



Economic Development Committee Minutes
1 December 2022
7:00 pm

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 12/1/22, held virtually via of Zoom.

Called to Order: 7:04 pm

EDC Members Present: Catherine Usoff, Dan Malloy, Ann Chang, David Didriksen

Also present: Julie Pierce, Fran Arsenault

Public Participation: Michael Geis, William Klauer, Terra Friedrichs

Members Absent: Ray Yacoub, Mike Majors, Shirley Ming, 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

3 November 2022, minutes were approved by all members in attendance with two minor edits. David Didriksen abstained since he was not at the previous meeting.

Public comments: Terra Friedrichs commented that the EDC 2023 strategy should be cautious to not advocate for infrastructure (sewers) that could be cost prohibitive for small businesses.

2. New/Special Business

Discuss EDC sponsorship of requested zoning changes by businesses

Julie raised the possibility of the EDC getting involved with requests for zoning changes by local businesses that come before the Select Board or Town Meeting.

Ann clarified that requests for zoning or bylaw changes usually start with the planning board.

Catherine - while the EDC would be willing to assist businesses with zoning requests, we would need to understand the current process and figure out how we would be notified of the requests. Having a tangible example to figure out how the EDC could help would be advantageous to determining what role the EDC could play.

Dave felt the EDC does not have stature to support these type of requests – the EDC could be a supportive conduit to the planning board, but it is outside of our charter.

Plan EDC Strategy Discussion

Catherine previewed the revised EDC strategy document with the added emphasis on supporting ways to improve and expand the commercial tax base.

She highlighted that Acton's residential property tax is significantly higher than most towns in the MetroWest and the financial burden on residents will get worse with increased spending and a diminishing commercial tax base.

David and Ann offered caution in the wording not to inadvertently imply that we are advocating to raise taxes on businesses but rather the goal should remain to attract new businesses (both large and small) to expand the commercial revenue base for the town.

Ann strongly encouraged the EDC to stand for the maintenance of a “single uniform tax rate” (which it is today) and to avoid any discussion of a split tax rate.

Dan likes the proposed focus on the financial burden for residents and that the EDC's advocacy should be on getting town officials and residents to adopt a “Pro-Business” culture that will help grow the commercial tax base. He feels the “Tax Relief” focus should be given the same attention by the Select Board as the sustainability objectives.

Catherine reinforced that the EDC should attempt to change the thinking about the future tax burden (not just to pass it on to residents) and make growing the commercial tax base an imperative for the financial health of the town. Growth of the business community is a vital strategy to support all the other town priorities. Increased spending without more commercial financial contributors to the tax base will create a financial crisis for residents.

As an aside, David thought the Acton schools and students should be given the opportunity for greater knowledge about how business works and what it contributes to the economic welfare of the town and schools.

Julie offered that “Reality Fairs” were previously offered in the schools which focused on financial management skills and could be offered again. It was agreed that more exposure to the principles of private enterprise would be helpful for Acton students.

One mechanism for this could be an expert lecture series from existing businesses in town. Outlined below is the current speakers' program at ABRHS.

ABRHS Career Speakers Program 2022-2023

This program hosts three Career Speakers events. For this school year, the dates are: Thursday 10/13/22, Wednesday 12/7/22 and Wednesday 3/8/23 so if any EDC members are interested in sharing from a business/entrepreneurial perspective, they could reach out to Julie and she will connect them with the program coordinators.

Careers covered in the 2021-2022 school year include: Chemical Engineering, Television Production, Art, Healthcare, Entrepreneurship, Law, Psychology, Wealth Management, Education, Nutrition, Tech, Public Service

More information about the program can be found here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gNKs1gmWJ-0Jlbs8x2ph1RHAjxo-1hY4T7kPSv5XV0s/edit>

EDC Strategy Discussion Continued

Catherine prompted the group to comment on the desirable outcomes from the proposed strategy:

Desirable outcomes from EDC strategy document include:

- Select Board members adopt at least one goal for FY24 that supports economic development/businesses
- Larger business(es) decide(s) to locate in Acton in the near future
- Commercial tax base increases as a percentage of the total tax base

Julie liked the proposed desirable outcomes as a tangible way to evaluate the success of the EDC efforts to change the attitudes and culture of the town toward business.

Dan wants the EDC to quantify the magnitude of the tax burden on Acton residents and use this to motivate the Select Board to adopt a pro-business goal and objectives for 2023. He also felt the proposed outcomes were a strong set of measurable events to evaluate the EDCs and town's success.

Catherine clarified that the strategy document maintains all the existing EDC support for existing businesses but adds the importance of growing the number of businesses contributing to the commercial tax base.

Ann suggested that the best way to communicate with residents about the tax burden and the need for a pro-business environment is through a warrant that would be presented as part of the town meeting materials. The creation of the EDC view of the "financial health of the commercial tax base" would provide a vehicle to raise awareness of the red flag around declining commercial tax revenue. Working in collaboration with FinCom, the EDC should create the fact and figures on the state of the business climate and how it effects the tax burden on residents.

Catherine agreed to do some research on how towns present facts about their commercial tax base and asked all EDC members to come to the next meeting with ideas of what should be presented in the warrant.

Dan suggested we re-visit some of the materials from the Dukakis center reports on town attractiveness to businesses as an input to our planning (**ATTACH SAMPLE REPORT**).

Terra offered that growing the commercial tax base can come from BOTH new businesses and the expansion of existing commercial locations. Both should be encouraged.

EDC Strategy - Possible Avenues to Achieve the Desired Outcomes

As part of the strategy document, Catherine outlined potential avenues to advance the EDC objectives. These include:

- Identify influential Actonians who share EDC's concern for insufficient economic development
- Present persuasive arguments to Select Board to spur their support and action
- Prepare town meeting warrant article(s) that support businesses and future development (call to action, changes in bylaws). Specific example: Resolution that we want the town/select board to support a material increase in the commercial tax base.
- EDC members actively engage in next master planning effort
- EDC coordinates with Finance Committee and town's finance director to call attention to the issue

The group was unclear on how to identify and engage with "influential Actonians" – Fran agreed to speak with some local business leaders to see if we can solicit their support. This may also yield some potential new members for the EDC.

Catherine commented that we need to actively recruit new EDC members to advance these objectives. The EDC is down 3 active members and we do not have a local business owner as part of the mix. Current EDC members need to help recruit new members.

Ann suggested we should focus on the Town's "Master Plan" and advance the EDC perspective on the need for a Pro-Business Culture. The master plan is a key vehicle for securing state funding and the town leadership places a priority on its preparation. This will help raise the visibility of the EDC while promoting a pro-business environment.

Central to this approach would be to take a stand in the master plan that "No land currently zoned for commercial use be available for conversion for residential development." By including it as a mandate of the master plan, we can stop the erosion of commercially available land and reduce the focus on the residential tax base as the way to support town spending objectives.

Julie will investigate the current cycle for the Master Town Plan (last one was in 2020).

Ann will meet with Brian McMullin (town assessor – who is in the process of retiring) to get historical run rates of the commercial tax base which should help quantify the current state and will likely document the ongoing decline of commercial tax revenue.

Updates from Economic Development Director

Small Business Saturday in Acton: November 26, 2022

The Office of Economic Development celebrated our local businesses by shopping small and shopping local for all your holiday needs – and all year round! Over 70 small businesses agreed to participate and welcomed the town's support and marketing.

The Results:

- As a group, we made approximately 1000 phone calls since most business owners needed 2-4 reach outs before responding.
- AB Schools joined in to support and will be putting a message at RJ Grey on Mass Ave to encourage shopping locally during the holiday season
- Middlesex West Chamber of Commerce and West Acton Village Merchants Association were so excited and encouraged their members to participate
- We all learned about businesses that we didn't even know existed here in Acton
- I was able to meet some new business owners who I hadn't met before (over 20!)
- Finally: we have nearly 70 participating businesses!

SHOP LOCAL ALL SEASON!

SMALL BUSINESS SATURDAY®



actonma.gov/business

Julie has asked EDC members to help retrieve the signs after Christmas.

Acton Business Leaders Annual Brunch - December 14, 2022

The Economic Development Office is hosting an event to recognize businesses that have reached significant longevity milestones. The Goal is to make this an annual event. Each year might have different themes but for this first year, we will be recognizing these business milestones. This is a RSVP only event. You will receive an email invitation and be sure to respond early if you want to attend. In attendance will be recognized business leaders, other representatives from the businesses and their families as well as elected officials and department and division heads from the Town. Haartz and Acton Pharmacy will be recognized with a Select Board Proclamation.

Be sure to RSVP early if you want to attend. There will be a link in the email to use to RSVP. Julie needs someone to sign up to help with registration table and other event help that day

Preview of the Planning Board Visual Guide to the Sign Bylaws -Draft Version

Julie shared with the EDC a draft version of the planning department visual guide (Acton Sign Guide) to the sign bylaws. This is intended as a supporting document for businesses and vendors who service them. It eventually will be on-line and will have hyperlinks to specific sections to facilitate its use.

Overall, the EDC reaction was positive and believe it will be helpful to local businesses and vendors. Ann did comment that it was silent on "Window Signs" and probably could use some additional guidance here.

Update from Members - Catherine

South Acton Vision and Planning Advisory Group

The advisory group was formed in response to a recent request for zoning changes by the State of Massachusetts around MBTA locations. Catherine encouraged members to take the survey which is still available.

Finally, the group agreed we would continue to meet via Zoom and Catherine will be exploring some alternative times (possibly during the day) for our next meeting. In the absence of a change, the next meeting will be the first Thursday (1/5/23) in January at 7PM.

Adjourn – 8:41 p.m.

Action Items Identified in this Meeting:

- Catherine will research metrics used by towns to describe their commercial tax base.
- Dan will distribute a sample report from the Dukakis Center that profiles MetroWest towns economic profiles
- Julie to define status of the Master Plan development and timetable

- Ann to get historical commercial tax figures and trends (vs residential) over the last 10 year from Brian McMullin
- EDC members should come prepared to the next meeting with content and metrics to include in a warrant article regarding the “state of Business in Acton.”
- Fran and EDC members will actively recruit for new members for the EDC
- Julie to send invite to the Acton Business Leaders Annual Brunch. EDC members that want to participate need to RSVP
- Catherine, David and Dan agreed to pick up small business signs after Christmas

For more information about the Economic Development Committee, please send email to

EDC@actonma.gov