



Economic Development Committee Minutes
3 February 2023
12:00 PM

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 2/3/23, held virtually via Zoom.

Called to Order: 12:10 pm

EDC Members Present: Catherine Usoff, Dan Malloy, David Didriksen, Mike Majors, Shirley Ming

Also present: Julie Pierce, Fran Arsenault

Public Participation: Michael Carpenter, Patty Sutherland, James Fuccione

Members Absent: Ann Chang, David Cote

Preliminaries

Call the Roll – attendance is noted above

The preamble about the open meeting requirements was read which define rules of participation for Zoom participants. The version of the preamble read was the one developed for Town of Acton Board and Committees, “Script for Remotely Conducted Meetings.”

1. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings

6 January 2023, minutes were approved by all members in attendance.

Public Introductions: Patty Sutherland and Mike Carpenter introduced themselves to the EDC members highlighting their professional background and current affiliation with the Town of Acton. The EDC members reciprocated by providing background on their role with the EDC and their other professional activities. Patty and Mike are being considered for membership with the EDC.

2. New/Special Business

Proposed Town Meeting Warrant Article

Catherine opened the meeting by providing background and a summary of the content of the

current proposed warrant article to be presented to the Select Board on February 6, 2023. She explained that the objective is to get support from the Select Board to endorse the warrant at the town meeting and to give more prominence to the role of economic development in future town planning.

There was a brief discussion about the two options (citizen petition versus select board endorsed) for advancing a warrant at town meeting. In the end, the consensus was that seeking Select Board endorsement makes sense and it would give it more credibility at the town meeting. If the Select Board does not endorse the warrant, we could always fall back to a citizen's petition.

Catherine and Fran both encouraged EDC members to attend the Select Board meeting and/or send an email to the town manager and Select Board members in support of the warrant. The more voices that are heard prior to the meeting will strengthen the case for endorsement.

Mike raised the issue of what the cost would be if the town engaged in a business development planning process. The group agreed it was premature to try and put a dollar figure without a meaningful exercise to develop a strategy and plan and determine what resources would be required (which the warrant would enable). Eventually, expenditures will need to be presented to the Select Board but it is premature for this level of detail.

Catherine commented that the current budget cycle (2023) which will be approved at town meeting is mostly set for the next fiscal year, so realistically we are targeting resources from the next fiscal budget as required. The planning process can start with existing resources with a limited upfront financial commitment and establish what would be required to advance the initiative.

Julie highlighted a parallel process that the non-binding sustainability warrant went through and then came back as a more formal plan after it had been researched by town staff.

Promoting Town Meeting

Catherine shared a conversation with a local business that offered to share information (e.g., a flyer with a summary of the warrant) with customers to get residents to attend town meeting and to voice their support. There remains concern that the light attendance of town residents enables a small vocal minority to dominate the town agenda and strategic priorities.

David was skeptical that businesses would want to engage with customers about town warrants. While he is supportive of the effort to raise the visibility of local businesses, he does not believe this is a tactic businesses will embrace.

Patty Sutherland raised the possibility that businesses could actively promote the town meeting and the potential impact of the economic development warrant as part of their standard social media marketing efforts. They have an existing communication channel that could be leveraged to raise awareness to the importance to local businesses.

Mike Carpenter pointed out that comprehensive economic development planning goes beyond just attracting new businesses but also supports retaining and developing existing businesses that are already a vibrant part of our community. The group acknowledged that Julie has really advanced the town's efforts on this front.

James Fuccione pointed out that existing property owners with vacancies will welcome and support the town's effort to bring a more tangible plan to assist in filling their vacant stores.

Dave felt it was important to emphasize that expanding the commercial tax (both new and expanding existing) is a direct benefit to Acton residents and can provide economic relief from the high residential tax base. The goal from of the warrant is to put the town in a position to maintain and possibly lower residential property taxes. Catherine, Shirley and Patty agreed and highlighted that by staying focused on revenue growth we can advance the town priorities and initiatives without further burdening the residents. Dan committed to emphasizing this point in the presentation to the Select Board.

Draft of EDC section of 2022 Annual Town Report

Catherine provided the members with a draft of the EDC section of the annual town report. There were not many comments. The document Catherine prepared was endorsed by the EDC with a suggestion to include the goals for 2023, including that of expanding the commercial tax base so that future residential property taxes will be lower.

Projects and initiatives requiring active EDC member engagement AND Updates from Economic Development Director

Julie called out two upcoming events that EDC members could attend in support of local businesses.

- Ribbon Cutting at KJ's Caffé (2/17 @ noon to 1PM) 145 Great Road, Acton MA
- Squash West (new owner has remodeled the business) Student Squash Club Final Season Match & Celebration of Inaugural Season (2/11 @ 1PM to 4PM)

Be sure to RSVP to Julie early if you want to attend.

Julie was also encouraging attendance at the Select Board meeting on Monday since there were several other topics (license for the farmers market, lighting in West Acton, proposal for the old civil defense building) beyond the proposed warrant that were relevant for economic development.

Julie is sponsoring the Acton Business Tour (which is being funded through a grant from a MA Compact grant) on 2/7 which is in support of creating a "Acton How to Do Business Guide." The visits will inform the content of the guide that will be developed in 2023. These sessions will give local leaders insight into the challenges faced by the business community in Acton.

Finally, the planning director will attend the next EDC meeting and give background on how they operate. The planning department is also introducing "Office Hours" which is a drop in opportunity to engage with the planning department staff (starts 1/9/23), every Monday from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Update from Members -Catherine

South Acton Vision and Planning Advisory Group

Catherine highlighted the outstanding job the planning department did in hosting 4 sessions on the history and options for the future for the South Acton Village. The events were well attended, and community interest and support were strong. One issue that was raised by a church group was concern for how the existing parking on School Street would be handle with the planning.

Finally, the committee will continue to meet via Zoom and we are planning for March 10th at noon if we can get a quorum. The schedule of the first Friday of the month at noon will be shifted for just this month.

Adjourn – 1:40 p.m.

Action Items Identified in this Meeting:

Dan will present the warrant proposal at the Select Board meeting on Monday 2/6.

- EDC members will write to the Select Board and town manager voicing their support for the proposed warrant.
- Catherine will finalize and submit the 2022 EDC town report, incorporating the committee's new goals.
- Fran and EDC members will actively recruit for new members for the EDC

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