



Economic Development Committee Minutes
February 2, 2024
12:00 PM

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 2/2/2024, held virtually via Zoom.

Called to Order: 12:05 pm

EDC Members Present: Catherine Usoff, Patty Sutherland, Dan Malloy, Sharon Tchon Gruet, Shirley Ming, David Cote, James Fuccione

EDC Members Absent: Michael Carpenter, Ann Chang

Also present: Julie Pierce and David Martin

Preliminaries

Catherine read the preamble for the meeting.

Call the Roll – attendance is noted above.

I. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meeting January 5th, 2024.
- Meeting minutes were approved by all members in attendance except Dan Malloy, who was not present at the January 5th meeting and abstained.

II. New Business

- The **Haartz corporation** has offered EDC members the chance to visit its facility during the first week of March to hear about updates to its business including the manufacturing of interiors for electric vehicles. Several members expressed interest in attending including Patty, Dave, Shirley, and Sharon. Catherine and Julie will finalize the time and date for the visit. It was also proposed that we combine this visit with the scheduled EDC meeting for March. If possible, we will hold an in-person meeting on the same day.
- Julie and Catherine attended the January FinCom meeting and discussed the need for a full-time FinCom representative for the EDC. Greg Jarboe (newest FinCom member and a social media marketing expert) expressed interest in playing that role. Catherine will continue to follow up with the FinCom chair and Fran Arsenault on the appointment. The tone of the visit to the FinCom meeting was one of cooperation and the desire for the two committees to support each other's initiatives was discussed.

- Catherine proposed that we schedule additional EDC meetings in March and April (twice a month) in anticipation of increased activity related to the upcoming Town Meeting. EDC members were supportive of the idea and Catherine and Julie will identify potential dates and times for the additional sessions.
- We discussed an inquiry about the tracking and reporting of tax revenue that was submitted to the EDC. The EDC was not considered an appropriate target for this request and the inquiry will be referred to the assessor or tax collection office. Catherine will communicate the referral.

We did feel that the EDC could benefit from more predictable access to financial data that documents the trends in residential and commercial tax collections. Catherine, Dan, and Julie will determine what information is available and request regular reporting of metrics that would support EDC's work and objectives.

- **Town Policy on Commercial Leases** - We discussed a restriction on the term of a potential lease for the 19 and 21 Maple Street properties that is out for bid through an RFP. The goal is to attract a tenant who would be willing to invest in the properties (which are owned by the town) and contribute to the re-vitalization of the South Acton area.

The current restriction limits the lease term to 3 years for these properties. A warrant article needs to be approved at Town Meeting to authorize the town manager to offer a longer-term lease on the property.

The Economic Director and the EDC do not believe the town will be able to find a tenant that will invest in the property for such a short duration (3 years) and that EDC should sponsor an article at Town Meeting to change this restriction and enable the town to attract a tenant with a longer-term lease guarantee.

David Martin (who is a Select Board member) does not believe this is a broader problem ("the town is not a landlord") and that the EDC efforts should be focused on solving the Maple Street situation directly. He also recommended that we discuss a strategy with Fran (the EDC Select Board representative) to bring this issue to the Select Board with the intent of granting the Town Manager the right to negotiate lease extensions for other town properties if this situation occurs again and not raise it as a broader issue at Town Meeting.

- **Updated Highway Signs** – James pointed out that the highway sign on Route 2 is advertising a business that is no longer open in Acton (Johnny Rocket Restaurant). The business has been closed for at least 5 years, but the sign remains. Julie reported that you must work with the state highway department to address the situation and that it would require a fee (it was 5K several years ago) to add an existing business to the sign. The town does not have a budget for these types of interventions.

James offered to investigate that situation with the state and potentially solicit businesses that may be interested in the advertisement (Dunkin', Starbucks, Not Your Average Joe's) as part of the correction. Julie will provide James with the contact information to pursue it. Depending on the costs, this could benefit local businesses for a relatively small investment.

- **Sign Bylaws** - Catherine raised an ongoing problem and frustration from local businesses regarding the restrictiveness of the sign bylaws. This is particularly problematic for the town's plazas that host multiple businesses. The size restrictions for signs in plazas are completely inadequate and require intervention.

Our local businesses are not being supported and it makes it difficult for residents to figure out what products and services are offered in these plazas. Catherine wants to determine the best way to address this problem.

David Martin feels this is a real issue that needs to be brought to the Select Board and it needs to be incorporated into their 2025 goals. He feels this is a more direct approach to getting the problem addressed (versus a citizen's petition at Town Meeting) and that the EDC is well within its charter to advise the Select Board on how to advance a resolution. While the planning board would be responsible for the specifications and implementation, the EDC can highlight the problem and the Select Board can direct the Town manager to address it through its 2025 goals.

Beyond the signage at plazas, the guidelines need to be expanded to acknowledge the interface with the bike path and the back of buildings and provide guidance on how to expand the rights of businesses to add signage.

Catherine agreed to discuss with Fran a strategy that would take this initiative directly to the Select Board with the goal of formalizing a commitment in June in their 2025 goals and objectives. The EDC will bypass the citizens petition route and will work directly with the Select Board.

III. Old Business

Status of the Leaf Blower Ban – David Martin provided the EDC with an update on the pending article that could be presented at Town Meeting. He indicated that if they can't come to agreement with the citizen that has proposed the ban, the resident will move forward with a citizen's petition at Town Meeting.

The background is that the Select Board agreed to modify the proposed article and simplify the complexity before they agree to endorse the petition. David took responsibility for coming back to the Select Board with a revised framework (to be presented at 2/5 Select Board Meeting). David briefly summarized some of the changes and generally described how enforcement and fines would be administered. It is premature to say if the Select Board will endorse these proposed revisions.

The EDC remains opposed to the regulations that would force the ban and would rather provide incentives for the town and commercial businesses to migrate their equipment to battery powered devices. It was previously noted to the Select Board that manufacturers and distributors of garden equipment are well on their way to not selling gas powered products soon and we don't need further regulation. There is also an effort sponsored by state representatives from Lexington (Michelle Ciccolo) and Brookline (Cynthia Creem) to create state sponsored funding for towns to convert their equipment and no interest loans for commercial landscapers to migrate their equipment. We believe we should engage our state representative (Simon Cataldo) to join this effort. Eversource is already offering rebates to consumers that support the migration to battery powered equipment as well.

RH Adhesives has requested ongoing support in its efforts to meet town requirements for the proposed exemption that was approved by the conservation committee. The EDC voted to continue to offer our support in town meetings to bring this to resolution.

Love of Business Event – Julie requested an EDC member to attend a forum with MA office of Travel and Transportation on 2/13. Dan agreed to cover this event.

Next Steps and Action Items

1. Catherine to discuss approach for changes to sign bylaws with Fran.
2. Julie to finalize plan and attendees for Haartz visit
3. Julie to advance article for Town meeting for Maple Street properties.
4. Agenda items not covered in this meeting will be covered in next EDC meeting.

Materials used in this meeting can be found at: <https://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/View/Collection-17585>

The meeting adjourned at 1:35 pm.

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