

Economic Development Committee

Thursday, February 27, 2014 7:00 PM
Old Library, 5 Fairbank St., Harvard MA

MINUTES

Members Present: Jim Stevens, Chairman, Rich Maiore, Vice Chairman, Duncan Chapman,
Elaine Lazarus, Peter Warren

Members Absent: Christopher Sintros

Present: Joe Hutchinson and Lucy Wallace, Master Plan Steering Committee

1. Town Meeting Warrant Article – Grocery Store Size

Mr. Stevens noted that at the last meeting the EDC voted to submit a placeholder for a warrant article to increase the maximum size of a grocery store in the C District. He stated the intent was to increase the size so that a grocery store can express serious interest in locating in Harvard. He added that two chains have definite interest, and if they can't do something soon there won't be a grocery store here.

Ms. Wallace stated it would be good to know where people in Harvard shop and why. Mr. Warren stated that people who attended forums and filled out surveys stated they wanted a grocery store. Ms. Wallace stated that in the past people have been ambivalent, and it is hard to locate a grocery store here. Mr. Hutchinson stated that the master plan phase 1 report which analyzed the surveys, stated that North Harvard residents were concerned, so it is a divisive issue. He suggested that a mini-charette on how to configure the C District with respect to mitigation of impacts might be helpful. He stated that at the last Planning Board meeting, Town Counsel explained the process for submitting a zoning article, and the Planning Board decided not to pursue this issue until the master plan is done. Mr. Stevens stated that Hannaford has said it is not interested unless they can have a 40,000 sq. ft. store, and they are at the point where they need to make a decision about what to do with the Ayer store. Ms. Wallace stated she would like to know what the level of daily traffic going by the site needs to be before stores are interested. It was noted that the gas station developer who attended a recent meeting indicated that the traffic volume on Rt. 110 is high.

Mr. Chapman arrived at this time.

2. Master Plan Steering Committee Informational Questions

Mr. Hutchinson stated they are engaging boards to obtain information that will be used in preparation of the master plan. He referred to the five priority issues identified in phase 1 and asked how they impact the committee's goals and vision over the next 5 to 10 years.

The Committee stated the zoning bylaw should be changed to allow for grocery stores to come into town, as just discussed. The Committee stated that streamlined permitting and a permitting process that is prompt and predictable, not in the outcome, but in the manner of process, would also be important. The Committee stated that conversations with business owners have indicated

that they feel that the Town is not business-friendly.

Ms. Wallace asked if this would be something similar to the ZBA process for a 40B public hearing where several departments come together for a meeting. It was indicated that this might be a component of it, but it is the approach to the whole process that is the problem. When developers come into a town they want to understand where the town is coming from, and whether it is interested in development. They want to know if the project is viable early on – if it is not, they will move on and that's ok. The Committee thought the interest and the visit by the gas station proponent recently was good, because it was the first time a company has come to the EDC and it was a good discussion about Harvard's commercial market.

In response to a question, the Committee noted its mission was drafted in response to the surveys of residents where they indicated they wanted certain uses, including a grocery store and a restaurant, in the C District.

Mr. Hutchinson asked if the Town had a planning department that handles community and economic development would it make a difference, such as what is occurring in surrounding towns. It was stated that a planner can pull together all the people that a developer wants to talk to – and if the town also has a master plan that expresses what it wants, then the planner and the Boards have a clear direction/mandate that it can impart to a proponent. The Committee noted that now that the Town has hired a planner, the position can serve in this role.

Mr. Chapman expressed frustration about how many say that nothing should be done in the C district because we need to wait for Devens to be decided first. Committee members agreed and felt that the services the Town wants and tax base diversity aren't keyed to Devens, and services at Devens aren't any more convenient for residents.

In response to a question by Ms. Wallace as to whether the committee's goal is to offset the taxes or provide services, it was noted that the mission mentions both. It was stated that residents want and revenue the town needs is the mantra, which is why the Committee is pursuing a grocery store – it's not the greatest tax generator, but a service that residents want. Other commercial uses that would provide tax revenue includes assisted-living. The Committee referred to the EDAT report for a list of desired uses and anticipated revenues. Also discussed was the possibility of having medical uses in the C district.

Ms. Lazarus stated an important thing she learned from the gas station proponent was the significance of the Rt. 2 interchange, that there is a gap along Rt. 2 between Acton and Leominster where there are few businesses/services. It was noted that the implications of this are that the Rt. 2 interchange is very attractive and there will be increasing development pressure there. Ms. Wallace noted that more development there will increase traffic, and it was stated that there will be increased traffic there regardless. It was stated that redesign of the interchange would be necessary, and may even be needed now.

There was a discussion of uses/character/traffic from Rt. 2 to Ayer in the C district. Mr. Stevens noted it is not the intent to create retail throughout the whole area or to change the character of the town. Ms. Wallace suggested different setback/design requirements which would allow for

parking behind a building instead of in front, to make it feel more rural and like Harvard's landscape. Ms. Lazarus noted that might be fine as long as it is done right. She referred to places where that was the design intent, but the final design resulted in the unattractive backs of buildings facing the road.

The need for design guidelines was discussed. Mr. Chapman stated the Committee had at one time hoped to have funds for a visual design study to quantify those kinds of design issues.

Ms. Lazarus referred to the housing in and around the C district, and that it was important to acknowledge that residences are there and should be protected. She expressed concern that more housing would result in more people living close to commercial uses, and the town might not want new development filling in and then having complaints about noise, lights etc. Mr. Warren stated that the village concept adopted a few years ago was not a good idea – the size of the C district is not that big if one puts in too much residential. He stated that between Poor Farm Rd. and Shaker Rd. it is zoned residential, and also from Appleworks to Ayer. He said one can't increase the tax revenue when there are houses blocking the development of the C district.

Mr. Hutchinson asked how this could be managed. Rich said the question is in overcoming opposition; sweetener improvements like bike trails, sidewalks, traffic calming devices like rotaries for example. He noted those are the things that people mention: sidewalks, trails, traffic calming. It was stated that buffering and screening and making development attractive would be important.

Mr. Chapman stated the window of opportunity is closing for the grocery store and if a new store goes into Ayer, there will not be one in Harvard.

In response to a question about Devens, the Committee stated it wants to decouple the issue of Devens from the C district, that one shouldn't stop things from happening in the C district until Devens is decided. Also noted was the capacity that Devens has for water and sewer, which could be connected to the C district. Road connections were also discussed, separate from the water and sewer.

3. Public Forum

After discussion, it was decided to put off holding a public forum because of the series of forums and activities planned for the master plan.

4. Minutes

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the Minutes of January 30, 2014 as amended.

Adjourned: 8:30 PM

Elaine Lazarus, EDC Member

Approved:

Documents used at the meeting:

- Meeting agenda
- Draft minutes of 1/23/14 EDC meeting