

**ASHBURNHAM ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES**

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**13 March 2017 - 6:30pm
Public Safety Building - Training Room**

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PRESENT: Bill Johnson, Chair, Christina Sargent, Chris McNabb, Leo Janssens II, John Enright, Rosemarie Eldridge Meissner, Vice Chair, Jaclyn Wooding, Secretary, Joseph Kalagher, Deb Gardner (Missing: Ronald Putnam)

- 1) OPENING REMARKS - Bill Johnson opened the meeting, 6:33pm.

- 2) BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT TARGETS - Johnson passed out sheets prepared by Meissner containing business engagement targets. She explains we will be asking similar questions to the ones we were asked during our visioning exercise: What is our story? What are our values? What is our vision for Ashburnham? List is prioritized into Brick and Mortar first, downtown and South Ash. One driver we are looking at is visitor spending versus what people in the town are spending. Entertainment, recreation, retail, food and beverage, accommodations. Second round is service spending: banking, insurance, health care, legal services, real estate, auto repair, education. Manufacturing also has a presence, but will be third round. Fourth round will be home-based businesses. Meissner then gave a review of two businesses that have had interviews: Ashburnham Hardware and All Tuned Up, both on Main St. Responses have been similar to our own commission results, and business owners seemed happy to engage. Meeting attendee Joanne of Ashburnham Hardware mentions that when they heard the commission speak about business engagements at the meetings, they realized they felt much of the same things, and wanted to be one of the first interviews. Joann and Richie were happy to show Meissner their vision for the store. Meissner mentions that Creative Connections, Donna's Barber Shop and Dave Hearne, both of Ashburnham Wine and Spirits and of Hearne Reality, were all looking forward to speaking with the commission. Some early results show that some of the things businesses have had trouble with are permitting, politics in town, approvals, the feeling of certain rules for certain people. Business owners would like to see Ashburnham be more business friendly, pedestrian friendly, have more gathering places - things like outdoor checkers and places to bring dogs, more restaurants, encourage tourism with hiking or biking locations, maybe a breakfast place or a brewery. Some other things business owners do not like are the local forces that oppose change.

- 3) CONTINUING COMMUNITY OUTREACH - A discussion continues on ways of engaging businesses. Gardner mentions that the town of North River, NY has a monthly business breakfast, where owners come together, share ideas and problems. A discussion ensues regarding town-owned property and whether it can be sold. Johnson says that the town cannot technically sell property, so that question will have to be asked of the TA and BOS. Enright asks about a multi-family unit on Main St currently for sale. He mentions it has a bad foundation, and other problems. It is currently zoned residential, and he questions the process of changing the zoning to commercial. Johnson says it would have to be raised at a town meeting, and that it would take a

minimum of six months. Sargent adds that the Historical review could add up to a six month delay. There would be the application for a demo permit, along with a fee, then the Historical Commission has 14 days to evaluate the plan, and then determine whether to decide then or delay. She mentions Brandon Funeral Home as an example of a business that came to the Historical Commission ahead of time, to discuss their plans before moving forward. McNabb asks what makes it easier and/or faster - going to the Historical Commission first, or pulling the permit first? The answer is the timing is the same. Johnson asks how can we expand the business district in downtown. McNabb asks if we have a list of properties on the historical list. Sargent says we do. One thing Sargent would like to see is town hall be open on Friday. She mentions that as a real estate agent, it is very difficult to get certain filings in place, if the town hall is closed on what is a very busy day. Richie Wright mentions that he would be willing to host events at his shop, such as a shop within a shop. Meissner adds that Adam from All Tuned Up would love to see Ashburnham become more of a biking community. He would like to see the rail trail be worked on and have access. Johnson closes up this discussion by asking the members who is comfortable engaging businesses - as he understands some people may not be comfortable with it. Meissner suggests that each member go with her to an engagement or two before going out on their own.

4) COMMUNITY FACELIFT - SIGNS

Gardner has prepared and passed around info packets on some sign research. She went around town, took photos, looked at current signs. She suggests we should set guidelines, and that we might want a new playground sign, and things like that. She mentions that the white MassDOT sign coming into town from Winchendon on Route 12 still has spray paint on it, making it look like "Cashburnham." How do we get that changed or fixed? Suggests we keep with a green theme, and maybe make the "welcome to" part of the signs bigger. She mentions that we should be careful of how many businesses we add to signs, being careful not to have them be too busy. A discussion is had about where directional signage should go. McNabb mentions we should have a kiosk in the parking lot, with map handouts of area attractions. Maybe between Athol Bank and Creative Connections. Enright asks if the old railroad is the rail trail. Yes it is. So we need to think about having parking for it. Gardner moves on to signs that change, such as town hall signs announcing elections, meeting and parades, should look a lot nicer than they do. A discussion is had regarding which types of signs to do first. McNabb and Enright both suggest the welcome signs should be a priority. Enright asks if the municipal building has to pull a permit. McNabb asks about Cushing art department helping with sign design. Gardner says Bob is leaving Cushing soon, so we may have to wait for the new art department head to ask that. Johnson mentions that Monty Tech has done signs for the town in the past. It is mentioned that we should maybe add signs on the Historic houses.

BANNERS - Wooding wants to put in a call to Mike Rivers at the light department to ask about the banner brackets used for the 250th celebration. The AMLP owns brackets, but they may be on loan to the town of Ashby. Lyman Signs was the company used for those banners. Meissner asks if we should get some stock spring banners going to start, to get the town spiffed up, and then move on towards sponsored banners later. Sargent asks how funding works for our plans. Johnson says we would make a request to the BOS to be on their meeting agenda, and then present the request at the meeting for the planned budget. It is asked if the DPW can help with the signs. Johnson says if the BOS and the TA wants something to go through certain departments, then they have to go along with it. Enright asks if we have looked into exact spaces for banners. Wooding says we should start with the lamp posts on Main St and possibly expand.

ADOPT-A-SPACE PROGRAM - Johnson has prepared a rough draft of the Beautification of Town Space Policy. He says the TA will ultimately write the policy, but this is a start. One idea would be that the spaces be on a first come, first served basis. The other idea would be an annual lottery. The rough draft has been shown to the TA. Meissner mentions that some towns will even provide the mulch and top soil for these areas. High St would be one example of an available space. Johnson asks members to bring ideas for locations to next meeting.

5) PUBLIC COMMENT - Kalagher asks visiting property owners Lori and Florence Saccone of Fitchburg if they have any comments. Lori mentions that when her family first looked to open their restaurant in town years ago they were enthusiastic, but were not treated well. She is thinking of starting a committee soon and developing their property on Maple Ave. They plan to do a similar thing as last time, except for the fine dining. They want to develop a farmers' market and a catering business.

6) OLD BUSINESS - Johnson passes around a copy of the Johnny Appleseed guide to attractions in the area. Notes that there are only a couple of things in there in Ashburnham. Meissner thinks there may be some money in the state tourism department that could be applied for. Johnson gives an update about discussions with the TA about a town planner. It is not in the cards at this time, for a part time or full time planner. TA is planning to put together a proposal for a planner contract with a planning company like MRPC to hire someone on a consulting basis. That money would come out of the AEDC funds the first year. Enright asks if they can come to our meeting to tell us how we are doing, and what we should be doing that we are not already. Kalagher says the planning part is different - that there is no money from the state to fix any of it. He says nothing is organized, nothing is filed right, they are so far behind. McNabb asks what is the downside to having a planning consultant, would it be less costly. Johnson says we would not have someone at our disposal at all times. Meissner agrees with Enright - can they visit us directly? Janssens thinks they will sit and talk with us at no charge. Johnson discusses that Mass Development has many resources to help us and the community to not take missteps. For example if we set a site as an Economic Development Zone, it helps us move forward. He tells us about a recent trip to the Orange Innovation Center. Our TA had called the Orange TA to put him in touch with the director. The site is an old mattress factory. It has been divided up and has many different businesses in it now. They worked with Mass Development to get funding for paving. There is a gym, brewery, spa and packaging store, among others. He went to Wooding's facility on Maple Ave to take a look at their older mill building, currently used for storage. He also looked at the old Lombard's building in South Ash as well. He mentions that other towns have links to sites like Mass Development right on their websites. Meissner brings up Wooding's building, saying if they want to sell it, can we go to developers and say these are the things we are looking for to come to town? McNabb suggests we have less control over what developers want to do. Saccone interjects that she bought the factory in question on Maple Ave, and lost it years ago. Johnson says we should keep things at the meeting positive, and to not keep bringing up old problems - that we are working on moving forward. Johnson tells the group he went to a planning board meeting, and has reached out to the chairman and hasn't heard back. Kalagher mentions that the previous TA had removed funding for seminars. Johnson brings up the TV studio issue, asks if we are ready to be in front of cameras. He has second thoughts about the studio space - not big enough and access issues. McNabb says we made the decision, he was tasked with getting the space, and now

Johnson has made the decision not to move forward. Enright thinks people need to see what we are doing and to know what goes on. McNabb is worried about credibility problems with the town. It is decided to bring the issue to a vote. Enright votes yes, McNabb votes yes we should be translucent, Leo votes no, Meissner votes no, worries it would impede creative process, Wooding votes no, suggesting we are at a fact-finding stage right now, and maybe when the group is cohesive and are structured would be a better time, Sargent votes no, and also suggests we limit meetings to two hours, Gardner votes no, would like to see our paths chosen and defined first. Johnson tells the group our update will be presented at the next BOS meeting. All are welcome to attend. Kalagher mentions we can't stop anyone from recording the meetings, thinks we're fine. Sargent makes a motion to table the conversation until at least another month. Enright seconds the motion. Motion passed 8-1-0 (McNabb opposed)

Johnson tells group that Thursday he and the TA are appearing before the MRPC panel to pitch for funding. McNabb asked that we get their advice, and can we discuss that at next meeting.

- 7) FUTURE MEETING SCHEDULE - Next meeting is planned for Monday, March 27, 6:30, Public Safety Building Training Room.
- 8) ADJOURNMENT - Motion to adjourn by Gardner to adjourn, seconded by Wooding. All in favor. Meeting adjourned 9:02pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Jaclyn Wooding, Secretary