



Economic Development Committee Minutes

7 July 2022

7:00 pm

Room 9, Acton Town Hall
472 Main Street, Acton, MA

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 7/7/22, held in Room 9 of Acton Town Hall, supported by Zoom participation for guests.

Called to Order: 7:10 pm

EDC Members Present: Mike Majors, Catherine Usoff, Shirley Ming, Dan Malloy, Chris Hardy (Zoom), Ann Chang, David Cote (Zoom), Ray Yacouby

Also present: Fran Arsenault; Julie Pierce Onos

Members Absent: Peter Daniel, David Didriksen

Preliminaries

Call the Roll – attendance is noted above

1. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings
5 May 2022, minutes approved by all members in attendance, except for Chris Hardy, Ann Chang, David Cote, Ray Yacouby who were not at the May 5th meeting
- Public participation – Kyran Vig – AB student – wants exposure to economic development

2. New/Special Business

Tribute to Larry Kenah – Catherine’s opening remarks were acknowledging the sudden and unexpected death of Larry Kenah (former chair of the EDC). The committee members spoke of the significant contributions Larry made to the Town of Acton and the EDC. We are all grateful for the support Larry provided to each of us and intend to send a consolidated note to his wife and his family expressing our condolences.

EDC Role, Membership and Meetings

Catherine began the meeting by acknowledging the need to revisit the structure and membership of the EDC. There remains confusion and inconsistencies with the town clerk's records about member data.

More specifically, we need to resolve who are full versus associate members. Catherine committed to speak with each member of the committee to clarify the relevant data (level of membership, training completed, etc.). She also committed to producing a revised and official list that will be presented to the town clerk (with Julie's support) as the official standing, reconciling the current discrepancies.

Her current understanding is that there should be 7 full members and 4 associate members. Ray Yacouby mentioned that other committees bestow full membership status (with voting rights) to the Planning Board and Finance committee representatives. He suggested that the EDC should also follow this practice.

The Chamber of Commerce representative was also discussed. This spot is currently occupied by Peter Daniels, however, due to the time demands of his business, he has not been an active member of the EDC committee. While he could be called on for special topics and would be welcome at any future EDC meeting, it makes sense to seek another business person for the Chamber representative spot.

Catherine and Fran confirmed that the Select Board representative is not a full member of the EDC and that going forward they wanted to change the expectation for the Select Board Liaison role. Fran and Catherine will establish direct communication (separate from the EDC meetings) and that will be used to inform the EDC of pending activities from the Select Board that impact the business community. While Fran may attend meetings in the future, it is not an expectation that she will attend every meeting. Catherine has agreed to provide a written summary of her correspondence with Fran to the EDC to maintain a strong link between the two bodies.

Julie and Catherine displayed the current description of the EDC that addresses membership and accountability of the committee. (See description in the repository linked at the end of the minutes). Some language is out of date and needs to be changed (e.g., "Board of Selectman" should be changed to "Select Board," and "Economic Development Director" instead of "Director of Land Use and Economic Development). The committee also discussed the language about the committee reporting on a regular basis to the Director, the Board, and the town manager.

Catherine has agreed to create the first draft of a revised description for review at the next meeting, with the goal of clarifying the committee's structure, role, and reporting responsibilities. All EDC members will be asked to review and edit as appropriate.

Finally, we discussed the frequency with which the EDC should meet, and the consensus was to meet monthly (1st Thursday of the month) with the option to add a second meeting date (3rd Thursday of the month -could be remote) if there was need for additional dialogue. There was also agreement that holding the meetings virtually was acceptable, particularly in the winter months. Fran and Julie said they expected there would be some guidance from the town manager and/or Select Board for committees and boards soon regarding meeting protocols.

Town Meeting and Warrants that Affect the Business Community

Catherine articulated the need for the EDC to be “more proactive” in the formation of warrants that effect the business community. The “Ban the Bag” and “Plastics Ban” proposals on the latest town meeting warrant were not shared early with the EDC. As a result the committee reacted to a completed proposal advanced by the Select Board, that had little to no input from the EDC (or other town committees). There was no economic impact analysis of these warrants, nor any real consideration of the negative implications for businesses. Despite attempts to influence the warrants, input from the EDC was largely ignored.

Ray also felt the “feel good” warrants are not giving proper enough attention to implementation requirements and they will hurt the business community. For example, West Side Creamery could not get a straight answer at the town meeting about what replacement products were acceptable from the folks who wrote the warrant.

The discussion focused on how we can get ahead of Select Board initiatives that affect the business community and for which the EDC should participate in the planning. Julie suggested that EDC members set up alerts from the town website to get advance notice of activities in front of the Select Board. She will send “How To” documentation to facilitate the monitoring of pending Select Board activities. Ann also advocated to start monitoring the Select Board agendas and the supporting documents.

Mike Majors also feels that previous select board actions (e.g., the fossil fuel ban) should not stand without a broader economic impact analysis. There is a rebuttal to the fossil fuel ban legislation and Mike would like the author(s) to come to a future EDC meeting to present it to committee members.

Other Town Initiatives and Activities that Impact the EDC

Catherine feels that the EDC needs to better coordinate with the sustainability director.

Ann feels that the new director is NOT in sync with the needs of businesses and homeowners. For example, the town is “pushing” heat pumps even though there is evidence that it could have adverse environmental effects.

Julie offered that the final climate action plan is soon to be released and the EDC needs to get informed on what it is advocating and what impact it will have on businesses and homeowners.

The consensus is that “Environmental Activists” are driving the Select Board agenda and there are insufficient checks and balances to ensure that we are working on a common set of objectives for the town that align with all stakeholders needs.

Finally, there was a brief discussion about the “sign bylaws” and efforts that are under way to clarify the bylaws with a set of illustrations that show how the rules are to be applied. Julie assured the committee that the sign bylaws are NOT being re-written but rather it is an effort to clarify the existing rules.

Catherine suggested we connect with other town staffers (e.g., Kristen Guichard) to coordinate EDC planning activities in the future.

EDC Priorities for 2022-2023 in Context

Julie made a presentation on the mission, vision, and goals for the town's economic development department.

Please see the full presentation in the repository linked at the end of these minutes.

The plan acknowledges the need for growth and the need to stop the erosion of the commercial tax base (now less than 10%) of the town budget.

One theme that came out of the discussion about Julie's plan is the need to better articulate the role of the EDC and to raise the visibility and status of the committee as an advocate for the business community. This should include the promotion of existing businesses and contributions they make to the Acton community.

By being proactive around the Select Board's objectives and achieving better coordination with other town committees and staff, the EDC can facilitate better planning that does not ignore the needs of the business community but rather supports their growth and development. The liaison between Fran and Catherine is seen as a key link to facilitate this communication and planning.

The Select Board drives the master plan for the town (which is required by state law) and should provide direction for where the EDC can advocate and shape the strategic direction of the bylaws.

Anne feels the bylaws, which create the framework for businesses in town, could be improved if an "Advisory Board" of the key knowledgeable stakeholders (legal, developers, engineers, regulatory etc.) were given a seat at the table to form rationale bylaws that meet the needs of all stakeholders.

To summarize, Julie asked the committee to focus on settings goals that complement the following objectives:

- Supporting Businesses
- Supporting the Work Force
- Supporting the Quality of Life

The EDC brainstormed on some immediate ideas that align with these goals:

These included:

Raising the stature of businesses in town – promote what businesses already do to support the town – e.g., WECO is an active contributor to the Acton Food Pantry. This should include further promulgation of business contributions to the schools, sports programs and community events.

Focus on the ease of doing business with the town – this includes the introduction of enterprise level software that supports permitting and licensing from the town. It also includes more operational and digital support (e.g., online business directories) to enable businesses to thrive.

Expanded infrastructure (water and sewer) that enables existing businesses to grow and sets the stage to attract other businesses that want to come to Acton. This is a prerequisite to attract new growth industries to town (life science).

Leverage historical assets – promote and capitalize on the rich history of Acton to attract visitors that will support our local businesses.

Transportation programs – establish a transportation system that will bring workers from adjacent communities to help with staffing workers for our businesses.

Identify development opportunities – document land and properties that can be offered to commercial investment.

Listen to businesses – survey the businesses on their greatest challenges in doing business in Acton.

Establish a strong quality of space – successful communities create vibrant downtown environments where people want to be.

Create a business-friendly environment where people want to do business and then identify and support entrepreneurs.

Catherine has asked that all EDC members think through what the priorities for the EDC should be and come prepared to prioritize among many possible goals in the September meeting.

Updates from Economic Development Director

- **Great Road Pop Up Sessions** – There are 2 sessions planned to obtain input on Great Road improvement projects (11 to 2PM on Saturday, July 9 at the Gould Plaza and Brookside Shops). Julie encouraged members to stop by. Flyer is provided in the document repository (link at the end of the minutes).
- **Bruce Freeman Rail Trail Wayfinding Project** – final decisions and commitment on the placement of the signage are being completed.
- **Stimulate Creative Economy with Public Art** - Artist stipends have been committed - seeking approval from commercial vendors to place the public art.
- **Online Business Directory** - The Town of Acton seeks funding to create an Acton Business Directory to showcase our local businesses and make it easy for those who live or work in Town to find the entertainment, products and services they need.

Interns have started to verify information from businesses to be included in the directory.

- **The Acton Business Incubator** - The Town of Acton is seeking funding to establish a Business Incubator program which provides technical assistance and grants to new businesses and existing businesses that are struggling to recover post-pandemic. 17 businesses are getting funding through this program.
- **Kelly Corner Block Party** - Planning a block party before construction begins in the fall – event will be staged in former Kmart parking lot. Need to engage with businesses and to advertise “Acton Day”
- **Permitting Software** – committee formed and a Request for Information (RFI) has been issued to 4 vendors
- **Store Front Matching Program** – funds to support 2 projects has been secured, providing a \$10,000 tax refund for participating businesses.

Member Updates:

Mike reminded the committee of the need for a group to take ownership of planning the 250th anniversary of April 19, 1775. Fran said that this is one of the short term goals identified by the Select Board.

Mike suggested that the town should recognize the upcoming 100th anniversary of Haartz, a major employer and valuable corporate citizen.

Request of Support for RapsCALLION Regarding Parking Challenges

The committee discussed Peter Daniel’s request of support from the EDC in obtaining greater parking capacity for RapsCALLION. More than 3,000 people have signed a petition to support RapsCALLION. While the EDC fully supports the business and wants it to remain in Acton, it is not clear what specific action the committee can take at this point. Julie met with Peter and discussed potential solutions. The specific location of the restaurant, which contributes to its popularity, also constrains the owner’s ability to expand parking capacity. In addition to physical space issues, there are health and safety issues that make the problem more complicated.

Adjourn – 9:15 p.m

Reference materials for this meeting can be found at <http://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/View/Collection-15319>

Action Items Identified in this Meeting:

- Catherine will send written condolences to Larry Kenah’s widow from the Committee.

- Catherine will connect with each member individually to confirm information about his/her membership and training status.
- Catherine, Julie, and Fran will coordinate with the town clerk's office to establish a correct, official record of membership data.
- Catherine will draft a new description for the EDC to be published on the town website. Members will provide feedback in time to have a good draft at the next meeting in September.

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