



Economic Development Committee Agenda

20 May 2021

7:00 pm

Zoom Webinar (see below)

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 5/20/21, held remotely at 7 pm

Called to Order: 7:02 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Ann Chang, Josh Fischel, Larry Kenah, Catherine Usoff, David Cote, Derrick Chin, David Didriksen, Shirley Ming

Staff Present: Selby

Members Absent: Jon Benson, Dan Malloy, Peter Daniel

Preliminaries

Call the Roll

Preamble (Larry Kenah)

I. Regular Business

1. Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings

- The minutes of May 6, 2021, were approved unanimously (with one abstention) with corrections, 8-0.

2. Public participation

- Chris Hardy of the Kelley's Corner Community Center calls in to say that he's trying to come up with a revenue neutral approach to purchasing the KMart property, and partnering with businesses that would be in frontage properties. Larry suggests that Chris come back to one of our two June meetings to talk about this at greater length. Ann Chang suggests that she would like to know the renovation costs; Chris asks for contact information for someone to let him in the building; Ann suggests contacting the Town Manager. Chris suggests he'd like to be on the 6/17 agenda.

II. New/Special Business

3. Fossil Fuels and New Construction (Jim Snyder-Grant)

Select Board member Jim Snyder-Grant speaks with the committee, seeking an informational discussion about this warrant article. It came out of the climate emergency resolution that was passed at a prior Town Meeting. Here are some salient points (which, I suppose, are what minutes are meant to capture): while we want to do what we can to address the climate crisis, we need the help of construction contractors. The proposed article would prohibit new construction from installing or using fossil fuels, without a waiver. Once this passes Town Meeting, we stop

digging the hole deeper; everyone else is grandfathered in with their heating systems and whatnot. We're part of a group of towns who are pushing this and hoping to force the state legislature's hand.

New businesses moving into existing spaces would not be required to adhere to this by-law unless they are making significant renovations ($\geq 50\%$ of floor space). From the residential point of view, all electric construction is now less expensive than hooking up gas lines, etc. Appraisals and home sales have increased when there is electric-only construction, so developers should have no problems with this article.

In the case of large-scale construction and commercial construction, there is not yet a cost-effective way to provide hot water through these new means, for instance; that's why there's a waiver.

Josh asks about the timeline for getting that additional waiver approved; Jim explains that the application goes through the Building Commissioner, who feels he could sign off on exceptions quickly; if he denies the request, any appeal would go through the Select Board.

David Cote refers back to three bullets that matter to the EDC: will this help us attract, retain, and grow our business community, and will it help promote the "appropriate development, redevelopment, and renewal of commercial property"? Jim responds that there's no data in Massachusetts yet to back up his answers to those questions; the best he can do is look at research from California. He will bring that back to our committee. Jim says the clearer data is about residential housing: reduced initial costs, and operating costs that are at least comparable, if not lower.

David D. says, "We don't really know anything about the future." He says the price of electricity will surely go up, since we're heading towards electric vehicles. He is concerned that he'd rather have businesses arrive at these decisions themselves instead of being "coerced" by Acton's governance acting as "the Great Parents in the Sky." Our current trend is businesses leaving town, so why place additional barriers in front of new businesses? They want to plant their flag in the town(s) of least resistance.

Jim responds that there are building codes; people generally want to do the things that are in them, but the harm of not following them is great enough that we make them mandatory.

David pushes back: "You have not convinced a man because you've silenced him." Jim says, essentially, "Look, there are going to be divergences between environmental and economic concerns."

Ann Chang asks whether these votes will require simple majority or two-thirds majority at Town Meeting; they need just a majority, but Jim wants large majorities in order to send a message to the state legislature. Ann asks about heat pumps: upfront costs, noise, and how well they work. She asks about the KMart building: would renovation of that fall under this guideline?

Mike Majors says we do have to acknowledge the climate crisis, but he *is* worried that, in the short-term, this might make us less competitive with neighboring towns. What will take the place for oil or other fossil fuels—though they are finite, they are plentiful. He worried that we're too far out over our skis. Jim responds that the new fire station and the new twin schools are both going fossil-fuel-free, which he sees as a sign that we're ready now. McDonald's and Wendy's already have "electric kits" for their franchisees who want to locate in places where by-laws like this exist.

Catherine asks if there are examples of communities that have had success with encouraging and influencing fossil-fuel-free construction instead of using coercion or edict. She also asks, if the state hasn't made decisions yet, are we acting needlessly prematurely? Jim replies that there's new climate legislation that requires the state to go through an 18-month process to establish new "stretch codes." It's unclear how far those will go.

Shirley asks about the Attorney General's conversation with Brookline, which recently passed their home rule petition, asking the state to let them govern according to their by-law. Jim says that the approval process by the state legislature is likely to take up to two years, so the 2022 implementation date is probably overly optimistic. Shirley also asks about the effectiveness of heat pumps, and whether geothermal heat pumps—like the ones being built for the school—could be used on residential properties. Jim says it's not right for every property (geothermal sourcing). He suggests that old, leaky houses may need back-up sources, and an energy audit to add insulation. Larry says we'll need to "have a good think" before discussing how our committee moves forward with this barrage of information.

4. EDC position on Drive-up Window Zoning (All)

A few members of the committee suggest their support for this; Larry polls the room. We're generally in favor, with a few caveats. Franny Osman calls in to make sure the conversation includes small businesses like Acton Pharmacy; she's in favor of it otherwise. David D. will go talk to them. Terra Friedrichs calls in to ask the EDC to review the position of the West Acton Village Merchants' Association.

5. Working Group Reports: Larry suggests that we postpone these discussions, due to the late hour. Catherine chimes in just to say that we should have a future conversation about takeaways from the pandemic.

- 50 Nagog (Dan and Shirley)
- LRRP (Larry and Derrick)
- Ann Chang Project
- Strategic Plan (David C, Josh, and Catherine)
- Business Inventory (Mike with Dave D and Larry)

III. More Regular Business

6. Updates from members

Josh lets the committee know that he will not seek to renew his appointment to the EDC; people say nice things; your humble clerk is further humbled.

7. Update from Director of Economic Development

Selby reports there are no concrete updates; he encourages the committee to take votes for Town Meeting at the 6/3 meeting. He's concerned about how to meet in-person once the state rescinds its remote meeting order.

8. Next meetings

- 3 June 2021
- 17 June 2021 (last meeting before town meeting)

Committee adjourns at 8:58 pm.

IV. **Consent Items**

9. None

Additional materials

- Draft meeting minutes from 6 May 2021
- FAQ from Jim Snyder-Grant

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.

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For more information about the Economic Development Committee, please send email to
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