



Economic Development Committee Minutes  
3 February 2022

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 2/3/22, held remotely, supported by Zoom.

Called to Order: 7:17 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Ann Chang, Larry Kenah, Dan Malloy, Shirley Ming, David Cote, David Didriksen, Catherine Usoff

Select Board Member Present: Fran Arsenault (for second half of the meeting)

Town Employee present: Julie Pierce Onos

Members Absent: Peter Daniel, Chris Hardy, Derrick Chin

**Preliminaries**

Call the Roll – those present and absent are noted above

Preamble

New Preamble (Town of Acton Board and Committees, script for remotely conducted meetings), read by Committee Chair Larry Kenah. For text of the preamble, please see January 6, 2022 meeting which was the first time it was read at the beginning of the meeting.

Introductions – none needed this meeting

I. **Regular Business**

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings
  - 6 January 2022

Minutes were approved unanimously with one small editorial correction.

- Public participation - none

II. **New/Special Business**

1. Economic Development in the Town of Acton
  - Continuing the conversation between the committee and Julie Pierce Onos, Director of Economic Development

Dave Didriksen and Shirley have both visited the Asian Market that opened this past week (soft opening on Monday). The market does not have all of its inventory yet.

Dave Cote – anything we should know about their start-up journey?

Dave D. – doesn't know if the owner had any problems with the town but there were the typical problems that businesses are having now because of COVID. In the early days, it is important for people to stop by. Dave encouraged the EDC members to stop by the market. It is important for new businesses to get good feelings from the community.

2. Business Inventory: past, present, and future (Larry Kenah, Mike Majors, et al)

Prior to tonight's meeting, Julie and Larry talked about Julie trying to build up her contact data base. Larry gave some background about an effort a few years ago where committee members went out and talked to many businesses to get their contact information. Last year, the EDC members drove by many businesses and created a new list of businesses. We should resurrect the list activity with Julie's input as to what data she thinks would be helpful.

With regard to data for each business, Julie would like to have the current phone number, email, name of business, and point of contact. So far, she has accessed the business certificate (DBA, or Doing Business As) list and a list of properties owned. She has phone numbers but they are not necessarily up to date.

Julie described three initiatives that require up-to-date contact information:

1. Personal outreach to each of the businesses in town, she would like to contact them before going to the place of business.
2. She is working on a newsletter and would need e-mails for that.
3. Business directory on the town's website like other towns have. The current town website runs on Civicplus which has a module for creating a business directory. You can search the directory by name of the business, but also by categories, it would be a good resource for the community and for businesses.

Larry – one thing we have struggled with in the past was how to make the information available to the public, having a directory on the town website would be great. He asked if other people might be able to add information to the directory in addition to Julie.

Julie – we could have a shared Google sheet with the committee and anyone can add information to the document. Once she has a critical mass of information, then she could add it to the directory online.

Ann – before you do any publishing, make sure you have everyone because if you leave anyone out, it would not be good. For example, if you include some of the grocery stores in town, but not all, that could be a problem.

David D. suggested that there could be a disclaimer at the end of the site, "if I left anyone out, please let me know."

Ann suggested that Julie could write up something that could be advertised through the Beacon, Action Unlimited, and Acton TV, letting everyone know she is creating this directory and asking businesses to send her the relevant information.

Julie could create a Googleform that structures the data so she can download the data easily. She can create this for the next EDC meeting and get input from the committee.

Larry – will send the Excel spreadsheet (inventory we did last year) to Julie and will let the committee members know what he sent to her in case we have anything else to add.

Dave Cote – backup plan. On Google Maps, can break the town into areas and have individuals gather the information from Google Maps

Mike – request from Julie, we don't have a lot of new businesses opening up, but he would like the EDC to be informed about what is going on. We should be on a distribution list to get the information in a more timely way.

Dan- Doesn't planning board have to be involved early?

Julie – she just got added to the chain of communication for when someone applies for a DBA license. She is working on getting into the chain (approved DBAs and approved permits) so she can be informed. DBAs are held in the town clerk's office and the property owner information is in the Assessor's office.

Dave D. – can Julie request information from the state office to see what businesses are filing for doing business in Acton?

Julie – she is working on being able to flowchart the process for different types of businesses with regard to the start-up process. There are many differences so that it is not that easy.

Julie – Vivian Birchall pulled together a list of businesses just before the holidays to encourage people to shop local. That is one source of information that Julie has used because it was done recently and is fairly current.

### 3. EDC working groups (brief discussion)

There was no dedicated discussion about working groups, but there was mention of them in the director's update (see below regarding directory working group and strategic planning working group).

### 4. "Rethinking the Strip Mall" (Ann Chang, Catherine Usoff)

"Rethinking the Strip Mall" was a webinar sponsored by the MAPC (Metropolitan Area Planning Council). Ann watched the webinar and a [link to a related document](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/cb9bec551f9d48599f267f4ff6282906) was sent to all EDC members prior to the meeting. [URL for link: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/cb9bec551f9d48599f267f4ff6282906>]

Dave D. read the entire thing. He didn't see much value in it, as the example given (Woburn) is a very unique situation and what worked there will not work for Acton. He thinks that the ideas presented would work better in high density areas like Watertown or Somerville. People in Acton want single family homes and space.

Ann watched the video and she thought we should discuss it. She didn't think there were that many properties that would be eligible.

Field Code Changed

Dave D. – thought the town was saying that we do not want more housing, but we want more businesses. He could see developers wanting to do this, but then we would have more children in the school system and more infrastructure issues. The town needs businesses and services and goods.

Catherine offered that there were some interesting ideas in the document, but they should be considered in the context of plans the town has for the different areas (Great Road, West Acton, Kelley's Corner).

Larry asked the group if there is anything the EDC needs to do right now with regard to the MAPC presentation.

Mike thinks we should look at the material and make some comment on it, do our due diligence. Look at it critically and come up with comments. There are some modified plans that you could implement around 2A or around the train station in South Acton. The study is worth looking at and looking at critically.

Dan thinks maybe we should formally respond. He has some of the same misgivings as Dave D. How does Great Road become a walkable, livable environment?

Dave D. – would have been more helpful if there were examples of areas that are more similar to Acton. Woburn is not like Acton.

Mike commented that in order to pull off a major redevelopment plan like what is suggested, you would have to have complete control. Here you just have to wait for a developer to come along and do what they want. You can maybe create some incentives, but you are at the mercy of what each developer wants to do.

Larry asked if we don't have to formally respond, do we need to write up a short report and send it to Julie?

Ann commented that this was another MAPC project/presentation, one among many that come our way. Some look like they might be interesting and some of them are not. We could just send the information to Julie.

Larry concluded from the totality of the discussion that he doesn't think there is anything we need to do with this (MAPC presentation) right now.

#### 5. April 19, 1775

- Upcoming 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary
- Role for EDC to play
- Mike Majors

Mike brought to the committee's attention that April 19, 2025 (250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolutionary battle at Concord's North Bridge in which Acton Minutemen played a crucial role) will be here before we know it. It will be such a big event that it will include many different organizations, including museums, schools, clubs, etc. It will take years to plan all of this, particularly figuring out budgets. The town needs to get an organizing committee together now. It is not part of the select board's goals for this year, but John M. has it on the list for next year.

Because of the economic impact, the EDC should be involved. The issue with the Colonial mascot could complicate some things so we need time to plan. There should be educational programs in the schools to let the students know about the Colonials and what life was like. There are a lot of possibilities and it could bring the town together.

Dave D. – wouldn't Concord also be doing this at the same time? Is there some coordination between the towns?

Mike – if we get a head start and come up with something unique, it could be a great thing for the community, bringing everyone together.

Dave C. – commends Mike for thinking about this and suggests that he writes his ideas down. There will be a lot of coordination required. Perhaps we should start with values – economic benefit, community, etc.

Mike – every other town in the state, federal government, and national parks will all be doing something big. He suggested a slogan for Acton - “America started here.”

Dan – is anyone from Historical Society thinking about this? Mike doesn't know.

Fran – John M. mentioned at the last Select Board meeting that he was focusing on the 2025 celebration and would forego fireworks for this year. The idea of checking in with the surrounding towns is a good idea. There should be a committee with representation from different groups and entities, someone from EDC and someone from the historic commission, someone from education, women's club, etc.

Larry – what is needed right now- a small group of people who are willing to lead the effort and bring it all together.

Mike – need someone with a vision. Need everyone's help – Select Board, town manager, residents.

Fran – will mention it during her report at the next Select Board meeting.

### III. **More Regular Business**

#### 6. Updates from members

Fran heard that the rolling pizza place is going into the Johnny Rockets place. It will be their storefront.

#### 7. Update from Economic Development Director (this item was covered earlier in the meeting as Julie needed to leave the meeting at 8:15)

- Pursuing additional funds
  - Julie is working on a public arts grant application to support local artists.
  - In collaboration with other town staff members, she is working on a joint grant with Concord to support wayfinding signs for the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (Acton and West Concord).

- Through a One Stop site at the state level, Julie and other town staff members have submitted grants for five different projects. There is one application to submit that will be considered by multiple grant agencies.
  - She just found out about another potential grant for starting a business incubator or a way to provide technical assistance for start-ups. She will be working on that next week.
  - Last year the town applied for, and recently got a Mass Works grant to do a feasibility study for waste water management on Great Road. The RFP for consultant will be out soon.
- Outreach to businesses
    - Julie is starting a newsletter to send out to businesses and is starting to meet with businesses one on one.
    - She has developed a welcome letter. Once she knows that a DBA has been approved, she can send that letter out to introduce herself.
    - She is going to start reaching out to Kelley's Corner businesses in anticipation of the construction that will start in summer or fall. One thing they need is the contact information for the businesses so the lead contractor will have all the information to contact them when needed. Related to this, Julie mentioned there will be a webpage for the construction that will give updates. Hopefully, there will be traffic tips on there. She doesn't know how to do it yet, but there must be a way to let Google, Waze, etc., know about the traffic issues so travelers can be alerted in real-time.
    - She has started a relationship with Middlesex West Chamber of Commerce.

Julie had a meeting with Rick Lofria, Executive Director of Greater Merrimack Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau. He has worked a lot with Concord and Lexington when there are tour buses coming to the area. If there are landmarks, historical sites in Acton that should be added to the tours, let Julie know.

Larry asked about the working group for the business directory, should we revive the group. Julie suggested that we see if new people want to be on it.

Julie expressed a desire to have a working group around strategic planning, aligned with the Select Board goals.

Larry brought up the enterprise software, OpenGov that Dan had looked into. We need a way to understand the business processes of the town and see how we can make them more streamlined for the businesses. His impression of the current software package is that it is sort of a patchwork. Larry suggests that Dan puts together a document, not just about the software, but about business processes.

Julie said that in the ARPA fund requests, there is one for permitting software. There is still a process to go through, but it is on their radar.

Another update from Julie – she is learning about different tax incentives, such as those for Life Sciences, and how towns can become BioReady. From the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council (MassBio) website: “MassBio has developed a rating system to determine a municipality’s readiness to host biotechnology facilities based on the community’s zoning practices and infrastructure capacity.” Julie sees these as other ways she can be helpful to businesses that want to locate in Acton.

Julie mentioned the state’s vacant storefront program, Selby started the process last year. One of the requirements for the program is to have matching money. There is now matching money in the town budget so she will be working on that.

Julie – Life sciences tax credit is a state program, consisting of refundable tax credits. Bioready is not a tax incentive program, it is more of helping to market the town.

Dan mentioned that we looked at the MassBio program (BioReady cities and towns) already and that we have registered there. He likes the tax incentive angle as that could help incentivize businesses to come to Acton.

Julie – thinks it would be helpful to even get the lowest level of certification for bioready status.

Larry recommended that the town makes sure there are people representing the business community when they make decisions about the permitting software (the people that are users of the permit software, like contractors).

Ann advised to plan far ahead if there are any tax incentives that have to go through town meeting. You have to start a year before the town meeting.

Julie – The Life Sciences tax incentive is a state program, so we wouldn’t need local approval. She would want to be a resource for a business that was interested in the tax incentive. It is centered around hiring and the money goes to the company.

Ann cautioned that we are getting a new governor and we are facing inflation, opportunities for state funding may decline.

8. Next meetings

- Thursday, 17 February 2022 (remote)
- Thursday, 3 March 2022

IV. **Consent Items**

None

Adjourn – 9:05 p.m.

**ACTION ITEMS IDENTIFIED IN THE MEETING:**

Julie will create a Google form to collect data from businesses in Acton and will ask for EDC input at the next meeting.

Larry will send the latest business inventory (data collected by EDC members last year and collated in an Excel spreadsheet) to Julie and will let EDC members know what he has sent to her.

Fran will bring up the need for planning work to begin for the April 19, 2025 celebration at the next Select Board meeting.

Dan will put together a document for Julie's benefit that summarizes the enterprise software (OpenGov) and the case for documenting (and improving) processes that support businesses.

For more information about the Economic Development Committee, please send email to [EDC@actonma.gov](mailto:EDC@actonma.gov)