



Economic Development Committee Minutes

2 December 2021

7:00 pm

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

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 12/2/21, held in person at town hall.

Called to Order: 7:06 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Ann Chang, Larry Kenah, Derrick Chin (by Zoom), Dan Malloy, Shirley Ming, David Cote (by Zoom), Peter Daniel, David Didriksen, Fran Arsenault, Catherine Usoff

Town Employee present: Maura Haberman

Members Absent: Chris Hardy

Preliminaries

Call the Roll

I. **Regular Business**

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings
 - 4 November 2021 – All members present voted to approve the minutes, except for David Didriksen and Peter Daniel who abstained because they were not at the November 4 meeting.
- Public participation - none

II. **New/Special Business**

- Enterprise Software for Municipalities (Dan Malloy)

Dan presented information about a technology platform (Opengov), an enterprise system that the town could adopt to support permitting and licensing.

The town currently uses Munis for financials, permits, etc. Maura will get some information from IT about what Munis is and what it does. David Cote asked if we could also get information from the system to see how the processes are performing (turnaround time for permits, for example). Maura said she thought the current system was implemented about 1.5 to 2 years ago.

First, we have to learn what system(s) the town currently uses to support business related processes. In determining whether the current system is adequate or a new system is needed, we should look at the process from the viewpoint of the business owner. Dave D. – what would be helpful is to have a menu tree online so business owners will know what they need to do. There can be 4 or 5 people who have to sign off on a permit, that creates delays, especially when there are part-time employees involved.

Peter Daniel – There is a disconnect between some departments within Town Hall. The town should go to their current vendor (Munis) and see what additional capability is available. Perhaps the town can use their current system to adopt features that seem available in OpenGov.

- ED Director – Brief update (Larry)

The new Director of Economic Development, Julie Pierce Onos, will start on December 13th. John Mangiaratti expects that she will attend the EDC meetings after she starts her position.

- Short-term goals – Ann Chang wonders if the director will be reviewing the zoning bylaws when she gets here.

- RapsCALLION and Parking

Peter Daniel brought the RapsCALLION parking issue to the committee. There are zoning issues that are restricting the parking capacity for RapsCALLION. Current zoning laws in Acton limit parking capacity to 1 spot for every 3 customers (as determined by the seating capacity of the restaurant). Changes in behavior patterns have resulted in that formula not working anymore, i.e., individuals drive separately to meet up at RapsCALLION. People were parking on one side of the street, but neighbors didn't like it so the town put up no parking signs. Peter wrote a letter to the ZBA (zoning board of appeals), seeking a variance to allow additional parking on a dirt lot on their property. ZBA did not approve the request, indicating that there was no evidence of hardship (which ZBA refers to as shape, size, soil, and topography) to warrant a variance.

Ann Chang - When the zoning bylaws are reviewed, we need to have someone on the committee who uses the bylaws all the time, like a local attorney. The bylaws have not been reviewed in light of the current business environment (for example, businesses, like RapsCALLION, that don't have access to communal lots).

Peter could write up a request to get a variance from the bylaws through town meeting which would require a 2/3 vote.

- How can EDC help?

A letter from the EDC would be helpful to go with Peter's next appeal to the ZBA. Before we do the letter, we should get the ZBA's filing and understand their objection to the initial request.

Catherine noted that, in addition to helping RapsCALLION to thrive, we should be looking at the bigger picture. We should encourage the Director of Economic Development to get information

from businesses regarding the problematic aspects of the bylaws, and work with a committee to update the bylaws. The process of reviewing and changing the bylaws will take a long time (likely a few years). In the short term, town leadership could implore the relevant boards and departments to approach decisions with a bias toward supporting, rather than thwarting, businesses.

- Open Space and Recreation Plan
 - Any EDC input?

Maura noted that there are components of the plan that relate to the EDC realm, notably, the Gardner Playground in West Acton is expected to have a positive effect on businesses in the area.

Catherine said she would be willing to be an EDC representative to the Open Space and Recreation Plan process.

III. More Regular Business

- Updates from members

Larry provided an update from John Mangiaratti. Stop and Shop has pulled out of the deal with the company seeking to build a senior living center on the former Kmart parcel.

Larry asked for input to a resolution from Jim Snyder Grant (Select Board) titled “Policy encouraging building with clean energy.” Several EDC members reacted negatively to the policy, saying that it appears to be “big brother like” and an example of Select Board overreach. The implication seems to be that the town will not look favorably upon builders/developers that do not build with clean energy. Some members feel that this approach will likely drive business to other towns that are more friendly.

The EDC members do not object to making information available to builders who want to build with clean energy, but would prefer using incentives rather than coercion.

Ann and Dan will plan to attend the Select Board meeting on Monday evening to present our objection to the proposed policy.

Dave D. - It would be nice to see more things coming from the town that are overtly friendly to business.

David Cote – learned a lot from Peter Daniels and his experience as a small business owner. David recommends that we bring in another business person to educate us about their issues. Rather than encouraging complaint sessions, the theme of their visits could be how could we promote a greater ease of doing business in Acton.

Larry thought this was a good idea, and if it works out well, should make it a regular feature of the committee meetings.

Fran offered that the owners of Eve and Murray's might be good candidates to visit a future committee meeting.

Peter said that many local business owners are involved with the Chamber and would be used to doing engaging with the EDC in this way, with an ability to keep it positive and time bounded.

Maura suggested that maybe Larry could talk about the EDC at the Chamber's annual meeting in February where several Acton business owners will be in attendance.

Peter suggested that the new Director of Economic Development should meet the new Chamber Director. Peter will facilitate a meeting with the new chamber director and the new economic development director, having them both come to a future EDC meeting (first Thursday of February).

Vivian Burchall (who is running for state rep) – made a spreadsheet of all the businesses in town, posted it on Facebook, to encourage local shopping.

Larry will send to John Mangiaratti tomorrow a recommendation from the EDC that the new Director's goals should include working on a revision of the Zoning Bylaws.

Dan suggested that we should find out how OpenGov is working for some of the towns that have adopted it, especially compared to their old system(s).

Maura will see what she can find out about the town's current system (Munis) and how it is being used, particularly to support business facing processes.

- Next meetings
 - There are no scheduled meetings for the rest of 2021.
 - The EDC will next meet on Thursday, 6 January 2022.

IV. **Consent Items**

- None

Adjourn – 8:56 p.m.

ACTION ITEMS IDENTIFIED IN THE MEETING:

- Maura will get some information from IT about what Munis is and what it does.
- Larry will inform John Mangiaratti and/or Melissa Rier (Recreation Director) that Catherine will represent the EDC in the Open Space and Recreation Plan process.

- Ann and Dan will plan to attend the Select Board meeting on Monday evening to present our objection to the proposed policy on encouraging businesses to build with clean energy.
- Peter will facilitate a meeting with the new chamber director and the new Director of Economic Development, having them both come to a future EDC meeting (first Thursday of February).
- Larry will send to John Mangiaratti tomorrow a recommendation from the EDC that the new Director's goals should include working on a revision of the Zoning Bylaws.

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