



Council of Economic Advisors
Town Hall
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Minutes
Council of Economic Advisors
Wednesday, December 7, 2022 8:30 a.m.
Zoom Meeting ID 840 2622 0888
Adopted on January 11, 2023

Members Present: Stuart Agler, Adam Block, Tina Burgos, Bill Day, Lise Elcock, Heidi Frail, Dan Goodman, Robert Hentschel, Adam Meixner, Rick Putrush, Matt Talcoff, Michael Wilcox
Members Absent: Liz Hay, Jeremy Halpern

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

Introduction and Roll Call - Adam Block, Chair, opened the meeting at 9:00 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. Mr. Block welcomed everyone back to a full Committee meeting as it has been nearly a year since the CEA met as a larger group. The newest members of the CEA, Dan Goodman and Heidi Frail, were introduced.

Subcommittee Updates - Mr. Block reported that while the three subcommittees, the District Focused/Redevelopment Subcommittee, the Small Business Subcommittee, and the Cluster-Based Economic Development Subcommittee, have met several times over the last year and have made progress in their respective areas, he is recommending that we transition back to having the CEA meet monthly moving forward. This would entail splitting up the tasks among more people so that we can reach our goals more effectively.

Reports were provided on the work of the subcommittees including a report from Ms. Haelsen who shared that last spring the Small Business Subcommittee worked on the marketing plan for Needham Center which included developing new branding for the downtown. This effort was funded through a technical assistance grant from the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative which is under the state's Department of Housing and Community Development Department. The process entailed conducting a public survey and focus groups comprised of residents and local businesses to solicit input. Ms. Haelsen added that the businesses need to own the branding, not the town, and has been in touch with some of them which were involved in the focus groups to discuss next steps. Ms. Burgos inquired whether the Town's new e-newsletter could promote

small businesses by featuring different ones every month. Ms. Haelsen responded that having messaging encouraging people to support local businesses and emphasize the importance of spending your money locally is doable but promoting specific businesses is not something the town would be able to do as there are about 2,000 businesses of all sizes in town and it would be difficult to give all of them equitable exposure. Mr. Talcoff wondered whether we could try to drive more foot traffic to local small businesses by offering special incentives or discounts for customers on their slowest days. Ms. Haelsen responded that she doesn't feel that offering discounts would be a popular idea with the small business community right now given that many of them are unable to lower their prices given the increased costs to run their businesses right now.

The Cluster-Based Economic Development Subcommittee has been working on updating the business inventory list that was first created by a group of Babson College students back in early 2020. Mr. Block discussed the idea of having an online business directory of Needham businesses which would separate businesses by sector. This refined data will help the CEA develop a strategy to support the existing industries in town and to recruit new businesses as well. This will be discussed again at the next meeting.

The District Focused Subcommittee took walking tours of Needham Center and Needham Heights and subsequently had discussions as to whether any zoning changes would help encourage increased density in Needham Center. Ms. Newman provided the history behind the current zoning regulations in Overlay District A and Overlay District B in the underlying Needham Center Business District. Overlay District A has a height restriction of 3 stories/37 feet or 3 + 1 stories/48 feet by Special Permit while Overlay District B has a height restriction of 2+1 stories/27 feet by Special Permit. When the overlay districts were created back in 2010, there was concern about buildings within a specific radius of town hall being too tall and wanting to respect the historic integrity of the building. Ms. Newman added that a few years ago there was targeted outreach to commercial property owners in Needham Center to see if there was an interest in coming together to create different types of structures to enable redevelopment to happen in the downtown but there wasn't an appetite for this at that time. Mr. Block commented that zoning regulations in addition to fragmented ownership, and having multiple tenants on different lease cycles, have posed significant challenges to current landlords and may explain the lack of redevelopment in Needham Center. The CEA will continue to discuss this issue and potentially make recommendations for zoning changes in the future.

Planning and Development Department Update – Ms. Newman reported on the status of recent activity in the Planning Dept. including the review of the redevelopment of the former Muzi Ford site at 557 Highland Avenue. A lab and office development of approximately 465,000 square feet will be voted on at the Planning Board meeting on December 19th. Other projects include a proposal for 100 West Street on a parcel that was rezoned in 2020 to allow the building to accommodate a fourth story. The Planning Board will hear the new plans for this property later in December which will include assisted living and memory care housing which is different from their original proposal which also included independent living units and affordable housing. Another project is the redevelopment of Panella's Market at 40-50 Central Avenue into a mixed-use project with street level commercial units and 15 units of housing above. She also reported that Boston Children's Hospital has filed for its permits for the parcel at 128 First Avenue in the New England Business District.

Economic Development Manager Report – Ms. Haelsen shared the following updates:

ARPA Funding: In early 2022 she put together a proposal for the Select Board to develop the “Small Business Recovery Grant Program” to assist local businesses with grants they could use to keep their businesses running. Funds could be used for operating costs such as their mortgage, rent, utilities, payroll, employee bonuses or incentives, inventory, COVID prevention (outdoor dining) and digital adaptation (create or improve their digital presence through online sales/ordering, improve/develop a website, QR codes). There were two rounds of grant applications which resulted in \$387,500 in grants being awarded to 44 small businesses in town. Feedback from the grant recipients has been very positive and many have stated that the grants have made a huge difference in their ability to keep operating.

Parking Study: Funds for a parking study in Needham Center and Needham Heights were approved at Spring 2022 Town meeting and in September the Town issued an RFP for a consultant. After a thorough vetting of the proposals, the Town has enlisted the services of Stantec to conduct this study. They have already begun their work with parking counts. The goals of the study are:

1. Plan for short and long-term parking needs
2. Optimize the use of the existing parking supply
3. Improve parking management system for residents, employees, customers, and visitors
4. Align parking system management with other community goals and plans
5. Create a customer-friendly parking environment
6. Support the economies of Needham Center and Needham Heights
7. Inform decision-making for future street improvement projects and zoning updates

Ms. Haelsen shared that a parking survey for residents, visitors and businesses was posted on the Town’s website and shared in the Town’s e-newsletter. She will forward the link to CEA members and requested that they take the opportunity to complete it.

Arts & Culture Plan: Last spring Ms. Haelsen submitted a proposal to MAPC (Metropolitan Area Planning Council) requesting technical assistance to develop an Arts & Cultural Plan for the Town which resulted in MAPC contributing \$43,000 in in-kind technical services. The day before she held a kick-off meeting with the Arts and Cultural Plan Working Group comprised of individuals in town with professional and/or volunteer experience with arts and culture in Needham. This year long process will include opportunities for public input including a survey and focus groups.

Outside Dining: Another successful season of outside dining wrapped up this fall. At the Fall 2021 Town Meeting, a zoning change was approved to allow for permanent outside dining, however, the Governor extended the Executive Order allowing for outside dining through April 1, 2023. Several Needham restaurants have already gone through the process to get approved under our own local bylaws with a handful more to go. Town staff has been shepherding restaurants through the application process.

New Business - Mr. Block shared the idea of the CEA organizing some type of Needham Business Fair which would provide the opportunity for businesses in town to make connections and find new ways to support each other's businesses. He envisions that it could take place in Powers Hall in Town Hall. Ms. Burgos shared she thinks it's a good idea but the challenge is that many small businesses in town have different agendas – some are just trying to survive, some are in growth mode, some are figuring out next steps or whether to relocate. Ms. Elcock added that she has a great deal of experience in this area. She shared the example of the Waltham Chamber of Commerce that has organized a business-to-business event and that it well attended by the vendors but attendance from other businesses has gone down. She added that it can be hard to get people to come to these types of events. The Charles River Regional Chamber has never wanted to host an event like this as it's a huge undertaking and getting people to attend is a struggle. She added that the Harvest Fair last fall was well attended but many of the small businesses could not participate because they didn't have the labor to be present at the event. Presently there are still many companies in the area whose staff are not fully back in the office and the timing could be difficult to have an event like this. Mr. Agler added that he thinks it's an interesting idea but thinks the logistics may be a challenge to make it significant and worthwhile for everyone. Mr. Goodman inquired whether we might try this concept virtually.

Mr. Wilcox shared that pre-pandemic, his company, Bulfinch, had a program in which they created a linkage for their tenants to support local businesses which entailed a discount card but it ceased during the pandemic. They also had a lunch delivery program where they tried to locally source restaurants to make deliveries to the offices. Most of the cafes in the office buildings still don't have enough volume to make it feasible for them to reopen. He said staff occupancy in Needham office buildings is roughly fifty percent. Mr. Meixner added that there is value in bringing people together in-person to create connections. In his observations, there are more employees in offices Tuesdays through Thursdays while most have very little staff on Mondays and Fridays. Mr. Wilcox shared that Bulfinch just signed a new tenant for 45,000 square feet of lab space at their 117 Kendrick Street location.

Adjournment Roll Call – the meeting was adjourned at 9:45 a.m.