



Council of Economic Advisors
Town Hall
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Minutes
Council of Economic Advisors
District Focused Subcommittee Meeting
January 5, 2022 at 8:30 am

Members Present: Adam Block , Adam Meixner, Rick Putprush, Mike Wilcox, Matt Talcoff, Stu Agler, Dylan Attia

Others Present: Amy Haelsen, Economic Development Manager

In advance of the meeting, Ms. Haelsen had shared a summary of observations from members of the subcommittee who participated in the walking tours of Needham Center and Chestnut Street in September and November, respectively, which was the basis for the discussion at this meeting. Mr. Block provided a broad overview that if this sub-committee and the full CEA saw opportunities for the Town in pursuing changes to the zoning bylaws in these districts for the May 2022 Town Meeting, then they would need to reach out to the Select Board who, if they agreed, would refer to the Planning Board to allow time for discussion and public hearings. He added that, alternatively, if more discussion and debate is needed on any potential changes then the group could consider doing so at another Town Meeting if the CEA believed there were viable benefits.

Ms. Haelsen reviewed the observations from the two walking tours. The highlights were that the Center Business Overlay District that was created a decade ago with the goal of encouraging more mixed-use development has only generated one mixed-use property thus far which is located at 50 Dedham Avenue. Committee members expressed interest in reaching out to the owner of this building to get a better understanding what his experiences and the challenges he faced throughout the permitting process and construction. Mr. Putprush offered to do this with Ms. Haelsen. Mr. Block added that market conditions also contributed to the lack of mixed-use projects as existing landlords may not be eager to relocate or lose tenants during construction when they have full occupancy. Mr. Putprush added that there is no economic incentive for these property owners to do anything other than what they are already doing. He believes there would have to be a change in ownership which may result in the tearing down of an existing building and replace it with one that had more square footage for it to be economically feasible. He added that from a structural standpoint, you just can't add floors on to the existing buildings in Needham Center. Committee members also inquired about the reasoning behind the difference in building heights allowed in Overlay Districts A and B. Ms. Haelsen will follow-up with Planning Director Lee Newman to better understand the history behind this zoning change.

Mr. Block suggested that the CEA look into the parking requirements to see if parking is an obstacle. He added that sub-committee members observed an opportunity for increased parking in the town-owned Chapel Street lot by adding a parking deck. Ms. Haelsen informed the group that a request for funds for a comprehensive parking study for Needham Center and Needham Heights will go in front of Town Meeting in May. If the funding is approved, the parking study would take place in the fall of 2022. She added that the committee should have the data from this study before making recommendations on changes to parking requirements. Ms. Haelsen stated that she suspected increased parking resources could potentially be a result of the parking study but that the Town first needed to get a better understanding of the current inventory.

The parking data will also be needed by the Select Board as they discuss plans for the future phases of the streetscape improvements as decisions will need to be made relative to balancing the needs for on-street parking, widening the sidewalks and potentially adding bike lanes. Included in the plans will be aesthetic improvements as well such as more street trees and landscaping. Mr. Block added that the group's observations during the walking tours included the desire for increased beautification and inquired what can be done by the Town or some type of civic organization to increase these efforts throughout the downtown that may lead to a more desirable destination for people. He added that the town center has become more of a destination especially throughout the pandemic. Mr. Agler added that the Garden Club in town does beautification throughout Needham and we should inquire whether they would be interested in doing more or if they have the capacity to do so. Among other observations of things that could add to the aesthetics of Needham Center are sandwich board signs. Ms. Haelsen shared that such signs are currently allowed by right as long as they adhere to the regulations for size, material, and messaging. She has several examples of sandwich board signs done well that she can share with the group.

The group discussed the existing setbacks of buildings on Chestnut Street. Mr. Putprush shared that his preference would be to always have parking behind the building rather than in front of it for residential. Mr. Block commented that there is a disparate collection of uses from retail to auto body services to medical to daycare uses with industrial uses behind them. He asked if there are certain types of uses that we want to try to attract to this district and would modified zoning bylaws, including dimensional requirements, allow us to do so.

The Committee agreed that it's important to have consensus on what the goals are for each of the districts which would include input from Town leadership and residents. Goals for Needham Center were outlined in the Needham Center Redevelopment Plan back in 2009 which called for increased density and an increased mix of uses. The Committee needs to explore if those goals are still relevant today and will take this up at its next meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:05 am.