reducing as a percentage of square footage to see how that works out.

Ms. Espada asked what was going on with Stephen Palmer. Ms. Newman noted the RFP is out. They expect to review the responses to select a consultant then that committee will begin work. Mr. Crocker noted the Tree Committee had a public hearing as well that was decently attended. There were some break out conversations. People had a lot to say and there were some good conversations at the tables. He thinks the Committee is going to have the summaries typed up. Ms. Newman note the results of the survey were put into Chat GBT and there were almost 80 pages. Mr. Block commented he has used Chat GBT to draft contracts and it was spot on. Mr. Crocker noted there will be another Tree meeting in about a week. It will keep moving forward.

Public Hearing:

7:15 p.m. – Amendment to Major Project Site Plan Special Permit No. 2012-07: The Children’s Hospital Corporation c/o Boston Children’s Hospital, 300 Longwood Avenue, Boston, MA, Petitioner (Property located at 66 B Street, 360 First Avenue, 410 First Avenue and 37 A Street, Needham, MA). Regarding request for certain modifications to the conditions in the 2021 Amendment.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:
VOTED: to waive the reading of the public hearing notice.

Ms. Newman gave a brief summary. A decision was issued on the Children’s Hospital including traffic mitigation improvements at Kendrick and Third Avenue that required a donation to the Town of \$30,000. The applicant is asking for revisions to Section 1.11 to allow the Town to utilize all traffic improvement funds at other locations and modifications of when the reviews will be done. Tim Sullivan, of Goulston & Storrs, stated in 2021 Children’s Hospital bought the property next to Trip Advisors. It was rezoned by Town Meeting to allow pediatric medical. The applicant got a building permit and construction is underway. They may be looking for a Certificate of Occupancy in the Fall. He noted the amendments are to align some facts to the decision.

The first amendment is to Condition 3.3. The applicants are obligated to pay \$30,000 to the Town to use for construction of improvements at Third Avenue and Kendrick Street. Children’s Hospital reached out and were told the Commonwealth is not allowing those improvements. That request is for the \$30,000 to be used elsewhere. The second amendment is Condition 3.4, that traffic monitoring will commence one year after the Certificate of Occupancy. One year is not the right timeframe. He would like it to commence 3 years after. The final amendment is Condition 3.5, that the applicant will work with the Town and Mass DOT on the Traffic Signal and Warrant Analysis and Roadway Safety Analysis. That is estimated to be \$25,000. It is ambiguous and he wants to clarify it is a funding issue.

Ms. Espada had no questions. She commented she read no town entities had any issues. Mr. Greenberg clarified it is a 3-year ramp up period with 2½ years to get to full steam. Mr. Sullivan stated it will take 6 months to get open and operating and then there will be a period of time to start seeing patients and get everybody in there. He feels three years from the Certificate of Occupancy or about 2 years after opening they will be fully operational. Mr. Block asked if Ms. Newman intended the applicant would conduct the Warrant Analysis and Road Safety Audit or is she satisfied with the Town conducting that with the \$25,000 contribution from the applicant. Ms. Newman is satisfied with the Town doing the audit. The DPW and Engineering have been consulted and are satisfied with that arrangement. The funds are satisfactory.

Mr. Crocker noted the following correspondence for the record: an email from Police Chief John Schlittler dated 5/22/25, noting the Police are fine; an email from Building Commissioner Joseph Prondak, dated 5/27/25, with no concerns or objections; an email from Assistant Public Health Director Tara Gurge, dated 6/9/25, with no additional comments and an email from Fire Chief Thomas Conroy, dated 6/12/25, with no issues. There were no public comments.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Mr. Greenberg, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:
VOTED: to close the hearing.

Ms. Newman will prepare a decision for the next meeting.

Discussion of Planning Board Goals.

Mr. Block asked if the first part of the spreadsheet was updated. Ms. Newman noted she tried to put together a framework of what was on the table, existing on-going projects and what their other goals were. She noted this is reflective of what the commitments are that they know of, and the timeline associated with those on a broad basis. Mr. Block feels it will not be until October 2026 to be able to finalize a Parking By-Law change. He feels 4 months between workshops is a long time and he would truncate that a bit. Ms. Newman noted it could be shortened up. Zoning changes will go in the Fall. They will not make a May Town Meeting.

Mr. Block sees an opportunity between now and 2026 to bring to Town Meeting, at that time, a Zoning By-Law change to Unlock the Charles and Great Plain Avenue between Pickering and Warren or Linden to Warren. He feels that is the biggest impact and the biggest benefit to the town. Those have the highest level of urgency while continuing to work on other issues. Ms. Espada noted having design guidelines for MBTA zoning is important, multi-family design guidelines and Stephen Palmer has no end date. She noted no additional help with the budget was approved by the Finance Committee. She asked how many Ms. Newman can do in parallel with the capacity the department has. Ms. Newman stated between staffing both the Large House Committee and the Stephen Palmer Committee they are eating up a lot of bandwidth and they are managing consultants around both projects. Mr. Block stated he could work with Mr. McCullen on Unlocking the Charles and he could work with Mr. Greenberg on Great Plain Avenue. Mr. Crocker commented, if looking at the Center of town, they would need to look at the whole center. Mr. Block stated he can look at Great Plain north and south side as that is the critical part of the spine. Mr. Crocker would like to look at the entire center of town and what should be done globally for the center of town.

Mr. Block reiterated he can work with Mr. McCullen and Mr. Greenberg to work on a basic planning draft By-Laws and draft guidelines to take some pressure off the committee. They can then present it internally, have discussion among the Board members and, when they have something they are pleased with, it could be opened up to the public for public comment. He is trying to map out specific dates and timelines to get it on the calendar. The Finance Committee made some pretty important messages and the Board has the opportunity to be able to kick start some of these activities that are quintessential to the economic growth of our town to reduce the residential tax burden. Mr. Crocker appreciates that, but he wants the entire center of town to be looked at. The committee does not have to be 15 people. It could be 8 or 9 and will take some time but it needs to be done. He is talking about the economic impact.

Ms. Espada feels it needs to be looked at holistically. Normally these things are done by committees and not one or 2 people. Things take time and there is a process. She does not feel one or 2 people without a planner is helpful. Mr. Greenberg feels they should start small. He agrees with Mr. Block's point that the Board should be more proactive. The reason he wanted to run was to do some planning. He would be supportive to get a jump start. Ms. Newman feels Mr. Block and Mr. Greenberg could create a working group to look at that particular block and think about other representatives from town government that could participate in that and create a process. There is a planning process around the Large House and around Stephen Palmer. Mr. Block feels there is an opportunity here. He and Mr. McCullen could get together to come up with a framework for Unlocking the Charles and he and Mr. Greenberg could do the same for Great Plain. Ms. Espada could do the same with the MBTA design guidelines. She could lead that.

Ms. Espada stated she is committed to the Stephen Palmer project but she knows what he is trying to do. She asked if there were any grants the Board could get to help them do this. There would need to be someone who could lead it. Ms. Newman noted they just have the parking grant. Mr. Block would be happy to meet with someone from the Finance Committee. Ms. Espada stated a community process takes a long time. She feels Mr. Block should create a work plan. Mr. Block is just trying to initiate the process. He wants to streamline it. Ms. Newman stated the steps should be laid out, what the product would be, and they should come back to the Board for discussion.

Public Hearing:

7:45 p.m. – Amendment to Major Project Site Plan Review No. 2013-02: Town of Needham, 1471 Highland Avenue, Needham Massachusetts, Petitioner (Property located at 1407 Central Avenue, Needham, Massachusetts). Regarding proposal for a new building addition of approximately 12,400 square feet, as well as the renovation of roughly 1,800 square feet within the existing storage garage to create a dedicated tire maintenance bay. Please note: this has been continued from the May 20 2025 Planning Board meeting.

Tyler Cofelice, Project Manager with Weston & Sampson Engineers, Inc., noted he went back and filled in additional information for the traffic study. He explained the ingress and egress. Vehicles will have to follow out to the left. The far left will be the exit and when the RTS is closed the middle exit will be used. In the 2014 traffic study the exit did not adequately meet the intersection stopping site distance. It has the stopping site distance so it can still operate safely. This is based on a speed limit of 40 although the speed limit is 30. He feels a good chunk of vehicles will come from 470 Dedham Avenue. The lighter vehicles take the shorter, more direct route. The heavy vehicles will take a longer route with less lights, down South to Charles River to Central. There were some concerns with taking Marked Tree. The DPW has agreed to avoid that road.

Carys Lustig, DPW Director, stated that currently most vehicles take that route and are already going to the RTS. She does not feel there will be a change in the volume and the traffic study does not show a change. Hank Haff, Director of Design and Construction, noted the study showed a 0.2% increase in traffic. Mr. Cofelice stated there will be 32 more vehicles and he showed the calculations. Mr. Block stated the additional information is very helpful and the commitment to change the standard of practice is helpful. He is satisfied with storm water and noise attenuation. Ms. Lustig encouraged people to come to the facility at 470 Dedham Avenue at 9:00 a.m. and they will hear about the same amount of noise that will go on with the new facility. Mr. Crocker is concerned with the pickle ball court and skate park traffic. That is the unknown. He opened the hearing for public comment.

Holly Clarke, of 1652 Central Avenue, appreciates that any road in Needham has traffic. When this was presented to Town Meeting the one issue that was raised was traffic. This is right across the street from the park and was raised last time. There was a comment in the traffic study. The applicants were not giving any traffic information or trip data. These projects were proposed by different departments without the planning. The truth is there is an existing traffic issue. The area is already flooded and you are bringing more. She feels the Board needs to get more data and should get the data from the other projects now. The applicant is saying they are going to South from Marked Tree and that is just shifting the traffic. When 1688 Central Avenue was proposed a traffic study was done on 10/5/21. The study said traffic at Charles River and Central is already operating at an F level. It would have been helpful to hear what is going on at these intersections. She feels more analysis should be done. Kenneth Sargent, Senior Project Manager, noted the hours of operation of the facility are 6:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Vehicles will be before the a.m. traffic and out of there before the p.m. traffic rush hour.

Ms. Clarke noted one concept was the idea of limiting trucks coming over. She asked if there may be a way to condition this to help on this street. Charles River has a field that is packed when in use. A traffic analysis for the day care center was done. She would have expected this proponent to do a full study. There should be a condition, if granted, that the use be limited to what the DPW has requested and limit times in and out. She is not sure why it cannot be open on Mondays. She noted her neighbor David Lazarus sent a letter to the Board that was not mentioned. Mr. Sargent stated the intent was to get trucks there in the 2:00 p.m. window or first thing in the morning to avoid traffic. Ms. Lustig stated the town maintains its own fleet maintenance, which helps with emergencies. Limiting the hours of access to the facility could be problematic to deal with emergencies, for example when there are snow emergencies. She noted, currently they use Marked Tree Road but have changed it to South Street due to comments made. She discussed 2 other projects on the same property. They just sought design funds, but she has no idea what the scope will be and does not know how many courts will be built. A consultant has not been engaged for the parking demand so she does not know what should be taken into consideration.

Ms. Clarke stated this is not a DPW issue but a planning issue. Things are being done out of order. There is no holistic comprehensive plan, and things are landing in places. This is a contained project, but it is big trucks. People on Charles River do not even know this is happening. If they had been given notice they might have been here to tell the Board more. Ms. Espada appreciates what Holly is saying. She lives across the street from Ms. Clarke and from the day care center. Only 0.2% more traffic sounds like an operational issue. It is a parking lot in front of her house. She agrees with Ms. Clarke.

She wants to do more planning, but the Finance Committee did not give them another Planner. Is there is a better system of understanding what all these projects are? There are F Level signals around town. If there are too many projects on one road, how should it be dealt with? This has never been taken into account. She feels the Town has not taken what they could into account and done the best they could. How do we look holistically at the Town?

Mr. Block feels Ms. Clarke's comments are valid. Projects come up and the Board tends to be site specific for specific reasons. Central and Charles River Street continue to be a service Level F. Kids are in the area. Having a crosswalk or sidewalk would be an improvement. He asked if the town has any plans for improvements here. Ms. Lustig stated intersections and how lights are functioning with each other needs to be looked at. She will go back and look to see if there are any improvements that could be made. There are pedestrian challenges as there are no sidewalks on any abutting streets. There need to be sidewalks to connect to. She understands that part was developed with no sidewalks because the people who lived there did not want sidewalks. This Fall they will reach out to very low volume neighborhoods with sidewalks on both sides to talk to them about renovating one side to be fully compliant with the goal of removing the sidewalk on the other side. They are also looking at adding capacity throughout the town. This is not short term, but a long-term goal. Mr. Block would appreciate her going back and looking at where that intersection is on the list.

Ms. Espada asked if there was any way, once these projects are completed, of doing a study to see what the impacts are. Mr. Haff stated if the town transitioned to curb side trash pickup it would reduce the traffic by over 5,000 cars a week on Central Avenue. He understands that it is under study but the traffic should be looked at with this. Ms. Espada stated some things have not occurred yet like 1688 Central Avenue and the pickle ball courts. This needs to be looked at holistically. Ms. Lustig stated Central at Hunnewell is being looked at now and a more cohesive design is being looked at for Central and Great Plain for more flow through there in a more logical fashion. She will need to see where Charles River at Central is on the list. Ms. Clarke appreciates the idea of analyzing later but feels it should be analyzed now. She heard Pollard is being done over and there will be an additional \$2,700 property tax hit per year for 20 years. For this project she urges the Board to memorialize the conditions the current applicants have said. When the current people leave the history is gone. She stated David Lazarus' comments should be considered such as no right turn on red on Charles River.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:
VOTED: to close the hearing.

The Board took a 5-minute break.

Informal Presentation: Charles River Proposed 40B project.

Anne Marie Bajwa, President and CEO of the Charles River Center, gave an overview. There will be 86 affordable housing units on East Militia Heights on a 3½ acre parcel. One half of the units will be designated to the general community and half will be designated to the Charles River Center clientele. All units will be affordable and wrap around services will be available to the Charles River clientele. Wrap around services are run by the state to help the residents and include staff support, job support peer support, social skills and money management skills. She feels it is a great project. It is mission driven development, inclusive and an affordable housing project.

Philip Crean, Project Manager with the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, which is a non-profit affiliate of the archdiocese, has been developing housing across the Greater Boston area. There will be rentals, mixed income communities and home ownership opportunities also. He reviewed the timeline. The project has a \$2.8 million commitment of CPA funds. They met with town staff to get initial thoughts and received a letter of support from the Select Board. This is an informal discussion, and the applicants will be meeting with the Design Review Board next week. The Project Eligibility Application will go to the state in the next few weeks. That takes about 4 months to conclude. There is an appraisal process as well. Once the letter is issued, they will submit it to the Zoning Board in October. There are funding opportunities every winter. The full application is due in February. Once the funding award is received construction will begin and will last about 18 months.

Mr. Crean stated all 86 units will be eligible for the subsidized housing inventory. They will be 30% and 80% of median income with 43 handicap accessible units. Five of the units will be for staff and 38 for people with disabilities. The rest of the units will be available to the town at large. There will be a meeting space that will be available, cooking classes and other workshops available for the town. There will be walking trails and there will be connections from the site. He reviewed the project design. Building A will be a 3-story building with common amenities and a fitness center. There will be 3 single story buildings which also have amenity spaces. There will be studios, one-bed and 2-bed units not SRO. Each unit will have a kitchen and a private bath. There will be 61 parking spaces – one to one for affordable units and ½ space for Charles River units. They are working on providing shuttle services. All buildings meet the passive house standards.

Jay Szymanski, Architect with The Architectural Team, walked through the site plan. The plan is to keep this as compact as possible to keep trees. There are 3 one-story buildings – B, C and D. The drive goes behind the building in a one-way loop. The 3 buildings will be identical with 6 studio units with kitchens and baths in the middle. There is a common space with a larger kitchen, living area and dining area. The ground floor in Building A has a 4,000 square foot community room, a main entrance with a lobby, a mail room and a lounge space. The Charles River Center units are a cluster of 5 one-bed units and a shared community room with another cluster of 5 one-bed units on the other wing with the balance being one and 2 bed units. The second floor has a balance of one and 2-bed rental units and the third floor has typical one-bed units. The smaller buildings are in the fore ground. On the pedestrian level there is an outdoor patio space in Building A, courtyard space between the 2 wings in back and a resident entrance for those who park in back.

Rebecca Bachand, Landscape Architect with RLBA Design, showed renderings with native plants and proposed trees. The applicant would like to maintain the tree lined street and as many trees around the perimeter to the extent they can. There is a wetland buffer zone in the rear where they will only be removing and replacing the old drive with native plants. The bittersweet will be removed and replaced with native vegetation. They will work with the Charles River Center on sensory gardens, healing gardens, and that type of program, and horticultural therapy. There is a challenging grade, but they will be looking at connecting the walking paths on this site. Mr. Crocker asked what the buffer is there. Joe Cappellino, Civil Engineer with VHB, noted there is a 25-foot no disturb buffer zone. Work will be done there but no structures are being put there. There is currently a paved area that will be removed. Ms. Espada commented it is a great project and noted it should be part of the Central Avenue traffic study.

Mr. Block stated this is a huge opportunity for the community and there are a number of community benefits. He knows how challenging affordable housing is. This is a well thought out project that serves the community and will wrap around services for the inclusion of the clientele. Mr. Crocker is glad to see something going in on this property. He asked how often the shuttle will run. Ms. Bajwa stated this is 1½ miles from public transportation, so they decided to do a shuttle possibly to jobs or doctor's appointments. North Hill wants to partner with them. Mr. Crocker asked about flooding and mitigation. Mr. Szymanski noted the site has no storm water service there. The water sheds off into all directions and will be a challenge. Preliminary they will try to retain and infiltrate one inch of rainwater. They are very aware of this and plan to mitigate. He does not have a full storm water design but will need to manage on site. Mr. Crocker stated the town may increase the one inch to 1½ inches or 2 inches. He asked about traffic and what would happen. Ms. Bawja stated a traffic study will be done. She noted they may route traffic to Forest rather than to Central. There may be a one-way up Dwight and down to Forest. Mr. Crean stated they are talking with Babson and will bring that up next time they talk.

Discussion: Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital-Needham (BIDN) to discuss the possibility of a revision to the Hospital's approved parking plan through the addition of a valet-only parking lot on property located at 14 and 20 Oak Street.

Evans Huber, Attorney for the applicant, noted the parking layout has been revised due to comments about a vegetative border. The parking has been reconfigured, and a 5-foot vegetative border has been added on Oak Street. There are still 52 parking spaces and a good 19-foot drive aisle was maintained. Ms. Espada asked him to compare this to what is along the hospital parking lot on Chestnut Street. Randy Howard, COO of BIDN, stated it is comparable. Arborvitae is a great plant. He wants to keep this consistent with the rest of the area. Ms. Espada appreciates the same number of cars with the buffer. She noted more information on the types of plants would be good. She wants to understand what they are planning for transit in the area and would like more information on planting year-round. Brian Vaz, Assistant General Counsel, noted there will be an evergreen hedge behind and day lilies in front for color. Mr. Huber noted this will go through the site plan

review process and the information will be available with that process. He wanted to get any additional information the Planning Board wanted.

Mr. Block stated this is a substantial improvement. There is a condition in the previous special permit that dealt with landscaping at the hospital. The strip along Chestnut Street sometimes does not look as pretty as it could. It makes sense to look at that and remove dead plantings. He suggested the applicant be mindful of planting color, texture, height change and screening.

Report from Planning Director and Board members

Mr. Crocker noted 888 Great Plain Avenue and his concern with spot zoning. He stated that Ms. Newman said that district could be extended, and it would not be spot zoning. Ms. Newman stated the district could be made larger. Ms. Espada appreciates trying to review the process. She suggested the Board try to find ways to fund these additional things. Ms. Newman noted it is a fiscal issue that does not allow additional help. The Board discussed additional processes. Mr. Block wants to kick start the process. Mr. Crocker stated it will take a long time but the main thing is to get 888 Great Plain Avenue going. He brought a comparison to Muzi and noted if it is not done now the opportunity will be missed. Mr. Block stated the Board has heard hundreds of comments about areas of improvement for the center of town. He knows there is desire among residents and business owners to increase economic activity. Mixed-Use development would support that. They need to explore the existing zoning and look at any deficiencies. The Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) looked at this. He could do it again and look at extending a neighboring district and make modifications although it will take longer if you extend it. He would like to come back to the Planning Board with a framework of the process. The discussion continued.

Ms. Espada stated there has been a lack of planning for the downtown and not just 888 Great Plain Avenue but the corridor. The time is now, and they are just starting the process, goals and initiative. There were concerns heard from the public. The Board needs to compile information. Ms. Newman noted once the framework is done it will then need to be modified. Mr. Greenberg stated a lot could be done with a concentrated zoning change. The Board tried to do too much with the MBTA Zoning Act. Ms. Espada suggested seeing if there is any low hanging fruit that needs to be dealt with before dealing with the entire project. Mr. Block stated the broader it becomes the less work will get done. He feels he and Mr. Greenberg should look at the existing zoning, and maybe extending, the size of the committee, how it would roll out and look at the zoning itself. They would then present it to the Board and talk about it. He and Mr. McCullen could do the same with Unlocking the Charles and make a proposal.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Block, and seconded by Ms. Espada, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:
VOTED: to adjourn at 9:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Justin McCullen, Vice-Chairman and Clerk