



Economic Development Committee Minutes

14 April 2023

12:00 PM

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 4/14/23, held virtually via Zoom.

Called to Order: 12:07 pm

EDC Members Present: Catherine Usoff, Dan Malloy, Mike Majors, Shirley Ming, Michael Carpenter

EDC Members Absent: Patty Sutherland, Ann Chang, David Cote

Also present: Julie Pierce, KJ Herther, Fran Arsenault

Public Participation: Jim Snyder-Grant; Leela Ramachandran

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.”

1. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings

7 April 2023, minutes were approved by all members in attendance.

2. New/Special Business – EDC Warrant Article 36

Catherine began the meeting by referencing the draft presentations contained in the repository that will serve to introduce the EDC warrant article at the Town Meeting. She requested feedback on the style and tone of the materials that have been created to date.

The goal of the proposed article is for economic development to be top of mind for town leadership and to ensure that the issue of economic development has some prominence in the upcoming town master plan. There are no specific projects identified in the proposed article, or details about what should be included in a plan, only that a plan should be developed.

After a brief discussion about the mechanics of how the warrant will be presented and voted on at the Town Meeting, we discussed the objective of the presentation and strategies to make the request clear and concise.

There was consensus to restate the motion in the presentation, clarify what is being requested, and summarize the benefits for the Town and residents. Some combination of the content from the two presentations in the repository will serve as the foundation for the final presentation.

By devoting resources to the development of a comprehensive economic development plan, the Town will be able to:

- Proactively guide future economic development and decision making.
- Improve opportunities to receive state funding and grants.
- Address the shrinking commercial revenue base.
- Secure funding to reduce the tax burden on residents.
- Integrate economic development into the new master plan for 2025.
- Highlight the importance of businesses to the community.

There was a discussion about the need to attract new and diverse businesses to Acton to improve the overall commercial tax base. It was encouraged that we have facts and figures regarding the historical erosion of the commercial base as backup for the presentation. While the commercial tax base has been consistently declining, it was noted that increased valuations of residential properties has exacerbated the dispersion between the commercial and residential tax base.

EDC Flyer to Display and Social Media Post - Julie Pierce

Julie shared a first draft of a flyer that summarizes the warrant articles that the EDC is supporting at Town Meeting. This included both the EDC warrant (36), as well as 2 other articles we agreed to endorse.

The one-page flyer will be handed out at the Town Meeting, will be offered to businesses to display and can be posted by EDC members to Social Media outlets. EDC members were encouraged to actively promote the flyer on social media.

The group provided recommended edits that Julie will attempt to integrate into the final version.

Town Meeting Participation

Jim Snyder-Grant shared that Town Meeting could be spread over the 3 days (currently scheduled for 5/1 & 5/2) and that warrants may be scheduled on specific days. The Select Board will announce a decision about the logistics for the meeting after the Select Board meeting on 4/24.

Projects and Initiatives Requiring EDC Support

3 & 13 School Street Proposal – Julie Pierce

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.

Beyond the EDC's decision to endorse the article to divest of the 13 School Street property at Town Meeting, Julie has asked members of the EDC to send letters to the Select Board in support of advancing the broader development proposal for 3, 9 and 13 School Street. The Select Board will be reviewing the proposal at their 4/24 meeting.

Summary of Warrant Articles 12 and 13 - Jim Snyder-Grant

Article 12 – New Specialized Energy Code.

Article 13 Amendments to Regulating Fossil Fuel Infrastructure in Buildings.

Jim provided an overview and update of two articles that will be presented at Town Meeting that will update and amend general bylaws that regulate the use of fossil fuels in buildings in Acton.

This is part of the continued effort to restrict the use of fossil fuels in new construction in Acton. These warrants will bring the town into compliance with 9 other Massachusetts communities that have also agreed to be part of a demonstration project that eliminates the use of fossil fuels in new construction.

Given time constraints, we did not get to discuss the presentation, but Jim offered to return if we wanted further discussion.

Jim was not looking for an endorsement of the warrants (the EDC historically has been opposed to environmental initiatives that adversely affect businesses in Acton) but merely wanted to update the EDC on what was included in the new warrants.

The meeting adjourned at 1:31

Upcoming meetings and Action Items Identified in this Meeting:

There will not be another EDC meeting prior to the Town Meeting.

Catherine will update the EDC warrant presentation for the Town Meeting and will distribute it to the group. If you have feedback, please reply only to Catherine to stay consistent with public meeting requirements.

All members of the EDC are encouraged to attend the Town Meeting on May 1st and 2nd.

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