



Economic Development Committee Minutes

5 August 2021

7:00 pm

Room 9, Acton Town Hall
472 Main Street, Acton, MA

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 8/5/21, held in person at town hall.

Called to Order: 7:06 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Ann Chang, Larry Kenah, David Cote (by phone), Derrick Chin (by phone), David Didriksen, Shirley Ming, Dan Malloy, Catherine Usoff, Fran Arsenault (Select Board Liaison), Maura Haberman (town hall representative)

Members Absent: Peter Daniel

Preliminaries

The meeting was called to order – 7:06 p.m.

Larry thanked Catherine for volunteering to take minutes for the EDC meetings.

Welcome and Introductions – Larry welcomes Fran A. as new liaison to select board to the EDC meeting. Fran introduces herself – town for 30 years, realtor in town (Barrett Sotheby's in Concord), interested in figuring out ways to get commercial businesses in Acton.

Members introduce themselves to Fran. (Derrick – Planning board liaison, Mike Majors – Finance Committee liaison).

Maura Haberman – liaison, was former vice president of the Chamber. Knows many of the businesses in town. Tries to connect with businesses for her activities as recreation director – sponsorships of events.

In response to some EDC members' comments about the challenges of doing business in Acton, Fran mentioned that one of the Select Board's short-term goals (identified at their recent planning meeting) is to improve permitting process.

I. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings
 - 17 June 2021

The minutes were written by Josh. Minutes approved by all other members except Catherine who abstained because she was not at the meeting.

- Public participation – no members of the public were present at the meeting.

II. New/Special Business

- Next steps for EDC (short discussion)

John M. was planning to be at our next meeting. Dave D. will not be at the next meeting (8/19) and he was the one who suggested inviting him – he requests that we ask John M. to come to another meeting. We suggested holding the next EDC meeting on 8/26 (rather than 8/19) and inviting John to join us then. John M. thinks he can make it (per text response to Fran).

To provide more immediate input to John about whether the Economic Development director should remain a combined position (ED and Land Use), the committee members each spoke in turn about this question.

Input to John M. about the position:

Mike – we have ignored our commercial businesses for years. There is so much we could be doing as a committee but we need to work in partnership with the ED director. Position should be focused on the health and wealth of the commercial community, change our reputation, make Acton more business friendly, encourage more businesses to come to Acton.

Ann – hired a sustainability person (Andrea), she is running the sustainability meetings, has an impact on businesses in town. With regard to Land Use, the town needs to rewrite the zoning bylaws. There has to be better cooperation with the Acton Water District, the Board of Health. There is a lot that needs to be done that shouldn't be the purview of one person. Should there be someone who is an overall person who coordinates everything in addition to a position dedicated to Economic Development?

Dave D. – it was too much for one person to do both ED and Land Use. In Selby's favor, he listened. He was the first person in Dave's experience who would listen. The town structure is very broken up into little fiefdoms. The original idea of the position was to have someone supervise the different departments so there would be more coordination. Someone needs to have control or relationship to the different departments so things can be coordinated. Should there be an ombudsman, someone who can walk businesses through the process of starting a business in Acton? Regardless, the process needs to be more organized to make it smoother. We need to make Acton more attractive to add to the tax base. Right now, Maynard has a lot going for it that Acton doesn't. We don't have sewers for example, which is a problem. There is a lot working against ED in town.

Shirley – ED is a very important role which hasn't received enough attention. Selby was working on a handbook for businesses, which would be good. The person also needs to have knowledge of the zoning bylaws, land use, etc. to be helpful to the businesses.

Dan – Should be an independent position, someone with business acumen who is connected. Need someone who is knowledgeable about big business.

Catherine – Should be one position, sends a message that the town invests in it.

Dave C. – if the town is taking this seriously, need to have a dedicated position. If we have a sustainability director, should have an ED director. In hiring someone, John M. needs to find a good listener, and someone who can develop that playbook to guide businesses.

Derrick – EDC was all talk and no action in the past until we got Selby. Derrick was amazed at how much he could accomplish with 2 jobs. Should be one job and also support the person with support staff.

David D. – if it is helpful, Dave has been on committees to help screen applicants for other town positions in the past and he could help John M. with this position. Someone from the EDC could be involved in helping John with this.

Larry – he thinks that the two roles require entirely different skill sets. Interaction with business is a very outward facing role. Director of Land Use – largely a management role (managing the different departments that have their specific areas of expertise). Director – titles are a big deal, so the title part of it is important as well. Business friendly – there is one thing about making it easier to make it through the maze. We should be a business-friendly town, which is more of an attitude or philosophy. Larry had sent something to Fran and the Select Board asking them to make this one of their goals. The message should be “We want to do everything in our power to make your business successful.” The two roles are in some way adversarial – the various departments are about enforcement, and the ED Director should be about advocating for businesses.

Ann – Moving departments into one building has helped. The zoning is not what you would call business compatible. We pass the zoning bylaws at town meeting so they have a certain gravitas. In prior master plans, supporting businesses seemed to be a low priority. Selby brought in grants. Kristen and the town engineer are also bringing in grants. Need someone who knows how to write, get grants, and know what the state is doing so Acton can take advantage of opportunities for funding.

Catherine – messaging is important. The personnel issue that created the vacancy in the position has presented the Select Board with an opportunity to make a statement. The most recent Town Meeting seemed to be anti-business, there needs to be some rebalancing to better support businesses in town. There needs to be education for the townspeople to understand why it is important to have more business in town.

Dan – this is a migratory town. People tend to leave after children graduate. The transitory nature of the citizenry may weaken the strong support for business development.

David D. – businesses have no voice in town meeting.

Fran asked what was meant by bigger businesses. Insulet was given as an example.

David D. – message that businesses have received is about enforcement. Some seem to think that businesses are not supportive of town. Businesses are part of town too, wish schools would see that too. Businesses do donate to the schools.

Ann – Schools ask businesses for contributions, but the schools don't seem to appreciate the businesses. When the Acton Farmer's Market opened, it wasn't great for Idylwilde, but everyone seems to like the Farmer's Market.

Larry – If we are waiting until town meeting to deliver the messaging, it is too late. We need to do it at town meeting, but not enough.

Larry – general consensus that we are all in favor of a separate dedicated position for Economic Development.

Mike – there has to be follow through. In addition to dedicated position, Town Manager and Select Board all have to be on the same page with regard to the importance of economic development to the town.

- Working Group Reports
 - Local Rapid Recovery Plan Program (LRRP) (Larry)

Kristen had a meeting yesterday about the LRRP program – Derrick and Larry were there. The woman representing the Middlesex West Chamber of Commerce was there (Cindy McCollough). The consulting group is finishing up their work and will be writing a report shortly. Tabling events at Great Road Plaza – August 12. Ann – they should talk to individuals. They have so far talked to so few of the business owners. The percentages reported from the survey seem larger than they are because of the small number of responses. Ann - Garbage in, Garbage out (GIGO), she doesn't see anything positive coming from it. Larry reported on the 4 items Kristen highlighted at the meeting that could be the focus of future projects - 1) general wayfinding along Great Road corridor (directional, informational signage). 2) wayfinding along the rail trail to find businesses along Great Road. 3) shared marketing services (like what West Acton Village does), and 4) Exploring sewer expansion along Great Road. Larry thinks the LRRP project team can't not mention sewer expansion in the final report, it is such an important issue for the businesses along 2A.

Dan - How long would it take to write a proposal for sewer expansion, to include shovel ready projects? We should be ready for any future funding coming from the state and/or federal government.

Dave D. – if you could poll businesses on 2A, most would say that the best thing we could do for them would be sewers.

Ann- The apartments on 2A are at an age where their systems are starting to fail and they will need sewers. Having sewers will support more affordable housing.

Larry will send Maura and Fran information about the EDC working groups

- 50 Nagog Park working group.

Jamie Lipscomb, managing director for JLL property and marketing company. Dan reached out and learned that they are in negotiations for one business to take the whole property. He has asked Jamie what we can do to make the new business feel welcome, he hasn't responded. There is a subculture of these types of property companies – the new ED director needs to be very connected to these companies.

Related comments:

There should be a focus on marketing to encourage life sciences, maybe create a fast track industrial park.

When rezoned Grace land, made it technology park. Problem – access through Independence Road.

It is better to have existing buildings for businesses to move into, we should focus on those opportunities.

Dan spoke to the Director of Economic Development for Boxborough where they were able to get a biotech company to locate there. The Director said that the town is creating barriers for the company that are concerning.

Catherine mentioned that in other towns' ED strategic plans they have specifically focused on a particular industry that we want to get in town, a target industry.

Maura made a suggestion about possibly using some of Andrea's summer interns (she has 3) who are working with her on sustainability issues. Maybe one of them could go to the businesses on Great Road and ask them about sewers. Ann would love to have someone go and talk to all the businesses on 2A because the consulting firm didn't talk to many of them. Larry thinks it is a good idea, that this request should go through Kristen.

Mike cited the example of Rapsallion as a business. It is a very successful, popular restaurant, but parking and sewers are major problems. What can the town do to help businesses like this to survive.

III. More Regular Business

- Updates from members

No other updates from members.

- Next meetings
 - 19 August 2021

We will not meet on 8/19, and we will tentatively meet on 8/26. Do we want to meet again on 9/2 which is a week later? The members agreed that we should keep September 2 as a placeholder.

- 2 September 2021
 - Kelley's Corner Community Center (Chris Hardy)

Larry informed the committee that Chris Hardy is no longer interested in making a presentation about the Community Center idea to the EDC.

Kmart property – There is no update that Fran knows of.

- How often to meet through the end of the year?

Larry – any reason to change our cadence of meetings? No one gave a reason to change the schedule.

Maura asked if we are looking to do the next meeting by Zoom. If so, we have to go through the Select Board. There can be public participation allowed by Zoom. You have to vote in person, there has to be a quorum of members meeting in person. Derrick said that meeting by phone is not good, hopes to have Zoom for the next meeting. The issue will be finding someone from the town to host the Zoom meeting.

Adjourn meeting – 8:45 p.m.

IV. Consent Items

- None

Additional materials

- Draft meeting minutes from 17 June 2021

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