



These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 2/4/21, held remotely at 7 pm

Called to Order: 7:03 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Ann Chang, Josh Fischel, Larry Kenah, Shirley Ming, Jon Benson (liaison), Dan Malloy, Catherine Usoff, David Cote

Staff Present: Selby (Economic Development Director)

Members Absent: Peter Daniel, Derrick Chin

“Good evening. It is 7:03 pm. This Open Meeting of the Economic Development Committee is being conducted remotely, consistent with Governor Baker’s Executive Order of March 12, 2020, due to the current State of Emergency in the Commonwealth, and the Local State of Emergency declared by the Acton Board of Selectmen and Board of Health due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 Virus.

“In order to mitigate the transmission of the COVID-19 Virus, the Board of Selectmen has suspended all public gatherings, and in accordance with the Governor’s Order all members of public bodies are allowed and encouraged to participate remotely. The Governor’s Order, allows public bodies to meet entirely remotely so long as reasonable public access is afforded so that the public can follow along with the deliberations and Committee votes of the meeting.

“Ensuring public access does not ensure public participation unless such participation is required by law. This meeting will feature public comment from invited guests. For this meeting, the Economic Development Committee is convening by video conference via the Zoom application. The meeting agenda posted on the Town’s Website calendar indicates how the public may join.

“Please note that this meeting is being recorded and that some attendees are participating by video conference. Accordingly, please be aware that other folks may be able to see you and anything that you broadcast may be captured by the recording.

“All of the materials for this meeting, except for any Executive Session materials, are available in the public DocuShare folder, and we recommend that the members and the public follow the agenda as posted.

“We are about to turn to the first item on the agenda. Before we do so, permit me to cover some ground rules for effective and clear conduct of our business, and to ensure accurate meeting minutes.

- Selby or I will introduce each speaker on the agenda. After they conclude their remarks, I will then go down the line of Members, inviting each by name to provide any comment, questions, or motions. Please hold until your name is called. Further,
 - o Please remember to mute your phone or computer when you are not speaking;
 - o Please remember to speak clearly and in a way that helps generate accurate minutes
- For any response, please wait until the Chair yields the floor to you, and state your name before speaking.
- If members wish to engage in discussion with other members, please do so through the Chair, taking care to identify yourself.

“After members have spoken, the Chair will afford public comment as follows:

- o The Chair will first ask members of the public who wish to speak to identify their names and addresses only after first being recognized by the Chair, and will be afforded two minutes for their comment or question.

- Finally, each vote taken in this meeting will be conducted by roll call vote. This requirement extends to the vote to adjourn.”

Regular Business

1. Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings

Minutes from January 7 are approved with a single change, unanimously: 8-0, with one abstention.

2. Public participation

Callers express interest in speaking when their issues of interest come up in the meeting rather than at the beginning of the meeting.

II. **New/Special Business**

3. Specific Issues

- Vacancy report (Selby et al)

EDC members did a “windshield survey” and found that there were 35 properties with vacancies in them. Selby shares a map. The majority of them are along Great Road. Selby is using the data to figure out the amount of vacant square footage in town and getting in touch with some brokerages. Mike Majors offers some help; Selby said he will ask the committee for help sometime next week. Catherine Usoff asks about a few Knox Trail properties and wonders if they’re Concord businesses or Acton businesses. Selby says that’s an industrial area, and they might just receive their mail at a Concord address, even if they’re physically located in Acton. Mike asks Selby if he was surprised with the results; he had not known that the 7/11 had gone out of business, but it otherwise matched up with his assumptions and knowledge. He talks further about the state’s Vacant Storefront Initiative, which provides a \$10,000 tax rebate for businesses that fill storefronts that have been vacant for more than a year. The state does require that the town provide a matching amount for the rebate.

- Kmart update (Jon Benson)

Jon summarizes where we are: people see it as a special parcel, and the last undeveloped piece of commercial real estate property. There was a local group (Colonial Automotive) that had an option agreement for purchasing the property but decided not to exercise it. Ocean State Job Lot signed a letter of intent to use at least two-thirds of the existing K-Mart building, but after meeting with Jon and a few other town representatives, they withdrew their interest. At the next Select Board meeting, Jon was surprised by crowd participation and one of his colleagues, who expressed interest in a discount store like OSJL or Target. There are a few other options that have more or less substance behind them: a community center, a life science building, and senior living center. The problem with a community center is that the town would have to buy the land and build the center, which could run up to something like \$21 million, and then we would have to eat the operating costs because we would want the fees to be nominal to be a member.

Chris Hardy talks about wanting to have something that binds the community together and allows people to gather. He conducted surveys over Facebook, including about 1400 people; popular choices were consistently a Target and then a community center. He mentions many of the benefits of a community center.

Ann Chang says the idea of a combined senior and community center has been batted around for years; the brick wall was that seniors didn't want to share their space with anyone else. To her, the property should remain commercial. We don't have the money and we're not a good broker for commercial property.

Terra Friedrichs advocates for a mixed use project—why not both?

David Didriksen said he had wanted to keep it commercial a year ago; Target's not going to go in there. You're not going to find a quality retailer. Ocean State Job Lot [henceforth: OSJL] would downscale the area. Decisions have to be driven by the money that is available; everything else is pure fantasy.

Josh chimes in by saying that a public market would be ideal to him, but he's swayed by the purchase, building, and operating costs being a barrier to achieving that dream. He suggests that a community center might be configured from existing space that the town currently owns: within one of the nearby school spaces. He's opposed to discount stores and fast food, and so wants the town to be careful about how we proceed on that front.

Mike Majors says we should wait until the Kelley's Corner infrastructure improvements are underway or done, and would be more likely to attract more attractive tenants/owners. He wants the town to hire an urban planner to sketch out some ideas about how to maximize the use of the space.

Catherine Usoff advocates for the life science facility that might be interested in creating an attractive mini-campus for their employees; it could provide opportunities for high school students to intern or apprentice there, too.

Mike says a new type of business would bring new employees, creating new jobs.

Dan Malloy agrees emphatically with Catherine. The life sciences industry is thriving in our area, so it makes sense that we would dip our toe in those same waters.

David Cote asks Jon why OSJL withdrew their letter of intent; Jon clarifies.

Mike Majors suggests that OSJL could fit quite nicely in the Pier One space in the Brookside Shops. Selby clarifies that OSJL had wanted to own the whole property; they are not looking to be a tenant somewhere.

David Didriksen asks if we had some sort of by-law limiting the size of box stores; Ann Chang reports that K-Mart was the limit. Selby cites the zoning by-law: 60 thousand square feet or less. Larry says he likes the life sciences idea, but isn't sure how realistic it is. He thinks we're not going to get what a lot of people want. (David D. and Josh have suggested that we find our town's generous multi-millionaires.)

David D. suggests that people are fleeing urban centers right now, and right now might be a good time to identify those folks as companies re-evaluate things.

Barbara Morse says that she has been in the pharmaceuticals and health care world, and that the life sciences industry works in shifts; we would have to anticipate the impact on traffic flow at that intersection. She says that Massachusetts is really the center of bio-tech in the world, and it's full of start-ups. They would require a lot of specific building needs; it might not be the low-hanging fruit that it sounds like we anticipate.

Terra reminds us to be concerned about what a life sciences company might put in our water. Shirley Ming asks Jon how he came to the conclusion that people didn't want a discount store like K-Mart or OSJL. Jon uses words like 'unique' and 'special' to describe the parcel; he speaks to Mike's earlier point, that the future enhancements of the area might inspire more upscale developers to purchase property in the area. He acknowledges that K-Mart *did* fill a need for seniors and for younger families alike.

David Didriksen says everyone's buying that stuff online anyway.

Ann Chang suggests we talk to "the guy at Insulet" to assess whether the K-Mart lot is feasible for life sciences in the first place. She suggests a European market, which is perhaps like a public market.

Alissa Nicol says she lived in Italy for three years and adored the markets there. She asks about whether Stop & Shop has wavered on their insistence not to allow prepared foods to be sold; Selby reports that they have not.

- Exchange Hall and housing (from last meeting)

David Honn of the Historic District Commission (HDC) reports that there are two houses and Exchange Hall itself on the property. In a nutshell, nothing can be changed on the outside, and the top floor dance hall can't be changed until 2028. Because housing is already being created nearby, they don't see the need to further diminish existing commercial space. He invites EDC members to come to a future HDC meeting to talk more about it. In response to a question from Jon about current use, he says that Glenn Burger, the owner, occupies the bottom floor with his business, Acton Woodworks. He has trouble renting the second and third floors. David says he would like to partner with the EDC to help him fill the space. Ann Chang asks about the HDC's feelings about the Civil Defense Building across the street; David wants to preserve it as much as possible, and to have potential building next to it have a similar feel. The problem with developing retail there is that there's no foot traffic or parking.

- Any updates on drive-up zoning changes?

Selby has lost power and thus the substance of this and a few other remaining items on the agenda will be limited.

- COVID vaccination (short discussion)

David Didriksen is dismayed by the map of distribution centers, because it leaves a vaccine desert in the MetroWest area. Ann Chang says there's a vaccination team for homebound folks. Jon Benson says there's just not enough vaccine to go around. We'll be allocated 100 vaccines a week starting at some point in February. David says it's more a communication issue than

anything else; Maine and Florida have signed up and/or vaccinated the entire Didriksen family. Jon suggested that Acton citizens can call the Acton Town Services Hotline at 978-929-6600.

4. General EDC business
 - Should we meet more frequently?

Mike Majors suggests we ought to meet twice a month. “If we’re going to be relevant, we could and should meet more often right now.” Larry says we will now meet twice a month until further notice. David Cote suggests perhaps a working session every two weeks. Self-proclaimed smart alec Larry responds, “Didn’t you go through Open Meeting Law training?” It would effectively limit David’s idea.

5. Proposed EDC Projects for 2021

III. More Regular Business

6. Updates from members

Jon says that Dan Malloy will be moved to full member as Jon becomes a liaison. David Cote will be added to the committee as an associate member.

7. Update from Director of Economic Development

Selby, without power in Ayer, is not available to contribute.

8. Next meeting – 18 February 2021

IV. Consent Items

9. None

Additional materials

- Draft meeting minutes from 7 January 2021

The listed agenda items are those reasonably anticipated by the Chair. Not all items may in fact be discussed and other items not listed may also be brought up for discussion to the extent permitted by law.

*Reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities are available upon request. Include a description of the accommodation you will need, including as much detail as you can and include a way we can contact you if we need more information. Please allow advance notice. Send an e-mail to **manager@actonma.gov** or call Town Manager’s Office **(978)929-6611***

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