



Economic Development Committee Minutes
6 January 2022

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 1/6/22, held remotely, supported by Zoom.

Called to Order: 7:07 pm

Members Present: Mike Majors, Chris Hardy, Ann Chang, Larry Kenah, Derrick Chin, Dan Malloy, Shirley Ming, David Cote, David Didriksen, Fran Arsenault, Catherine Usoff

Town Employee present: Julie Pierce Onos

Members Absent: Peter Daniel

Preliminaries

New Preamble (Town of Acton Board and Committees, script for remotely conducted meetings), read by Committee Chair Larry Kenah:

“Good evening. It is 7:00 on Thursday evening. This Open Meeting of the Economic Development Committee of the Town of Acton is being conducted remotely consistent with the Legislative Acts of 2021, Chapter 20, Section 20, an Act Relative to Extending Certain COVID-19 Measures Adopted During the State of Emergency.

This meeting is convening by telephone conference and video conference via the Zoom app as posted on the meeting agenda. Please see the meeting agenda on the Town Website for details on how to participate remotely.

This meeting will feature public comment.

For “Zoom” Meetings

Please note that this meeting may be recorded and it may be published or rebroadcast. All participation within this meeting will be visible to others.

Finally, *each vote taken in this meeting will be conducted by roll call vote.*”

Call the Roll
Introductions

Julie Pierce Onos addressed the committee, expressing her enthusiasm for the opportunity to work with the EDC, and members introduced themselves individually to Julie.

I. **Regular Business**

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meetings
 - 2 December 2021 – approved unanimously by all members present
- Public participation – there was one call-in participant who joined the meeting after the start. Her comments are incorporated in the section below about “Economic Development in the Town of Acton.”

II. **New/Special Business**

1. Setting the Context

- FY23 Point of View
- Mike Majors, Finance Committee

Mike Majors, Finance Committee representative to the EDC, made a presentation (Finance Committee FY23 Point of View) which was also distributed to the EDC members prior to the meeting.

Although the town is doing fairly well, inflation is at an all-time high, and there is economic uncertainty associated with that. Reserves (free cash) going into the next fiscal year are \$6.2 million. Because the town is AAA rated (by Standard & Poors), we can borrow at relatively favorable rates. With regard to the demographic data about Acton, the population is aging, as well as becoming more diverse.

Dave D. – his take away is that expenses are growing more quickly than the revenues. Therefore, the current rate of spending is not sustainable.

Ann – largest expense is salaries and fringe benefits but you can’t really cut that because then services will suffer and citizens will not be happy.

Dave D. – problem with Acton, it is very residential, so town will start to look to businesses to pay more. Putting more burden on businesses could result in driving them out of town.

Dave C – does Finance Committee want to give a recommendation to address some of the challenges outlined in the presentation?

Mike – Fixed costs are a large percentage of the budget. We are in an unprecedented period of supply chain issues, inflation, and other factors that will have a big effect on fixed expenses.

Ann – to get new revenue, need to have an operating override. Is Finance committee saying that we will need an override in the future?

Mike – Finance committee is not in favor of an override. Mike thinks that there will be a need for an override in the next five years. The capital plan is for \$78 million, which will add to the

debt service costs (which are now about 10% of the total budget). The Finance Committee would like to see the town restrict new hiring to positions that are necessary and in support of revenue generation and/or direct service.

Catherine – how do we communicate to the citizens about the need for solutions, greater revenue (more businesses to contribute to the tax base)? There is a need to connect the dots more for the citizens so they might gain a more balanced perspective of the situation.

Dave D. – there are proposals being made that are very costly and they will want to go to businesses to pay for it. Don't know how this will be resolved.

2. Economic Development in the Town of Acton

- A conversation between the committee and Julie Pierce Onos, Director of Economic Development

Dave C. – question about how to connect the dots. Social media might be a way to get some alternative views out.

Dave D. – purpose of the committee – Economic Development. Anything that helps Economic Development is in our purview.

Larry – anything that inhibits ED is also within our purview.

Ann – communication between town and business community. People in town using businesses to build their things, don't necessarily have a place that they work from, but they work in town. Rules and regulations that are promulgated by town need to be clear and concise. Make sure we don't end up with all the cases in the ZBA. Communications between town and business is not good. Need to look at contractors as a business segment.

Dan – what is the infrastructure the town has. Echo Catherine's point – at Select Board meeting, presented environmental plan with many items that “town will,” but there were no economic justifications for them. If anyone questions the proposed initiatives, it turns into that you are “anti-environment.”

Derrick – it looks like the OpenGov (enterprise software to support permitting) is part of the upcoming budget.

Larry – we have been talking about the software that supports doing business with the town, but there is also an underlying philosophy about how things are supposed to work. Larry doesn't think that we have the philosophy right.

Julie – as she learns more about Munis and the related systems, then she can put something together to help the EDC understand what the town currently has in place. Then we can look at

what the systems are, how they meet the needs of the businesses and the employees and make some recommendations.

Larry suggested that each member in turn take a minute or two to tell Julie what she needs to worry about in next week, month, year.

Shirley – immediate future, help the local businesses to get over the Covid crisis. Business revenue for the town needs to increase, Julie should focus on attracting more businesses to Acton.

Mike – The town is getting very creative in identifying additional sources of revenue. The town manager has directed staff to pursue grants and state funding. Julie could pursue grant opportunities that support economic development efforts.

Fran – Focus should be not only on bringing new businesses to town, but cultivating existing businesses.

Derrick – as an aside, a positive development is that anyone who wants to propose buying open land will now have to say where they will get the revenue to buy it.

David C – Look at the job description, why they hired you and what they expect you to do, but come up with your own mission statement. What do you stand for? Step 2 – go and be visible, introduce yourself to every small business. Then people will trust you and tell you things that are relevant to improving the environment for business. It will be important for them to tell you the truth. With credibility, then you can bring back the issues to the town government. It is important to build relationships with the businesses.

Dave D. – When you visit a business, you can hand them a card and say, “if you have any problems, then give me a call.” Now there is no one person to call, that could make a big impact. Sometimes, it is what you don’t do that is helpful, don’t over-regulate. Keeping the heavy hand of regulation away from business can be the best thing to do.

Dan – His focus is on revenue, he wants to find where big money can come into town. Money from the state can help build infrastructure that will interest larger businesses to come to town. Small businesses thrive when the larger businesses are there to generate demand for small businesses.

Chris – liked Dave C’s philosophical approach. Could we have a Great Road business association, like what they have for West Acton Merchants Association. (Dave D. – was involved with that in past, and could speak to issues associated with a Great Road business association.)

Catherine – There are many different constituencies in town and different priorities. The issues that have been talked about lately are the environment, need for more affordable housing, and diversity and equity. We need to present the economic development priorities in the context of all the other priorities. There are ways that economic development can be supportive of the ability to accomplish other initiatives.

Ann – when Julie interacts with commerce in town (e.g., having her car repaired), she can ask if they are facing any problems with the town. EDC’s role is to support businesses and bring more businesses into town. If we don’t have a coherent set of zoning bylaws, we will fail to bring more businesses to town.

Terra Friedrichs (public participant) – echo Fran’s comments about networking, the West Acton Village Merchants’ Association (WAVMA) represents over 40 businesses and provides a good way for Julie to learn about many businesses in an efficient way. Facetime is important. Julie should get the town website to be inviting to businesses, and use it to develop relationships. Other towns have storefronts on their websites.

Terra supports going after grants, but not for infrastructure that encourages residential development. With regard to sewers, businesses would have to pay for them. A focus on ROI should include property values. If people upgrade their properties, rather than building more houses, the tax base should increase. Other investments can be made in town that will make it more attractive too (e.g., more open land, community center), and result in positive ROI.

Terra - Other towns report new tax revenue in terms of categories so that over a number of years you can see where the revenue is coming from. Tax revenue from improvements can be a good source of revenue. You can also see what is coming from commercial properties. In the future, Acton may want to split commercial tax rates so that small and larger businesses are charged different rates.

Mike – regarding the budget. FY23 budget has \$150K to cover online permitting and other line items that should support updating their systems. A lot of businesses open and we are the last to know about it. It would be nice to be kept in the loop to know when they come. New deli/café in the old Jos. A Banks store – we didn’t know about it.

Fran – She has seen some work being done at the old Johnny Rockets, but we don’t know what is going in there. Fran can do some digging to see what permits were pulled for that location.

Dan – addressing Julie, he said that “we work for you.” It is important that she feels empowered and ask us to do stuff.

III. More Regular Business

3. Updates from members

Larry – asked Dan about December 20 Select Board meeting where he presented a response from the EDC to the proposal of promoting clean energy building (“Policy Encouraging Building with Clean Energy). Dan sent the statement he read at the Select Board meeting to the committee members prior to tonight’s meeting. Fran indicated that voting on the policy proposal was delayed to a future meeting of the Select Board.

Dan will send to Julie some information about OpenGov.com software that he put together.

Dave C – referred to his earlier advice to Julie that maybe she can’t meet every business. There are likely ways to build the necessary relationships more efficiently.

Catherine will share documents with Julie related to activities of the working group she has been involved with.

Larry said that he would like to continue meeting twice a month for the time being. He suggests that we continue to meet by Zoom for at least the next meeting. Members concurred. Dave D. will not be at our next meeting because he has a schedule conflict.

4. Update from Economic Development Director

Julie shared three things she is currently working on:

- She is part of a working group recently formed to look at an online permitting system. She sees her role as making sure it is looked at from business owner vs. contractor vs. residential home owner, and also from the perspective of the employees.
- With regard to Dan’s point about the state being a good source of funds, she is working on securing Acton’s participation in the vacant storefront program.
- She is looking at different grants available that relate to economic development.

Julie has an ask of the committee members. She is starting to reach out to business owners and is making a list. If anyone knows business owners in Acton, it would be helpful for members to make an introduction for her, helping her network to grow faster. Fran would like to help her in this.

5. Next meetings

- Thursday, 20 January 2022.
- Thursday, 3 February 2022.

IV. **Consent Items**

None

Adjourn – 9:00 p.m.

ACTION ITEMS IDENTIFIED IN THE MEETING:

Dan – will share information about OpenGov.com software with Julie

Fran – will see what she can find out about the potential new business in the former Johnny Rocket's space.

Catherine – will share information with Julie from her working group.

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