



Economic Development Committee Minutes

7 April 2023

12:00 PM

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 4/7/23, held virtually via Zoom.

Called to Order: 12:04 pm

EDC Members Present: Catherine Usoff, Dan Malloy, Mike Majors, Shirley Ming, Michael Carpenter, Patty Sutherland, Ann Chang, David Cote

Also present: Julie Pierce, KJ Herther

Public Participation: Corey York (Acton DPW), Carolyn Radisch (Greenman-Pederson Inc - GPI), Alissa Nicol

Members Absent: None

Preliminaries

Call the Roll – attendance is noted above

The preamble about the open meeting requirements was read which define rules of participation for Zoom participants. The version of the preamble read was the one developed for Town of Acton Board and Committees, “Script for Remotely Conducted Meetings.”

David Didrikson has decided to resign from his current position on the Economic Development Committee (EDC). Dave has been a long-time member and has provided years of service to the Town of Acton for which we are grateful. His direct business experience as an owner of a local business provided insight into the needs of the small business community. He has been a valuable asset to the EDC over his tenure.

1. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings

10 March 2023, minutes were approved by all members in attendance.

Public Introductions: Patty Sutherland and Mike Carpenter were announced as the newest members of the EDC. We are grateful to have their expertise on the committee.

2. New/Special Business

Great Road Complete Streets Project: Update and Planning

Carolyn Radisch (GPI) shared a slide presentation on the status of the research, design, and planning around improvements to Great Road (both East from the Concord line and West to the Littleton town line). This work has been conducted over the last year and has included surveys of residents and communication with local businesses. The objective of the project is to advance recommendations to improve safety and access to businesses along Great Road.

The current schedule for the project is to have recommendations completed by the end of June and that the Town of Acton in collaboration with the State's Department of Transportation (MassDOT) will begin to form strategies to source funding to support the advancement of the improvements. The town will be pursuing BOTH short- and long-term funding options and improvements could be rolled out in phases. This project may be eligible for the new federal infrastructure funding. MASSDOT ultimately will be responsible for the construction and requirements with it being a State Road. The current cost estimates for the design and construction for the east part of Great Road improvement project is 15 million. The west section is still to be determined.

Some funding has already been provided by the state and the first upgrade to a cross walk which includes the introduction of a “HAWK signals – High Intensity Activated cross Walk” (Corner of Brook Street near Donelans) will be completed by the summer.

Highlights of the preliminary recommendations being advanced include:

- Expand the side paths (10 feet on both sides) and landscape buffers to the street (5 feet) to enhance safety for pedestrians.
- Introduce enhanced cross walks and lighting at key intersections along Great Road
- Petition the state to reduce the speed limit along Great Road (currently 40 MPH)
- Change some road intersections to make entry and exit of cars safer for both pedestrians and motorists.
- Introduce raised medium where possible to further add safety for pedestrians.
- Introduction of banners and public art to reinforce the “business district” feel versus an access road that supports commuters through town.

The EDC members offered a few recommendations as the planning comes to completion. These included:

- More restrictions around passing options on Great Road (no passing options on the right - this creates risk for both turning motorists and pedestrians).
- Introduce bike lanes on both sides of the road and facilitate access to the rail trail.
- Improvement to Harris Street intersection (reduce slip lane) – eliminate the 2 left hand turns out of the Nagog Park area – currently creates a safety risk for both pedestrians and motorists.
- Introduce “T” intersections (e.g., Davis Street) to improve visibility onto Great Road. Need to factor in the needs of fire trucks and similar large vehicles in this planning.
- Introduce HAWK Cross walks at more locations.

Citizen's Petition Regarding Sewer Commission – Alissa Nicol

Alissa Nicol provided an overview of a citizen's petition that will be presented at the Town Meeting. The nonbinding article is "to see if the Town will conduct an objective analysis, either by establishing a working group or committee, commissioning a study, or engaging a consultant, to determine the pros and cons of creating a Sewer Commission independent of the Select Board or an advisory Sewer Committee, or take any action related thereto." She is not advocating for a specific governance structure but rather to explore alternatives to the current system which has the Select Board members acting as a defacto sewer commission as part of their duties.

The need for considering an independent commission comes from the fact that wastewater management issues cannot get the proper attention with the current structure. The Select Board members do not necessarily have the requisite knowledge of the issues, sewer issues and decisions are discussed during regular Select Board meetings that are generally packed with many other items, and there is a potential conflict of interest given that the Select Board represents all citizens and the sewer district only represents a portion of citizens. We are also at a critical juncture with a need to address impending capacity constraints with the existing system and to advance a long-term strategy for the deployment of sewers more broadly in Acton.

Historically, Acton has had several failed attempts to expand the sewer system based on lack of public support. The town does not have an effective wastewater management plan that aligns with the existing requirements for property owners that have already paid the betterment fees, nor is there a plan for growth of the town. We are quickly approaching thresholds that will exceed current sewer commitments and capacity.

In the discussion, the financing and funding of sewers was acknowledged as a major issue that a commission would need to address. It will require a combination of both public and resident funding to advance an effective wastewater system across the town. Having a separate commission would allow the town to recruit this level of expertise with experience in advancing funding that can defray the pass-through costs to residents.

After the discussion, the EDC decided to endorse the citizen's petition as presented and we will offer our support at the Town Meeting.

Proposal for Development of 3 & 13 School Street

Julie reviewed a warrant article that will be introduced at the Town Meeting that seeks authorization to divest a town-owned property at 13 School Street.

By advancing this divestiture the town would find itself in a better position to facilitate development in the South Acton area including the 3 School Street property (Civil Defense Building) that is also town owned and has remained dormant for many years. Several previous attempts to sell the 3 School Street property alone have been unsuccessful. The lack of parking and the historic district requirements make the property less than desirable to commercial development.

The town currently has a proposal in hand from a developer that proposes 25 units of rental

housing (assuming the developer can acquire 9 School Street which is privately owned) and would create a commercial option for the 3 School Street property (café and coffee shop). By combining the parcels, the town would improve access to market rate rentals, and would increase housing density within one half mile of the train station, consistent with multi-family zoning requirements for MBTA communities. While not part of the developer's proposal, it would be possible to negotiate inclusion of some affordable housing within the plan.

Scoring factors for the RFP for the combined properties include desirable items such as public parking, easier access to the train station, affordable housing, and the use of green technologies.

The current proposal appears to effectively address most all of the desirable features, including the proposed resurrection of a pathway under the bridge to access the train station. The first step in the process to advance this or any other development proposal is to get the approval to divest of the 13 School Street property at the Town Meeting. If approved, the Town manager would be able to negotiate the terms of the development across the combined properties. If not approved, the development of 3 School Street on its own is very unlikely.

If the development proposal is advanced, zoning changes or variances would be needed to accommodate the existing proposal. In any case, the Historic District Commission would need to first approve of the plan before it could go forward.

After the discussion, the EDC decided to endorse the article to divest of the 13 School Street property at Town Meeting and are optimistic the proposed development could be a tangible plan to improve South Acton and create future property tax revenue for the town while eliminating property assets that are not currently contributing to the town's finances.

Upcoming Meeting and Next Steps

The meeting had to adjourn at 1:31 because of members' scheduling conflicts. We agreed to schedule a follow up meeting for next Friday 4/14 at noon via Zoom to complete the current agenda.

The remaining agenda items include:

- Review and discussion of the EDC warrant article being presented at Town Meeting
- Status update on the current fossil fuel restrictions from Jim Snyder-Grant and the EDC's continued response to the restrictions around the impact on businesses.

Action Items Identified in this Meeting:

The group will reconvene a week from Friday (4/14 @ Noon) to complete the agenda.

Catherine will send a confirming email and revised agenda with the time of the follow up meeting.

For more information about the Economic Development Committee, please send email to EDC@actonma.gov