

Minutes
Council of Economic Advisors
Wednesday, July 1, 2020 9:00 a.m.
Zoom Meeting ID 872-6836-0733
Approved September 9, 2020

Members Present: Adam Block, Stuart Agler, Tina Burgos, Glen Cammarano, Bill Day, Virginia Fleisher, Maurice Handel, Robert Hentschel, Adam Meixner, David Montgomery, Rick Putprush, Matthew Talcoff, Michael Wilcox

Members Absent: Anne Marie Dowd; Ted Owens

Others Present: Lee Newman, Director of Planning and Community Development; Tim McDonald, Director of Public Health; Katie King, Assistant Town Manager; Cyndi Roy Gonzalez, Public Information Officer; Greg Reibman, President of the Newton-Needham Regional Chamber of Commerce; Rick Merson, Director of Public Works

Adam Block, Chair, opened the meeting at 9:00 a.m.

1. Update on COVID19 Impact - Issues and Concerns on Local Businesses

Mr. McDonald provided an update on the number of cases of COVID-19 in Massachusetts with the trend being fewer confirmed cases and deaths. Governor Baker indicated that Phase III may begin July 6 but will be dependent on data. The town has been working with local businesses in different sectors to try to resume normal operations following the state health department guidelines. He added that Needham has a very committed core of restaurant owners who are very attentive to detail and committed to following the safety guidelines, however, one challenge is mask wearing for line cooks during the summer when the temperatures in kitchens can get very high. There have been a few public complaints about kitchen staff removing or improperly wearing their masks. The Town has been working with restaurants to expedite permitting for outdoor dining that has made use of space on sidewalks and parking lots and from Mr. McDonald's perspective the process has gone very smoothly. The return to indoor dining has followed a similar process in which restaurant owners present their plan to the Town's Health Dept. for review and he has been impressed with how seriously they are taking this to protect the health of their patrons and staff.

Mr. Reibman noted that Needham has been very responsive to restaurants' needs and is in sharp contrast to what he's seen in Newton where the process has been slower. He said generally-speaking, patrons are more reluctant to dine indoors so outdoor dining has been critical for restaurants. There is still a reluctance for employers to bring back staff to offices especially ones in buildings that house multiple tenants.

Ms. Burgos spoke about the impact on retailers in Needham Center and that the majority are reporting that business is slowly starting to come back. One of the biggest challenges for many of them is that they don't have an e-commerce website as it's cost prohibitive for many of them. She noted that some retailers have expressed that the reduction of on-street parking

spaces due to increased outdoor dining capacity for local restaurants has caused some challenges for their customers and delivery services. Mr. Handel inquired whether reducing the maximum on-street parking time from two hours to one hour might help. Ms. Burgos suggested that some monitoring or enforcement would be helpful. In response to an inquiry from Ms. Fleischer about what else the Town could be doing to support the retailers, Ms. Burgos said there has been a lot of communication from the Town about the reopening of restaurants and it would be great to create that same awareness for retailers. She is concerned that there are some retailers that may not survive to the end of the year so increased PR efforts are important. The annual sidewalk sale in Needham Center normally draws sizable crowds but many retailers have expressed discomfort with organizing one during a pandemic. Mr. Reibman suggested closing a portion of Great Plain Avenue on a Saturday morning to allow for more space. Mr. Handel reiterated that the Town is committed to supporting the small business community and if the Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce had a proposal for a promotion like this they would review it in a very timely manner. Ms. Burgos responded that given the hesitation from several retailers who are uncomfortable with the risks crowds pose to the health and safety of their staff, even with social distancing measures in place, she's unsure what their level of interest and participation would be in such a promotion this year. Mr. McDonald offered that he and his staff would be happy to meet with any business owners who have concerns about how to keep their staff safe during daily operations.

Installing banners that encourage residents to shop and dine locally would help increase awareness. Mr. Handel added that Paul Good of the Needham Community Revitalization Trust Fund may already have such banners. Mr. Reibman added there are currently banners like that installed on Chapel Street. He added that a bigger and more concerted effort needs to be made to highlight the importance of supporting local Needham businesses not just on one day or for one event but overall. Cyndi Roy Gonzalez suggested that the "Reopening Needham" website would be an ideal place to share information on what businesses are open.

Mr. Meixner spoke about the impact on office space indicating that inquiries for available space have picked up steadily over the last month. Several businesses are in the process of renegotiating their leases. A few of them are asking for free rent for a number of months while others are looking to relocate from Boston or consolidate their employee base. IDG is currently in Framingham in four buildings but will be moving into new space in Needham at 140 Kendrick Street in the former PTC space starting in early 2021. Mr. Meixner and Mr. Wilcox agreed that it is too soon to tell what the long-term implications from COVID-19 will have on the office rental market.

2. Update from Town Planner

a. HC1 – Update

Ms. Newman reported Town Meeting appropriated \$60,000 to conduct plans for the HC1 zoning. A meeting of the working group, which is comprised of two members of the Planning Board, two members of the Select Board, and two members of the Finance Committee, is scheduled for July 7th. They will be putting together a plan to move this

forward with an anticipated zoning proposal for the May 2021 Town Meeting. Mr. Block will be one of the two members of the Planning Board serving on this working group.

b. Issuance of Permits

Ms. Newman reported that the Planning Board will meet next week with two public hearings on the agenda including 225 Highland Avenue for a special permit for a proposed preschool and at 330 Reservoir Avenue for a special permit for a proposed fencing academy.

c. Rezoning

Ms. Newman shared that the Planning Board is advancing the rezoning of the former Carter's building on Highland Avenue to allow for redevelopment for a project that will allow 83 assisted living units and 72 independent living units, 12.5% of which will need to be affordable housing. Zoning changes will be necessary as the developer is proposing to put a fourth story on the building and the current zoning doesn't allow for that. The Planning Board will hold a public hearing on August 11th and to have it advance to the October 4th Town Meeting. Mr. Block shared that the developer would like to meet with the Council of Economic Advisors to share the plans, answer questions and address any concerns they may have. He will try to put them on the CEA's August or September agenda.

Mr. Putprush shared that over the last year the CEA has discussed zoning changes to allow condominiums within walking distance of downtown as an effort to help support the businesses in Needham center. He inquired about the status of Hillcrest Garden Center on Great Plain Ave. as he understood it had been sold to a developer and thought it would be an ideal location for condominiums. Ms. Newman said the zoning at that property is residential and is constrained in terms of having a multi-family unit but the developer could utilize 40B zoning if they were prepared to make a certain percentage of the units affordable otherwise it would require that the zoning be changed to allow for condominiums.

3. Status Update - Economic Development Manager

Round Two interviews for candidates are scheduled for next week and the Town Manager's office anticipates there will be someone hired and ready to attend the August CEA meeting.

4. Other Business

Mr. Handel stated that the Town is becoming acutely aware of the need to continue to address issues around diversity and discrimination. The Select Board is hosting a forum on July 21st which Mr. Handel said will be mostly listening on their part and encourages people to attend and bring forward any issues of concern so they can be addressed. He is very interested in knowing if any of the businesses are doing anything with respect to training of employees around these issues and are any businesses, employees or customers experiencing any type of discrimination. Ms. Burgos stated that some people may not be comfortable coming forward in a public forum to share their concerns. Mr. Handel encouraged people to contact the Town Manager's office to do so if they are not comfortable at a forum. He expressed that the Town is committed to identifying and addressing issues on an individual basis but also on a policy basis.

5. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 am.