Minutes of Meeting of October 16, 2024

To view a recording of the meeting on YouTube:
https://youtu.be/9ORNEgr6cjY?si=MTz-gjdlu7R5nE6V

The meeting of the Finance Committee was called to order by Chair Carol Smith-Fachetti at approximately 7:00 pm in the Great Plain Room at Needham Town Hall, also available via Zoom teleconferencing.

Present from the Finance Committee:
Carol Smith-Fachetti, Chair; John Connelly, Vice-Chair
Karen Calton, Paul O'Connor, Barry Coffman, Joe Abruzese, Tina Burgos, Lydia Wu (Present on Zoom)

Others Present:
David Davison, Deputy Town Manager/Director of Finance
Molly Pollard, Finance Committee Executive Secretary

Citizen Request to Address the Finance Committee

None

Approval of Minutes of Prior Meetings

MOVED: By Mr. Coffman that the minutes of meeting October 9, 2024, be approved as distributed, subject to technical corrections. Ms. Calton seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of 7- 0 at approximately 7:05.

Special Town Meeting Article Discussions

ARTICLE 8: AMEND ZONING BY-LAW - MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (BASE PLAN)

ARTICLE 9: AMEND ZONING BY-lAW - MAP CHANGE FOR MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (BASE PLAN)

These articles have been previously discussed.

Mr. Coffman expressed appreciation for the work that had been done to gather information. He supported the articles due to the financial implications of losing state grants and resources, believing the incremental build-out would not negatively impact the town or schools. Mr. Coffman noted that the change to Chestnut Street in the base plan does not allow for incremental units compared with the existing overlays. He also mentioned, with regards to the neighborhood plan, that based on his experience, he thinks any redevelopment on Chestnut St will be slow.

Mr. O'Connor agreed with the views expressed, noting the risk to state funding and the potential consequences of the proposed changes.

Mr. Connelly reiterated the necessity of compliance with the law despite differing opinions on its appropriateness. He noted that the likely build-out numbers were not minimal and would have significant implications for the town. He supported Articles 8 and 9 while acknowledging their impact.

Ms. Calton supported the base plan as a starting point, suggesting future projects be considered more independently. She emphasized that complying with the minimum legal requirements was essential.

Mr. Abruzese acknowledged both sides of the debate, expressing less concern about the loss of state funding but supporting compliance with state requirements. He believed starting with the base plan allowed for a better evaluation of its impact.

Ms. Burgos supported Articles 8 and 9 but had concerns about the base plan's limitations for small businesses. She viewed it as an opportunity to boost the local economy and urged the town to trust the experts and data that had been gathered.

Ms. Wu also supported the articles, citing the importance of complying with state requirements to access future funding opportunities.

Ms. Smith-Fachetti expressed support for expanding the Avery Square business district to encourage development. She emphasized the need to secure funding for the Pollard school renovation, considering it a priority to comply with the state law and expressing support for Articles 8 and 9.

MOVED: By Mr. Coffman that the Finance Committee recommend adoption of ARTICLE 8: AMEND ZONING BY-LAW - MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (BASE PLAN) and ARTICLE 9: AMEND ZONING BY-lAW - MAP CHANGE FOR MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (BASE PLAN). Mr. O'Connor seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of 8-0 at approximately 7:22pm.

<u>ARTICLE 10: AMEND ZONING BY-LAW - MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSING PLAN)</u>

<u>ARTICLE 11: AMEND ZONING BY-LAW - MAP CHANGE FOR MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSING PLAN)</u>

Documents: Letter to Town Meeting Members from Greg Reibman (President of the Charles River Chamber), Letter to Town Meeting Members from various members of the Charles River Regional Chamber, Letter to Town Meeting Members from Mr. Fogarty (President of Beth Israel Deaconess)

These articles have been previously discussed.

Mr. Coffman recognized the need to diversify housing options and stock, recognizing the potential impact on the community. He highlighted the financial implications associated with the proposed zoning changes, suggesting that while achieving maximum build-out might present challenges, a more realistic scenario of gradual build-out would be manageable within the town's available resources, particularly concerning schools. He conveyed confidence that the plan's financial impact would be sustainable and voiced his support for Articles 10 and 11, which he believed could lead to greater housing diversity, ultimately benefiting the town's population.

Mr. O'Connor acknowledged his evolving perspective throughout the discussion but indicated he was ultimately swayed by the support from the business community advocating for these articles. He conveyed his belief that the process of change would be gradual, and endorsed the proposed zoning changes, recognizing their potential to stimulate economic growth within the town.

Mr. Connelly opposed Articles 10 and 11, advocating instead for a more conservative approach that aligns with Articles 8 and 9. He emphasized the importance of gradual housing diversity and raised concerns about the rapid growth these articles could allow for. He pointed out that the schools in the area were already experiencing overcrowding, and he cautioned that implementing Articles 10 and 11 could exacerbate this issue by attracting more families into the community without ensuring the necessary infrastructure and resources were in place to support them. Mr. Connelly suggested a more prudent approach would be to wait for McKibben 's analysis in December. McKibben is a long term consultant of the town and could model the potential zoning changes. Mr. Connelly's preference would be to align the timing of these demographic changes with infrastructure changes for both the school as well as capital planning, particularly for Chestnut Street.

Ms. Calton articulated her opposition to the expansion beyond the state-mandated requirements. She expressed apprehensions regarding the potential loss of local control over development decisions resulting from the proposed plan's broader framework. Her preference is to allow for development in more specific scenarios, allowing for community input rather than allowing as of right zoning for the entire area in the neighborhood plan.

Mr. Abruzese expressed reservations about the sensitivity of the assumptions made in the financial analysis presented by RKG. He stressed the importance of understanding the implications of maximum build-out, warning that the articles would enable substantial growth that could place additional strain on the town's resources. He endorsed a more cautious approach, recommending a focus on Articles 8 and 9, which he believed would ensure compliance with state laws while opposing Articles 10 and 11 due to the uncertainties associated with their financial projections. He also noted the importance of maintaining the town's rights to opinions over future development projects and seeing how the assumptions of the models play out after the adoption of Articles 8 and 9.

Ms. Burgos advocated for Articles 10 and 11, emphasizing the urgent need for small businesses, families, and community members seeking affordable housing options. She explained how she had reached out to Ms. Lee of the School Committee, to understand how the schools plan and accommodate for influxes of students. Ms. Burgos expressed confidence in the readiness of schools and other town committees to handle the potential growth that the new housing plan could bring. She expressed confidence in the consultants and other experts who put together this proposal. Ms. Burgos stated that the advantages of the neighborhood housing plan outweighed the associated risks, viewing it as an opportunity for fostering community development and ensuring the well-being of local residents.

Ms. Wu expressed her support for Articles 8 and 9 as a cautious step that would allow for further investigation into the plan's impacts. She articulated concerns regarding the adequacy of infrastructure development, arguing that housing changes should be in sync with the town's capacity to expand services and facilities, ensuring that growth does not outpace available resources.

Ms. Smith-Fachetti reflected on her experiences with the housing working group, voicing specific concerns about the current focus on areas near rail stations. She noted the exclusion of other significant parts of town, such as the area surrounding Hersey, from the proposed plan. Ms. Smith-Fachetti questioned the assumptions underlying the financial analysis, particularly the exclusion of potential benefits in operating cost calculations and the low student-per-unit ratios. She recommended adopting a more holistic approach to housing diversity, one that could better address the varied needs of the community while ensuring equitable development throughout the town.

MOVED: By Mr. Connelly that the Finance Committee recommend not to adopt ARTICLE 10: AMEND ZONING BY-LAW - MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSING PLAN) and ARTICLE 11: AMEND ZONING BY-LAW - MAP CHANGE FOR MULTI-FAMILY OVERLAY DISTRICT (NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSING PLAN). Mr. Abruzese seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of 5-3 at approximately 7:56pm.

Finance Committee Business

Mr. Davison explained his suggestion that the Finance Committee meet again on Monday before Town Meeting to reaffirm their votes on articles 8,9,10,11 since there was a delay in posting this meeting. The purpose is just so that nobody could question the validity of the Committee's position and there is precedent for such a reaffirmation.

Ms. Smith-Fachetti outlined the budget process for the newer members and mentioned that she and Mr. Connelly would be assigning department liaisons shortly after town meeting and ahead of Ms. Fitzpatrick's meetings with department heads.

Mr. Davison confirmed an orientation meeting for Ms. Wu and Mr. Abruzese on Friday October 18.

Adjournment

MOVED: By Ms. Calton that the Finance Committee meeting be adjourned, there being no further business. Ms. Connelly seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of 8-0, at approximately 8:04 p.m.

Documents: Letter to Town Meeting Members from Greg Reibman (President of the Charles River Chamber), Letter to Town Meeting Members from various members of the Charles River Regional Chamber, Letter to Town Meeting Members from Mr. Fogarty (President of Beth Israel Deaconess)

Respectfully submitted,

Molly Pollard

Executive Secretary, Finance Committee