



Council of Economic Advisors
Town Hall
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Minutes
Council of Economic Advisors
Wednesday, December 2, 2020 9:00 a.m.
Zoom Meeting ID 840 2622 0888
Adopted January 6, 2021

Members Present: Stuart Agler, Adam Block, Glen Cammarano, Bill Day, Anne Marie Dowd, Lise Elcock, Virginia Fleisher, Maurice Handel, Robert Hentschel, Adam Meixner, David Montgomery, Rick Putprush, Mathew Talcoff, Michael Wilcox

Members Absent: Tina Burgos

Others Present: Amy Haelsen, Economic Development Manager; Timothy McDonald, Director of Public Health Services; Lee Newman, Director of Planning and Community Development

1. **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.
2. **Minutes of November 4, 2020** - Moe Handel moved to adopt the minutes of the November 4, 2020 meeting. David Montgomery seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.
3. **COVID19 State of Emergency Update** – Tim McDonald reported that we are in the midst of a fairly significant upswing in positive cases across the state including locally. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health’s data showed that Needham has the highest daily number of cases to date which is fifteen. Recently, Needham had anywhere from two to six daily cases so the increase is concerning. The Town’s Public Health Department, in collaboration with the Public Information Officer, is working on new COVID education and awareness campaigns that feature civic engagement type of messaging with the general idea being to help people understand that their sacrifices now will help keep everyone safe. There will be signage, banners, window clings for businesses, wraps for public trash cans as well as posts on social media and paid advertising in local papers. The hope is to help reinforce good behavior through positive public health messaging. In response to an inquiry from Mr. Handel regarding complaints about restaurants complying with mask requirements for staff and employees, Mr. McDonald said that over the course of the pandemic the restaurants have greatly improved in this area and that there is better signage, better training of staff and better

enforcement. He added that there has been one establishment in town which his department has received public complaints about regarding mask wearing and they are working with the owner on this issue. In order for his department to issue a written warning or a fine, or shut down an establishment, they must witness non-compliance first-hand or see it on video. Mr. McDonald stated that the COVID transmission rates in Needham have primarily been through family or social gatherings and that large clusters or outbreaks have not been attributed to restaurants. There are pretty significant safeguards in place to make indoor dining safe. Small private social gatherings are driving COVID transmission rates.

4. Challenges and solutions

- a. **Office** – Mike Wilcox shared that physical occupancy for his company’s properties in the suburbs continues to be around twenty percent which is higher than in Boston. This reflects employees physically working out of company offices and not a reflection of office space vacancy rate. Trends with tenants continues to be the same as he has reported in recent months with some tenants downsizing or consolidating while others are renewing shorter-term leases. Most of the leases he has done in recent months have been for more traditional type of companies like law firms, financial services and insurance companies, which are also the companies that he has seen with a higher occupancy rate than high-tech firms. Adam Meixner reported that activity at his firm for prospective tenants and tour volume has picked up over the last couple of weeks with also several renewals and expansions. Bob Hentschel shared that on the retail side, his company just experienced their first casualty. He has also seen the spectrum on lease renewals. Mr. Block inquired about future demand for office space in the suburbs. Rick Putprush commented that warehouse space, which took a back seat to more desirable office space, is again in high demand but that it requires a substantial amount of space.
 - b. **Industrial** – Mr. Meixner reported that there hasn’t been that much activity in the lab sector in Newton and Needham because life science companies like to be in clusters. He believes there will be new lab space in Needham eventually as the trend has been this sector is moving out of Cambridge down route 2 and onto route 95. It’s expensive to convert space to lab and generally labs need large spaces. Mr. Wilcox added that most lab tenants want lab-ready spaces so it’s challenging to attract life science/lab tenants unless you’ve got a developer who is committed to creating that product. It’s all about speed-to-market as companies can’t wait for a full building rehab. Mr. Block stated that he and Ms. Haelsen would like to set up a separate meeting to discuss what it would take to attract more life science companies to Needham and would be following up with Mr. Meixner, Mr. Block and Mr. Putprush to scheduling this.
 - c. **Retail/Restaurant** – Lise Elcock reported that the Newton Needham Chamber’s Needham 100 Day Challenge Campaign has helped to increase awareness of the importance of supporting local businesses and the feedback from merchants has been very positive. Once the campaign is over, the Needham Business Alliance will regroup to figure out what to do next. Mr. Handel shared that as part of this campaign, The Exchange Club, of which he is a member, is giving each of its members a \$50 gift certificate to a local business of their choice.
5. **Economic Development Manager Report** – Amy Haelsen reported that she continues to be in contact regularly in-person and via email with the small business community in town to check in, to see how they’re doing, and to communicate relevant and helpful info. including

free webinars and resources available from The Center for Women in Enterprise, the Small Business Administration, the Small Business Development Center, the International Downtown Group, among others. These entities provide technical assistance on topics such as reassessing cash flow, helping businesses survive a COVID winter, mastering social media, and others. She also attends many of these webinars herself. In mid-November she sent a letter signed by Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick, Assistant Town Manager Katie King and herself to about eighty Needham small businesses to give them updates on what the town is doing to support them which includes:

- Extending outdoor dining for a period of up to sixty days after the Governor's declaration of the state of emergency ends
 - Keeping the tent on the common up through Thanksgiving
 - Coordinating retailers in Needham Center to offer expanded hours
 - Offering free 2-hour parking in Needham Center and Needham Heights
 - Organizing "Needham Lights" to encourage community support and give us all something positive to enjoy during these challenging times
 - Kicking off the Pilot Snow Program for sidewalk snow removal in designated areas in Needham Center
- An article in The Needham Times yesterday highlighted these things that that the Town has done to help the small business community
 - Ms. Haelsen was able to get eleven retailers in Needham Center to commit to staying open late on Thursdays until 7 pm leading up until Christmas. She also reached out to restaurants to create cross promotional opportunities on Thursday nights with seven restaurants participating.
 - She applied to be a Neighborhood Partner for the national Small Business Saturday promotion that was last Saturday, November 28, and distributed some promotional items including reusable bags and signage to small businesses. The Town helped promote the campaign and feedback from the small businesses has been positive - overall they saw an uptick in business.
 - The "Needham 100 Day Challenge" campaign continues through the end of the year to highlight the importance of shopping and dining locally. It has generated a lot of awareness and support from Needham residents.
 - Ms. Haelsen recommended curbside pickup locations for retailers and restaurants throughout Needham Center to members of the Downtown Working Group and has had signs created for this purpose which will be put up by the end of the week. There will be twelve on-street parking spots in locations throughout Great Plain Ave., Chapel St., Highland Ave. and Dedham Ave. (near Latina) that will be reserved for 10-minute parking for curbside pickup for both retailers and restaurants.
 - Ms. Haelsen continues to attend a bi-weekly zoom meeting with Economic Development Directors, an informal group of economic development staff from twenty different towns and cities in the Greater Boston area. They share best practices, discuss solutions and brainstorm on common challenges we're facing. The Director of Economic Development for MAPC also attends these meetings and has been a great resource on providing insight on state funding, evolving state regulations, etc.
 - Ms. Haelsen will be reaching out to businesses in Needham Crossing and Highland Avenue area near the Newton line to keep them updated on construction related to the Newton-Needham Corridor Project that began in the fall.

- **Business Updates:**
 - Blue On Highland is renewing its liquor license and plans to reopen in the Spring
 - The Sheraton Needham is also renewing its liquor license and plans to reopen in April

6. **Planning and Development Department Business Permits Issued** – Lee Newman provided an update on 140 Kendrick Street which formerly housed PMC and will soon be IDG's new offices. It is being converted from a single tenant occupancy to a multi-tenant occupancy. There will be improvements to both the interior and exterior with improved access to Cutler Lake. The Planning Board approved this permit at its meeting last night. The Board also held its first public hearing for Boston Children's Hospital two weeks ago. There were some issues that surfaced regarding transportation issues, traffic improvements that might be required, and questions about the traffic study that had been prepared. The hearing will be continued to the Board's next meeting on December 15. She anticipates the Town will be able to resolve these issues with the applicant and the plan is for a decision to be issued on the property at the Board's January 4 meeting. An application has been filed for a new residential apartment building for eight units in the Hillside Avenue Business District at 400 Hunnewell Street. Ms. Newman also received an inquiry from a developer who is interested in redevelopment opportunities in Needham Center to take advantage of the zoning that was passed for an overlay district allowing for mixed use development. The developer is exploring converting a single-story building to a three-story mixed-use property with street level retail with apartments above.

Ms. Newman also provided an update on Highway Commercial 1. She reported that GPI presented its traffic study in a recent joint meeting of the Planning Board, Select Board and Finance Committee. The traffic study was based on a 1.35 FAR (floor area ratio) and what infrastructure improvements might need to be made to offset the impact of any development. The study is available online on the town's website. The meeting, held via Zoom, was also recorded and is available for viewing to better understand the impacts of any future development of that site. The Planning Board is currently moving forward with the urban design plan for that property and she anticipates being able to review this work in January to move forward with zoning changes for spring town meeting. A complementary fiscal impact study is also being prepared for this site. Anne Marie Dowd inquired about development in neighboring communities, how they will impact Needham's existing traffic, and whether they were taken into consideration in the traffic studies. Ms. Newman responded that they were, as far as background growth numbers and projections for ten years out.

7. **Other Business** – Mr. Block reported that he, Ms. Dowd and Ms. Haelsen will be working on drafting goals and priorities for the CEA for 2021 and encouraged council members to reach out to him or Ms. Haelsen to share their thoughts and ideas on how the council should be focusing its efforts. Mr. Block also thanked the council members for their participation and valuable contributions over the last year as the group has navigated how to support business in Needham throughout the pandemic. Mr. Handel thanked Mr. Block for his leadership.
8. **Adjournment Roll Call** – the meeting was adjourned at 10:40 am.