



These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 2/18/21, held remotely at 7 pm

Called to Order: 7:05 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Ann Chang, Larry Kenah, Shirley Ming, Jon Benson (BOS liaison), Dan Malloy, Catherine Usoff, Dave Didrikson, Derrick Chin

Acton Staff Present: Mathew Murphy

Members Absent: Peter Daniel, Josh Fischel, Selby, David Cote

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 and the public announcement from the Governor's order around public meetings was read by Larry Kenah. The EDC decided not to replicate the text in the meeting notes going forward. To read the text, please refer to the 2/04/21 EDC minutes.

### **Regular Business**

1. Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings

Minutes from February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 are approved with a single change (Catherine will finalize with Josh), unanimously: 8-0, with one abstention.

2. Public participation

4 callers joined the meeting with 2 expressing interest in speaking later in the meeting.

### **II. New/Special Business**

3. Commercial Prospects for Kmart Parcel

Catherine opened the discussion by commenting that the previous EDC and Select Board Meeting left her with the impression that there is not a master plan to guide town officials in how to evaluate commercial opportunities. Further, she wants the EDC to be more proactive and bring a structured approach to create context to support the discussion and decision making around commercial activities.

She also found the life science idea for the Kmart parcel intriguing and did some research into the MassBio council ratings of MetroWest communities' friendliness and ability to accommodate the life science industry. [<https://www.massbio.org/initiatives/bioready-communities/>]. She recommends that the EDC help drive this rating for Acton. She believes we need to do an inventory of what we have and what do we need to be competitive for these desirable businesses. She feels the lack of context of what we have is impacting our ability to attract business and make informed decisions.

She feels we should focus on the Town website and proactively develop a storyline that more effectively promotes the town and the assets we bring to potential businesses that would complement the culture of the town. While there is some limited business development content, it is not prominently presented and does not tell a compelling story about Acton.

Dan commented on the opportunity to maximize the commercial value of the Kmart parcel and advocated that the EDC be proactive in developing a commercial strategy for the property (and perspectives on the adjacent properties). More specifically, he wants the town to develop a commercial strategy that focuses on attracting growth industries (life science, health IT, medical device) that will maximize income for the town and help ease the property tax burden on residents.

He provided context on the explosive commercial real estate market for life sciences and the activity in other MetroWest communities (distributed Lexington's life science report) that have already been highly effective in attracting these growth industries.

He described the opportunity for Acton as being able to offer Life Science/Biotech companies a significant cost advantage over Boston/Cambridge (60% less for commercial rates) while attracting highly paid educated workers to our community (many which already reside in Acton and commute to Boston). The presence of these types of businesses will also spark other economic development (e.g., restaurants, services, childcare) that will enhance the overall value of the town. To attract these businesses, we need to assess our capabilities (infrastructure, human capital, ease of doing business) and proactively pitch the offer to life science development companies.

Mike Major agreed "100%" that EDC and the town need to be proactive in developing a strategic plan (for the Kmart parcel and the town) and wants to develop a marketing package that illustrates the "Kelly Corner Campus Concept" and to proactively pitch it to targeted desirable business partners. He wants us to create the vision for what the site could become.

Derrick Chin commented Insulet was attracting not only engineers but also manufacturing roles that are lower paid.

Dave Didrikson reminded the EDC that it's a committee with no power or capability to fund anything but that we would need to convince the town to spend money on the website and the promotion of the town. He felt there would-be conflicting interests within the town over the desire to promote to new business types. He feels the EDC role should be more of a commentator on business proposals rather than the initiators of the ideas. Dave said that EDC's role should be to keep the space commercial, and ensure that it doesn't become a drain on the town's finances.

Ann Chang suggested there could be economic development in the Knox Trail area and the EDC should consider in the context of a more comprehensive economic plan. She said this was an area that was reserved for commercial development as a technology park and should also be considered for life science. Ann thinks there should be access from Knox Trail to the WR Grace property. There is some existing infrastructure at the Grace site that could be helpful (e.g., rail spur). She noted that Acton doesn't have the wealth of existing buildings that Lexington has. Ann suggests that we wait until the highway plans are finished for the Kelly's Corner area so we can put all the pieces together rather than focus more narrowly on the Kmart site. Supporting Dave's statement, Ann said that the EDC should come out strongly with a position that the Kmart parcel MUST remain commercial.

Derick raised the issue that a solar array is going in at the old WR Grace site and this could impact the opportunity for other commercial development in the area. We should be able to earn Payment in Lieu of Taxes or tax revenue from the solar array though.

Ann also thought we should get a perspective (maybe from Insulet or a consultant) whether the Kmart parcel would be suitable for a life science company. She also wants the Kmart parcel to remain commercial.

Shirley Ming raised the issue that the use of water needs to be thought through in any discussion with life science companies (this was also raised by Terra Friedrichs – caller 1) and the water district should be brought in early to this discussion.

She also raised concern about the potential change from office based to remote work forces in the IT sector. The COVID experience could permanently change the need for an office complex going forward. This is less of concern for life science companies.

Jon Benson gave an update on very recent discussions about the Kmart parcel with Acton town officials and a senior living development company (National Development (natdev.com) – Newton MA)

They have proposed the development of 115 rental units for seniors with assisted living needs. The plan would also call for a small amount of retail space (10K sq. ft). The Select Board representative in the discussion will be Dean Charter since Jon has had previous business relations with the attorney for National Development). There was some discussion of whether this type of project would need to secure a variance from the current zoning regulation. Jon said he didn't think so but Selby could confirm.

Stop & Shop is encouraging the town to find a business partner they would want to work with to help advance the sale of the parcel. The Sears/Kmart lease expires in November 2021 and this is creating a bit of urgency to find a suitable buyer before there is no more rental revenue to offset the tax commitment.

Other participants input:

Caller 1 Terra Friedrichs from West Acton – offered her support for the development of a marketing plan for the town and wants the EDC to be proactive in driving it. She also liked the idea of targeting growth industries but thinks the dialogue should focus on both commercial and social returns for the town.

Caller 2 Alissa Nicol from South Acton – wanted to know what the status of the previous life science inquiry was and whether we were following it up. Jon Benson responded that there has been no further discussion from the initial call.

Alissa also felt it was important for the EDC to stay focused on the South Acton Master Plan and to proactively participate in discussion with the Historic District Commission (HDC) around plans for the Exchange Hall and 3 School Street proposals.

#### 4. Proposed Projects for 2021

Larry Kenah has asked Dan and Catherine to think through what the next steps would be to develop a town wide commercial plan. This could include the Kmart parcel but will be affected by the discussions around senior housing.

Mike Majors with assistance from Larry will complete the business inventory assessment and will formulate next steps to make the information actionable. The EDC members did a “windshield survey” and found that there were 35 properties with vacancies in them. The scope of the visual survey included store fronts on the major roads (Main Street - Route 27 and Great Road – 2A).

Mike Majors think we should re-visit the South Acton Master Plan and to create a more contemporary vision for what is possible for that area, the previous plan is over 25+ years old.

Catherine wanted to know if there are other town meetings that the EDC should be represented. There is a meeting on 2/24 at 7PM regarding the Maple Street properties (South Acton) that the EDC should be represented. Ann is planning to attend.

Larry will follow up with David Honn about the HDC meetings with the Exchange Hall owner and will plan to attend and represent the EDC at the next HDC meeting (2/23).

**III. More Regular Business**

6. Updates from members – none provided
7. Next meeting – 04 March 2021

**IV. Consent Items**

9. None

Additional materials

- Draft meeting minutes from 4 February 2021
- 2020 Lexington Life Science Report

*The listed agenda items are those reasonably anticipated by the Chair. Not all items may in fact be discussed and other items not listed may also be brought up for discussion to the extent permitted by law.*

*Reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities are available upon request. Include a description of the accommodation you will need, including as much detail as you can and include a way we can contact you if we need more information. Please allow advance notice. Send an e-mail to **manager@actonma.gov** or call Town Manager’s Office (978)929-6611*

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