



Economic Development Committee Minutes

2 September 2021

7:00 pm

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

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 9/2/21, held in person at town hall.

Called to Order: 7:03 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Ann Chang, Larry Kenah, David Cote (attended part of the meeting by phone), Derrick Chin (by Zoom), Shirley Ming, Dan Malloy, Catherine Usoff, Fran Arsenault (Select Board Liaison)

Guest: John Mangiaratti, Town Manager

Members Absent: Peter Daniel, David Didriksen

Preliminaries

Call the Roll

Welcome and Introductions

John M. introduced himself as town manager, has been here for about 3 years. Most excited about bringing in a new director of economic development. The new director's office will be physically located near the town manager's office, but John expects this person to be out of the office frequently, promoting business and working with state, federal, and regional partners. There are some good candidates and he hopes to have someone on board by Thanksgiving.

Members of the committee introduced themselves to John.

I. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings
 - 5 August 2021 – approved unanimously by members present at the meeting.
- Public participation - none

II. New/Special Business

- John Mangiaratti Visits the EDC

Larry summarized some of the EDC discussion about the director's position from the previous meeting. We talked about characteristics of new ED director and his/her ability to interact effectively with the business community. One of the challenges is the number of empty storefronts, while another (different) challenge is attracting big businesses to the town. The town needs to decide how we want to approach big companies, and whether we want to target specific industries. The skill sets the new director needs to have include working with current businesses and with those that want to come in to the town.

Mike gave an example of a company that was given some financial incentives to locate in Acton with the stipulation that they do a certain amount of hiring. The company struggled to meet the requirement. The town worked with them to stimulate interest and identify training for jobs at the company and in the end, the situation worked out well. Mike also expressed his desire that someone from the EDC be involved in the hiring process for the new director.

John M. has invited Larry to participate in the process (as chair of the committee). Larry will seek input from the committee to inform his participation.

John M. reiterated that the emphasis of the ED Director's job is to be out of the office, talking to businesses, offices at the state and regional levels. Having a dedicated person to focus on development will be a huge asset.

Dan asked John how the EDC could best support the new director, and what John wants to see the committee do?

John responded that the EDC's major role is advocacy. Having expertise and perspective from the members is important. The EDC should help the community see why ED initiatives are important and why they should be supported. Development is one of the special interests that could be better represented in town. All employees who work for John have goals from the select board, but also have individual goals for their roles and departments. The EDC can provide advocacy for things the director is already trying to do as a result of their specified goals and provide input regarding other things that EDC thinks town should be doing more of. The LRRP (Local Rapid Recovery Program) is a good example. The LRRP work will result in some projects that the EDC can consider getting behind to help make them successful.

Larry (EDC representative to the LRRP) said that the town will see a first draft of the report from the LRRP team on September 10. Deadline for submission to the state is October 8. In the beginning of the LRRP discussions, sewers came up and the topic was initially dismissed, but now sewers are back on the list as one of the 4 proposals. Sewers seem to be at the top of the list for things businesses need.

Ann heard that Concord is going to dig up 2A to put a water pipe in. John said maybe it is part of the treatment plant work. Ann suggested that Acton could benefit from the work that Concord is already planning to do.

John M. suggested that the EDC could be helpful in advocating for expansion of sewers in Acton. At town meeting, restrictions were put on the proposal to update the sewer plant, preventing the addition of new capacity as part of the update. Previous attempts to add sewers have been voted down. A primary issue seems to be the cost and how the cost is passed on to property owners. Perhaps with the support of the sewer expert that was brought in for the LRRP work, we can explore alternative ways to fund the sewer work so it will be more acceptable to the citizens.

With regard to town meeting votes and their impact on economic development, Mike said that the recent proposal to put a moratorium on natural gas for new construction could have serious unintended consequences. HAARTZ Corp is very concerned about the implication for them. We could lose some businesses in town because of this.

Dan asked if John thinks we will get more revenue from dealing with the federal and state governments or should the new director spend time trying to get more big businesses in town (like biotech). We need to continue to support small businesses, but the real money coming into town will come from larger businesses. Where will John tell the new director to focus?

John explained that we already go after federal and state money now and we will continue to do that. The Kelley's Corner project (that includes federal money) will have a big positive impact on development in the area. Biotech requires a lot of water and that is always a big issue for Acton. We have to work with what we have and there are opportunities to build out the tax base that way. Another big thing is the American Rescue Plan Act, which will provide money to cities and towns across country to help with effects of the pandemic and problems that existed before hand. The town will be soliciting ideas from the community for projects that could be funded through the Act. One idea they are considering is offering grants to businesses to help reduce our carbon footprint. If businesses are interested in converting to more sustainable energy use, the grants could provide money to do that.

As an aside, John shared some good news. There is a business (X Golf) interested in locating in the old Pier 1 space on 2A. X Golf provides a golf simulation experience, and the facility serves food and drinks, similar to a bowling alley environment.

Another issue that has prevented development is that some companies (e.g., Asian Market) can't get employees. It is mostly a timing issue (related to COVID unemployment relief payments), and hopefully not a more general town related issue.

When things go before the select board, there are different interest groups that will go and talk about their own perspectives. The EDC should be presenting and/or writing up a memo. There is a public hearing in October regarding the X Golf proposal. Fran will send the date to the EDC.

There was some discussion about the fact that many important issues are decided at the town meeting where extreme (and possibly minority) views are represented. Is there a way to get some of the economic development related issues on a ballot so that more Acton citizens can be involved in the decision process?

Larry said that one of the reasons the sewer proposals have failed is because of the way Acton assesses for it. If the sewer runs by the business or home (regardless of whether you hook up to the line), you have to pay for part of it. We need to figure out a better way to fund sewers in town. Ann wants to meet with the LRRP subject matter expert for sewers (Emily Innes).

Derrick said that there will be a sewer discussion meeting of the LRRP group on Tuesday, September 7. It will probably be a Microsoft Teams meeting. Derrick attended an LRRP meeting about wayfinding yesterday (Kristen Guichard and David Martin were there). Derrick found that it was one step forward and two steps backward since the consulting group (Beta Group) didn't seem to bring the Subject Matter Expert (SME) up to speed before the meeting.

Catherine asked how the EDC could best engage with the LRRP process. John suggested that the committee should read the draft report (due to come out on September 10) and provide input to him and the select board.

- Working Group Reports
 - 50 Nagog Park

Dan – JLL is in negotiations with one tenant for the entire building. Jamie Lipscomb won't give Dan any details about it, but says they are close. John said that the town is getting records requests which indicate activity for the parcel. It seems that they will not be asking for tax incentives, which would be good.

Dan asked if we should be trying to find other properties to market in town, create a brochure with properties we could advertise to biotech firms like Lexington did. If we are going to build a marketing plan, who are we marketing to, and what is our objective? Wherever we think we are going to get revenue should be a focus. Insulet is growing and doing well, are there opportunities for them to grow here?

John mentioned that the sewer extension in the Powdermill area (related to housing complex), could provide potential for economic redevelopment in that area. Housing project is going forward, but is delayed. John hopes they will get started up again by spring.

Ann mentioned the Grace property. There are access issues, but that is the only other large property available in town.

Fran asked if there is a place on the town website to list available properties. John answered that right now the town website links to a third party site (LoopNet) that lists available sites.

- Business Inventory

We have a bunch of different databases, but what do we do with this list? Dan asked how we expect businesses to find properties. There is a list the state provides of vacant properties, but is it up to date? We could compare it against the inventory we have compiled and see if it seems current.

- Economic Development Strategic Plan

The subgroup has done some research (looking at other towns' strategic plans, talking to local businesses, etc.) and they look forward to working with new director.

- Local Rapid Recovery Program (LRRP)

Larry reported that the LRRP group has identified four areas for future projects:

- 1 – Bruce Freeman Rail Trail wayfinding signage
- 2 – Great Road wayfinding signs and place making (primarily for people driving down 2A)
- 3 – Shared marketing
- 4 – Expanding municipal sewer system (different models include putting in sewers for only business use).

The LRRP group is holding final meetings with SMEs this week and next week. The initial report will be posted on September 10 for public comments. EDC can discuss the report at our next meeting and provide input.

- South Acton (Prospect Street, Maple Street, High Street)

Ann will follow up with the Prospect Street project. There is not much going on with the Maple Street project right now. There will be a presentation soon on the High Street project, where the Select Board is dealing with tree replacements.

III. More Regular Business

- Updates from members
- Next meetings

A future agenda item was proposed related to adding new members to the EDC, in light of Josh's departure. We should have a current business owner on the committee.

- 16 September 2021

The committee should discuss the draft LRRP plan at that meeting. Larry will arrange to get the draft to the EDC committee in time to review before the meeting.

- 7 October
- How often to meet through the end of the year? Probably meet twice a month through the end of the year.

IV. Consent Items NONE

Adjourn meeting – 8:42 p.m.

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