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EDC Minutes – 7 February 2013

These are the meeting minutes from the Economic Development Committee (EDC) of the Town of Acton, Massachusetts. The meeting took place on 7 February 2013 at the Acton Town Hall.

The meeting was called to order shortly after 7:30 by Nancy Dinkel.

Present: Allan Gulliver, Chris Pappas, Dave Clough, David Didriksen, Derrick Chin, Dick Calandrella, Larry Kenah, Nancy Dinkel

Missing: Ann Chang, Doug Tindal

Roland Bartl, Planning Director for the Town of Acton, joined us to talk about the Planning Department with special emphasis on issues that the committee has dealt with over the past year.

Minutes from the meeting of 17 January 2013 were approved.

Conversations with Roland

Over the course of the meeting, Roland and the committee talked about several areas of common interest. These minutes attempt to group the conversations by topic.

- Ease of doing business
- Acton 2020
- Sign enforcement, especially temporary signs

Ease of Doing Business

A recurrent theme in the entire conversation was the ease (or difficulty) for someone to establish or maintain a business in Acton.

Current State

Roland reminded the committee that the primary focus of town employees is existing laws, especially zoning bylaws and sign bylaws. (A later section of these minutes talks about some specific items related to signs.)

Roland pointed out that the town does not know all of the businesses operating in town. Someone speculated that incorporation with the state might allow businesses to bypass the town. There were no good suggestions about how we might remedy this lack of complete information.

Future Plans and Suggestions

There is a plan to transform the business facing left hand side of town hall to follow the lead of the right hand side with more open space and people who can answer the first set of questions that a prospective business owner will ask. Committee members made some additional suggestions.

- There needs to be a single desk (“one stop shopping”) that will deal with a business owner’s initial visit to town hall.
- People want to speak with a person who can answer questions.
- Business owners need an ombudsman.
 - Is this a role for the EDC?
- We need a set of triage questions that will help guide various business owners only to the departments that they must deal with. This questionnaire should be posted as well as existing as a physical document.
 - As an example, neither a software development office nor a clothing retailer would need approval from the Board of Health.

It is not yet clear who leads this effort but several people suggested that we get “the pros” involved with guiding new businesses through the various approval processes. These would include contractors, realtors, and sign makers.

The recent arrival of Johnny Rockets was an example of both good news and bad news.

- Large companies with experience in opening new sites know how to deal with roadblocks.
- Smaller businesses, especially first timers, struggle with some of the unexpected details.

Acton 2020

(These minutes are being published after the 7 March 2020 meeting and one or two points may have been superseded with what happened at that meeting.)

Roland provided a preview of the Acton 2020 meeting of 7 March 2013. Steve Cecil, principal of the Cecil Group, will make a presentation in a public forum about the current focus of Acton 2020 on Kelley’s Corner. The EDC has been paying much attention to Acton 2020 in recent months and most members chose to attend the Acton 2020 Forum rather than to meet as a committee.

Roland asked that the EDC look at the Acton 2020 goals as they pertain to economic development.

In later conversations, Dave Clough pointed out that Celia Kent from Acton 2020 had recently presented to the Design Review Board (DRB). In Dave’s opinion, Acton 2020 is making progress in answering some of the questions raised by several of the town boards and committees.

Roland made a couple of additional observations about Acton 2020.

- Someone needs to take the first step.
- Acton 2020 is fully aware that the town does not own any of the land that makes up Kelley’s Corner and that owners of the land must be involved in conversations and plans going forward.
- In the context of Acton 2020, Roland pointed out that zoning is focusing on developments with locally higher population density.

Dave Clough mentioned one of the DRB recommendations, that Acton 2020 hire an external project manager before it goes forward with its MassWorks request. Dave indicated that the DRB recommendations were not unexpected. Roland mostly agrees with the DRB recommendations.

Signs

Roland talked about sign bylaws in general.

- For signs in the historic districts, the Planning Department only responds to complaints.
- For the rest of the town, Scott Mutch visits each “area” about one per month.

Roland pointed out that most sign issues are related to temporary signs. This led to a focused discussion on temporary sign permits and the signs themselves.

Temporary Signs

Roland described the most recent temporary sign issue, the grand opening of Johnny Rockets. Temporary signs were scattered all around town. At first, he and his department were prepared to leave the signs alone but this prompted a heated response from other retailers who asked why one business would “get a pass” while everyone else had to comply.

Dave Didriksen used his own experience with a Terry Francona appearance at his store to make several points about the temporary sign process. In particular, he learned about the visit on short notice and wanted to quickly publicize the event.

- The temporary sign process is burdensome.
- A retailer must fill out a 4-page form for each temporary sign event.
- The application requires the signature of the landlord, sometimes a real burden when the landlord is located out of state and not immediately accessible.
 - Roland mentioned that this requirement happened almost by accident.
 - It needs to be changed at town meeting and so is too late for this year but he supports making the change for next year.
- Some people view the regulations as so hard that they ignore them.

Sign Pamphlet

The sign pamphlet developed by Derrick Chin with help from Scott Mutch is now available in a couple of places at Town Hall but is not yet available on the town Web site. Roland indicated that this will happen but that the town IT Department was at the time experiencing a backlog of projects.

Roland and Regular EDC Meetings

At the end of the meeting, everyone agreed that the conversation with Roland was especially valuable for several reasons but that two stand out.

- Roland was able to provide the town’s perspective on several issues that allowed the committee to get a more balanced understanding of these issues.
- Roland took away several action items that he could begin to work on immediately rather than waiting for the issues to wind their way through sometimes inefficient communication channels.
 - An example of this is the requirement for a landlord’s signature on the application for a temporary sign permit.

Agenda Items

Customer Service Focus

We covered this item in the context of the lengthy discussion with Roland.

HDC and Signs

- No HDC bylaw changes were submitted to town meeting.
- Dick Calandrella did not attend the most recent HDC meeting (as of 7 February).
- The HDC operates under town bylaws so the town could propose changes.

Ease of Doing Business

- The recently appointed subcommittee will operate under the goal of making it easier to start and maintain a business in Acton.
- We will incorporate the suggestion of triage questions one approach for delivering recommendations.

In Closing

- Is there an opening on EDC?
 - Nancy indicated that there is someone who would like to join EDC.

The meeting adjourned at 10:05.