

Town of Needham
Select Board
Minutes for Wednesday, May 19, 2021
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89093905788>

6:00 p.m. Call to Order:

A meeting of the Select Board was convened by Chair Matthew Borrelli. Those present were Marianne B. Cooley, Daniel P. Matthews, Lakshmi Balachandra, and Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick. Marcus Nelson was not present. In addition to the Select Board, Dave Davison, ATM/Finance and Sandy Cincotta, Support Services Manager also participated. Recording Secretary Mary Hunt recorded the meeting remotely.

Mr. Borrelli announced this open meeting is being conducted remotely consistent with Governor Baker's Executive Order of March 12, 2020 due to the current state of emergency from the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. He noted all public gatherings have been suspended as advised and directed by the Commonwealth. And, as such, suspending the requirement of the open meeting law to have all meetings in a public, accessible, physical location while encouraging and allowing members of all public bodies to participate remotely. Mr. Borrelli stated the meeting will not include public comment and the Needham Select Board and all attendees are convening by Zoom, as posted on the Town's website identifying how the public may join. He said all supporting documents used at this meeting are available on the Town's website www.needhamma.gov.

Motion by Mr. Matthews that this meeting be continued to the Select Board's next scheduled meeting on Tuesday, May 25, 2021, if a technical problem develops that makes it impossible for the Select Board to conduct the meeting in this format.

Second: Ms. Cooley. Unanimously approved 4-0 by roll call vote.

6:03 p.m. Discuss MBTA Weekend Service:

Mr. Borrelli gave a brief background of discussions concerning MBTA proposed schedules for restoring and expanding weekend service. He noted the two options under consideration for Saturday and Sunday service:

Option 1

Commuter train service every two hours from 6 am to 8 pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Inbound trips originate from Needham Heights; Outbound trips from South Station terminate at Needham Heights.

Option 2

Commuter train service every two hours from 6 am to 8 pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Inbound trips originate from Needham Junction; Outbound trips from South Station terminate at Needham Junction. Originating and terminating at

Needham Junction would eliminate service on weekends at Needham Center and Needham Heights.

Mr. Borrelli said the Select Board's public hearing held May 11, 2021 had over 60 attendees, with over 100 emails received after the meeting showing residents were evenly split between Option 1 and Option 2. Mr. Borrelli said concerns over train noise vs. convenience were voiced. He said several questions from residents were forwarded to the MBTA and asked Ms. Fitzpatrick for the MBTA's response. He noted that the Select Board is holding a special meeting because the Board wanted to get answers from the MBTA to the many questions and comments received from residents. He noted the MBTA asked for Needham's preference on Option 1 or Option 2 by May 21, 2021.

Ms. Fitzpatrick said many questions asked by residents do not directly apply to the decision being made tonight, noting she has partial answers to several questions. She said the Town will continue pursuing answers to resident questions and will update the Town's website as new information becomes available. Ms. Fitzpatrick said Quiet Zone reports will be posted shortly. Ms. Fitzpatrick commented she will continue pursuing answers as to why trains are running at odd hours, noting the MBTA completed its "positive train control" testing in March 2021. Ms. Fitzpatrick commented on the possibility of free parking at Needham Junction, should Option 2 be selected. She said the decision for free parking is not up to railroad operations and that she will reach out to MBTA management and will report back to residents. Ms. Fitzpatrick commented on electrification of rail, noting the MBTA is doing a great deal of work on the possibility, but no target date has been established. She commented on train horn noise, noting railroad operations have confirmed the horn is either sounding or not, and is at the same decibel. She said more discussion will be had on train horn noise. Ms. Fitzpatrick commented on long term planning and the possibility of bus service from Needham Junction to Needham Heights, saying the MBTA indicated a larger rail transformation conversation is happening and that she will continue to press for answers. Ms. Fitzpatrick confirmed the MBTA is not planning to use the track at Needham Junction for turning trains around. She commented on the train platform in Needham Heights and the distance from the station at West Street, noting the platform to board the train is located at the locomotive end of the train so that a coach will always be behind the locomotive to avoid having the train make additional stops. Ms. Fitzpatrick said she will continue seeking answers to questions.

Mr. Borrelli asked for comments from the Board.

Ms. Cooley commented on the variety of feedback, noting at this time it makes the most sense to go with Option 2 (train stops at Needham Junction). She noted some people are concerned Option 2 could become long term, saying she believes the situation is not a long-term decision, rather an offer by the MBTA of expanded service to Needham, while limiting the impact of noise on weekends. She said she

feels most people appreciate limiting the impact of trains on weekends. Ms. Cooley said the MBTA is an area to learn and engage with more, noting many people move to Needham because of the valuable MBTA service, noting the number of train stops make things a little complicated.

Ms. Balachandra said she has polled constituents, noting a lot of interest in Option 1 and using the trains on weekends. She commented Option 1 is particularly good as we come out of the pandemic and a way of avoiding increased traffic and would be a boon. Ms. Balachandra said she favors expanding service, while at the same time addressing the train horn noise concerns. She noted equity and opportunity, with more possibilities on weekends would be a nice option.

Mr. Matthews said the train is part of Needham's environment and discussion on train horn noise has been ongoing. He said younger folks moving to Needham object to the noise, commenting that trains are heavier and louder than they used to be. He noted federal regulations. He concurred with Ms. Balachandra in that there is an argument for equity in running the train to Needham Heights, but at this point, to the best of his understanding, it is a fact that train use has not at all returned to what would normally be considered peak use. Mr. Matthews said his impression is the offer from the MBTA is temporary and he would be for Option 1 if more people were using the service. However, he said that he does not believe the level of use will return at this time. Mr. Matthews said it is better to go with Option 2, and "see how it goes." He said there is more work to do.

Ms. Balachandra concurred with Mr. Matthews and noted that the expanded option has not been previously available. She said a whole new market would open up for train ridership. She said she is not sure if we can rely on past use in terms of future use, at this point.

Mr. Borrelli concurred with Ms. Balachandra that the long-term goal is for the train to terminate at Needham Heights. However, the issues of ridership, noise, and Sunday service could be viewed as a pilot, while lobbying with the MBTA for the eventual return of full service. Mr. Borrelli said he believes the MBTA would like to go all the way to Needham Heights but recognized the Town has been very vocal in the past regarding horn noise and idling trains. He concluded Option 1 is a compromise to "get the ball rolling." Mr. Borrelli said he favors Option 2 with the understanding that the Town will work toward full service.

Discussion ensued on the possibility of a hybrid approach with expanded service to Needham Heights from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., free parking at Needham Junction, and creative ways to help workers needing to travel to Needham Center or Needham Heights from Needham Junction.

Motion by Mr. Matthews that the Select Board vote to support Option 2 and authorize the Town Manager to communicate that recommendation to the MBTA.

Second: Mrs. Cooley. Unanimously approved 4-0 by roll call vote.

Ms. Cooley suggested, and the Board agreed, to include a recommendation to the MBTA that they consider expanding train service to Needham Heights between 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and continue to engage in discussions with the Town.

Mr. Matthews commented if ridership on the weekends dramatically increases, the Board may want to consider revisiting the issue. He suggested starting with Option 2 with the ability to have further discussion, particularly if federal funding is available.

Ms. Cooley suggested the Town notify and remind residents of the availability of weekend service.

Ms. Balachandra concurred with Mr. Matthews that data is necessary and that residents must be made aware of the service. Ms. Balachandra said while she still favors Option 1, she will vote with the Board for Option 2. She said it is better to have some type of service.

Mr. Borrelli commented not to lose sight of the fact that Needham will now have Sunday service (which it never had) and have a resumption of Saturday service. He said either Option is a benefit, no matter how it is viewed. He said he favors Option 2 at this time, until weekend ridership data is available. Mr. Borrelli said any further comments from residents can be forwarded to the MBTA.

Mr. Matthews said the MBTA needs to know from the Town what it prefers for their own planning purposes. He said it is clear there are many thoughts on the issue and discussion should continue.

Ms. Fitzpatrick clarified with the Select Board that notification to the MBTA should include the Town's desire for the return of full service in the future, that it wants to discuss ways to mitigate resident concerns, and would like the MBTA to consider extending service under Option 2 to Needham Heights during daytime hours.

Mr. Matthews suggested the Town plan for Option 2, clarifying the Town needs to find out more from the MBTA about options going forward.

Ms. Cooley said more data will also become available.

Mr. Borrelli said the idea is to explore whether it is even possible to have a different Sunday schedule, then have public discussion.

6:29 p.m.

Massachusetts State of Emergency:

Mr. Borrelli said the State of Emergency order will be lifted on June 15, 2021, which will change Town operations, restaurants, and outdoor dining. He said

discussion on the implications of ending the State of Emergency will occur at the next Select Board meeting on May 25, 2021.

Ms. Cooley suggested Ms. Fitzpatrick have authorization to act on behalf of the Select Board should any decisions for the Town need to be made prior to the lifting of the State of Emergency order on June 15, 2021. She commented the timeframe is very short and legislative actions at the State House could occur at the last hour/last day. She said she supports all good actions by the Town to help restaurants and outdoor dining.

Mr. Borrelli concurred.

Motion by Mr. Matthews that the Select Board authorize the Town Manager to act on its behalf on initiatives beneficial for the Town related to the Massachusetts State of Emergency being rescinded on June 15, 2021, subject to any action being ratified by the Select Board.

Second: Ms. Cooley. Unanimously approved 4-0 by roll call vote.

6:35 p.m.

Adjourn:

Motion by Mr. Matthews that the Select Board vote to adjourn the Select Board meeting of Wednesday, May 19, 2021.

Second: Ms. Cooley. Unanimously approved 4-0 by roll call vote.

A list of all documents used at this Select Board meeting is available at:

<http://www.needhamma.gov/Archive.aspx?AMID=99&Type=&ADID=>