

**Minutes**  
**Council of Economic Advisors**  
**Wednesday, January 11, 2023, 8:30 AM**  
**Zoom Webinar ID: 885 5150 4402**  
**Adopted February 8, 2023**

**Members Present:** Stuart Agler, Adam Block, Bill Day, Lise Elcock, Heidi Frail, Dan Goodman, Liz Hay, Jeremy Halpern, Adam Meixner, Rick Putprush, Matt Talcoff, Michael Wilcox

**Members Absent:** Tina Burgos, 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. 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.

**Minutes of the December 7, 2022 Meeting** – Mr. Meixner moved to adopt the minutes of the December 7, 2022 minutes and Mr. Talcoff seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

**Zoning Reform** – Mr. Block shared an overview of zoning changes being considered by the Planning Board which include reducing the regulations for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) to make them more accessible as part of a broader housing plan. Several years ago Town Meeting passed ADU zoning which allowed for them within an existing structure and up to 850 square feet to allow for additional housing for family or caregivers. The Town’s comprehensive housing plan will be discussed at a future meeting.

Discussion turned to the proposed development at 888 Great Plain Avenue, the former site of Hillcrest Gardens which is currently in the Single Residence B (SRB) District. Ms. Newman explained that the developer is asking to have changes made to the current zoning for the Center Business District and Needham Center Overlay District A and have it extended down Great Plain Avenue to include this parcel. The Overlay District was adopted in 2010 to incent mixed use development allowing up to a four-story profile on a building with a residential density of eighteen units per acre. The mixed use building at 50 Dedham Avenue is the only project to have come to fruition under Overlay District A. Ms. Newman said the developer is asking for changes that go beyond extending the current zoning which include lifting the eighteen units per acre threshold to allow a much higher density of apartments to be built at that location. He is also asking for the FAR calculation adjusted to not include the calculation for the affordable units. The current FAR under Needham Center Overlay District A is 2.0 and the current plans for 888 Great Plain Ave. reflect a 2.22 FAR.

Mr. Block added that the developer has not yet filed an application and is only in discussions with the Planning Board at this point so the Board has not yet taken a position on the proposed zoning changes nor the recent development concept. The developer could seek a zoning change

as a citizen's petition through Town Meeting or the Planning Board could take a position and file its own zoning amendment for Town Meeting. Mr. Block shared that there had been some safety concerns with the original development concept relating to the impact of an increased number of cars entering and exiting the property. Greene's Field is directly across the street from the site and there are young children and families who frequent the area. Ms. Haelsen added that safety improvements to the intersection of Great Plain Avenue and Pickering Street will be included in phase two of Downtown Streetscape Project but those plans are on hold pending the completion of the parking study of Needham Center.

Mt. Putprush commented that this project is going to be a litmus test for what else we can accomplish in the downtown. He is said he is hopeful that the developer's ability to have a mixed use building with a viable number of residential units may be the catalyst to encourage other commercial property owners along Great Plain Avenue to see the economic potential of being able to do this and create the residential component that will ensure the survival of the small businesses and our downtown. Mr. Goodman agreed that increased density will help liven the downtown area with increased activity for the small businesses. Ms. Hay added that as a small business owner she sees this project as a positive and would help bring more vibrancy into the downtown area. Ms. Frail added that this project is within the bounds of the state's Dept. of Housing and Community Development's (DHCD) multi-family zoning requirement for MBTA communities that will need to be considered by Town Meeting by May of 2024.

The Planning Board is also looking into other climate-smart zoning changes with a phased roll out of a number of different types of initiatives. One of them is allowing solar canopies by right instead of by special permit as well as a change to setbacks for energy efficient equipment. In addition, as part of the special permit criteria should the Town consider energy efficient technologies as a basis for approval and establish certain thresholds and standards. Mr. Block shared that the Town is currently developing a Climate Action Plan and recommendations on these issues will come out of this plan and asked whether the CEA will want to discuss the impact of these changes on the business community.

**Planning & Development Department Updates-** Ms. Newman shared that in December the Planning Board issued a special permit for the project at 557 Highland Avenue for 475,052 square feet of office and lab space and 10,000 square feet of retail space. In addition, a special permit is being sought for 40-50 Central Avenue for a mixed use development on the site of Panella's Market with fifteen residential units. Coca Cola has also filed a special permit application to demolish a portion of their existing building to construct a new fleet wing and to add loading docks to their facility. Another project that is still in process is the redevelopment of 100 West Street. The parcel was rezoned in 2020 to allow the building to accommodate a fourth story. The developer proposed 127 assisted living units and 28 memory care units which the Planning Board had concerns with as this was not what was originally proposed when the zoning change was made. The developer has now proposed nine independent living units as a change to these plans that are still being reviewed by the Planning Board. Ms. Newman also reported that the Housing Plan Working Group has finished their plan and it will be posted to the Town's website that day. The Town has a deadline of the end of January to submit its action plan to DHCD detailing how it will meet the multi-family housing zoning requirement for MBTA communities. The Select Board and Planning Board are currently reviewing it.

**Small Business Initiative** – Mr. Block revisited the discussion from the December CEA meeting of organizing an event of some type for small businesses. While there are some challenges in

organizing something like this he pointed out that the goal is to support the small businesses in town by helping to give them more business through awareness. Mr. Block continued by saying he believes the Town should use its resources to help its businesses, both big and small to provide linkages among the business community in Needham. He suggested the CEA pursue looking into creating such a program and shared an idea of the town possibly providing transportation for employees from larger companies into Needham Center to patronize local businesses. Ms. Hay, who owns Barre 3, said this would be of great interest as she has attempted to reach out to local companies to create partnerships without much success. She offered the idea of a “meet and greet” type of event where employees from local companies would come to Needham Center on a specific day to be introduced to the merchants and perhaps get a sample or more information. Mr. Goodman, whose technology business is located on Gould Street, thought it was a good idea and a fun team-building event. Mr. Wilcox shared that it can be challenging to get employees out of the office once they are there and suggested we consider building better infrastructure for delivery to the employees at the office that may be more productive long term. He added that attempts to connect the small business district to the larger offices around town have been done in the past and he thinks it may be better to bring the small businesses to the offices as it would be more sustainable. Mr. Talcoff added that some large new companies have moved into Needham including Wellington Management on Kendrick Street and anything we can do to help make their employees more aware of what Needham has to offer would be great.

Mr. Halpern suggested putting together a survey to see what other towns have done with more direct material economic kind of support for local businesses. He added that having a list of what projects and initiatives are being done in other towns and then prioritize what types of things we want to do and which of those require town support and what that includes. Mr. Halpern also suggested that the Town get feedback from local businesses about the obstacles that they have faced when opening a new business and see if we can try to address those. He also inquired whether the Town has a “Why Needham?” package to help recruit new businesses including a promotional video or a presentation for site selection. Ms. Haelsen shared that she and Mr. Block recently spoke about developing a marketing package for just this purpose. She referenced a campaign that was done by the town of Burlington called “Bring Me to Burlington” and encouraged CEA members to visit [www.bringmetoburlington.com](http://www.bringmetoburlington.com). She added that she has continued communication to the Needham business community and tries to identify things that the Town could do to make the process of opening a new business or making changes to an existing business easier. She is also working to complete a “Guide to Doing Business in Needham” that will serve as an easy-to-navigate roadmap of how to operate a business in Town. Ms. Elcock referenced that in 2014 the Chamber developed marketing materials for the N-squared Innovation District to attract new businesses to this area and will share these with Ms. Haelsen.

**Economic Development Manager Report** – Ms. Haelsen reminded CEA members to complete the survey for the Town’s parking study that is focusing on Needham Center and Needham Heights. The survey is online and will close on January 19. She also shared that the Town would be hosting a Parking Study Open House on Thursday, January 26<sup>th</sup> from 6-8 pm in Powers Hall to solicit feedback and input from residents and businesses on proposed changes to parking in these business districts.

**Adjournment Roll Call** – The meeting was adjourned at 9:46 am.