

NEEDHAM PLANNING BOARD MINUTES

May 12, 2023

The Needham Planning Board meeting, held virtually using Zoom, was called to order by Adam Block, Chairman, on Friday, May 12, 2023, at 9:00 a.m. with Messrs. Crocker and Alpert and Mmes. McKnight and Espada and Assistant Planner, Ms. Clee.

Mr. Block took a roll call attendance of the Board members and staff. He noted this is an open meeting that is being held remotely per state guidelines. He reviewed the rules of conduct for all meetings. This meeting does not include any public hearings and is being held to discuss the Stantec parking study. If any votes are taken at the meeting the vote will be conducted by roll call. All supporting materials, including the agenda, are posted on the town's website.

Presentation by Stantec, reviewing their findings from a parking study focused on Needham Center and Needham Heights.

Amy Haelsen, Economic Development Manager, gave the background. She noted Town Meeting approved funding for a parking study for Needham Center and Needham Heights. A RFP process was undertaken. The Town contracted with Stantec and they began the work analyzing parking in both areas.

Liza Cohen, of Stantec, gave an overview and noted Stantec was hired to do a parking assessment. She worked with the Town to establish goals which included: documenting existing supply, improving the parking management system, user friendliness, recommending parking efficiencies and opportunities, better aligning policies with long term goals of the areas, supporting the economy and having informed decision making for future street improvement projects.

Ms. Cohen noted the first step was to see what public and private parking is available for Needham Center and Needham Heights. Needham Center has a total of 1,771 parking spaces with the majority being off street or restricted parking. She then counted all the cars in the spaces in November 2022. She showed occupancy by facility. The occupied spaces averaged 63% with 659 spaces still available at the peak time. Ms. McKnight noted the boundaries go a little beyond the commercial area. Ms. Cohen stated they were looking at spillover. Mr. Alpert sought clarification as to whether this is parking overall, including private parking, and was informed that was correct. Ms. Cohen stated at 6:00 p.m. the area is pretty full, but areas around loosen up. Public parking never exceeds 74% in the Center or 51% in the Heights after 6:00 p.m.

Mr. Crocker asked if the parking at the MBTA station in the Heights was being counted. Ms. Cohen stated it was counted and is considered public parking. She stated there was the same breakdown for restricted parking. The Center at 6:00 p.m. had almost 900 spaces available in restricted spaces. Restricted spaces are taking up a lot of space in the dense, walkable downtown areas. There were 561 spaces available in the Heights. A public survey was done with over 1,000 responses. In the Center, 91% of people spent less than 2 hours per visit and one half parked within one or 2 blocks of their destination. She noted 15% of employees park on the street. An open house was held and over 50 people were there. They held a couple of roundtables with local merchants and she showed the key findings. There is available parking even at peak times, but it is hard to find. There are not a lot of options until 2:00 p.m. with permit parking.

Jason Schrieber, Senior Principal at Stantec, noted they have identified a crosswalk to go in by Learning Express on Chestnut Street and noted there used to be one there. Ms. Cohen noted there is a zoning component. Stantec did a review of the zoning by-law and the top finding is that requirements are relatively high. Waiver requests are frequent but there are limited options for developers to have reductions as of right and flexibility is limited. Mr. Alpert commented he would not say waiver requests are "frequent." The frequency for waiver requests in the Center is 100%. There is very little room as the parking in the Center is mainly on public property. Ms. McKnight noted the report refers to waivers granted by the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), but most are actually done by the Planning Board. The report could be simplified to say Planning Board or ZBA.

Ms. Cohen noted she used Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) data, which is what Engineers use to calculate parking demand. The zoning requirements are relatively high. Needham requirements are higher than suburban standards. She noted the residential development in the Heights averages one space per unit and the Center averages 1.3 spaces per unit. Ms. McKnight clarified Rosemary Ridge has 105 units. Mr. Block stated it is striking for him that the demand is less than one car per unit. Ms. McKnight stated it would be helpful to have the particular developments broken out. She would like to see this table in the report. Mr. Alpert noted visitor parking is being taken into account. He asked if the counts were taken at a time when there could have been a lot of visitor parking like morning versus evening. Ms. Cohen noted the counts were taken later in the evening to capture peak residential parking. Parking trails off during the day and increases at night.

Ms. Cohen stated they always need to be aware of the count in the evening as there is no overnight parking where residents can get a permit. Mr. Crocker asked what time of year this was taken. How many units were actually occupied at Rosemary Ridge Condominium, or had unit residents gone to Florida? Ms. McKnight noted, if going to Florida, the people may leave their cars in the lot for months. November would be a good month to get the counts. No one is on the Cape or in Florida yet. She noted there is 100%-unit occupancy at Rosemary Ridge. Ms. Espada stated Rosemary Ridge and 275 2nd Avenue are not in the Mixed-Use areas. She feels those areas have less demand. Hamilton Highlands and 50 Dedham Avenue have higher demand. She asked if that was because they had restaurants there. Mr. Schrieber stated the real influence of this has to do with the type of residents and the buildings themselves. He noted 50 Dedham Avenue is high end so people may have more than one car. It is not necessarily the location. It has more to do with the market for that type of product. Ms. Espada commented it seems to be one extreme or another with nothing in between. Mr. Schrieber noted it is also the size of the building.

Ms. McKnight noted the report mentions, with regard to 275 2nd Avenue, a percentage of affordable units. Some affordable-unit occupants may not own a vehicle. Ms. Espada noted that could be looked at for the MBTA Communities law compliance effort. They are trying to create more affordable housing in the areas with public transportation available. Mr. Schrieber noted the key is if you suddenly model everything off the worst-case scenario you would have excess supply. Mr. Crocker was curious to see what the parking demand at Charles River Landing is. Mr. Alpert noted the major point is 1.5 cars per unit is an excessive requirement. The number may not be 1.0, but 1.5 is excessive. Ms. Cohen did the calculations to see how much should be built in the Center. It should be something like 3,500 per By-Law requirements but the existing is 1,800. The actual counts across the time of day vary. Mr. Schrieber stated the Board asked for 3 times the available number. Mr. Crocker commented he never thinks of the Dedham Avenue lot as a parking resource. He feels it should be advertised.

Mr. Block noted the final report has been submitted to the Select Board. There were 13 findings for parking condition improvements. One recommendation is for zoning reform. Others related to improving awareness of parking supply and access to supply and optimizing it. He feels, if part of the solution is zoning, the Planning Board should work on it. Ms. Cohen discussed waivers requested and granted. She reviewed where the zoning code offers flexibility, where flexibility is offered via overlays and what overlays allow by right and by special permit. The overall recommendations are to reduce or eliminate parking minimums, consider parking maximums, reduce parking requirements for Mixed-Use developments, expand off-site parking opportunities (removing the land-ownership requirement), and expanding Transportation Demand Management by increasing and enhancing TDM requirements. The in-lieu fee program should be formalized and utilized. She noted the Town can use funds to make more coordinated improvements and should revise regulations to match across the study areas.

Mr. Alpert thanked the Stantec Team for the good presentation. Including bicycle rack requirements are supposed to encourage other modes of transportation but they are finding "if you build it they would come" does not work. He does not feel bike spaces are utilized. People are not using public transportation. Mr. Schrieber noted there is a need for more bike lanes. Mr. Alpert added that people need to adhere to bike lanes. He stated it would make sense to have a joint Planning Board/Select Board meeting where the public is invited, and which is well advertised, to discuss. Ms. McKnight noted people can bicycle on the sidewalks in Town, except in Needham Center, and such sidewalk-biking is safer for kids. She likes the idea of a joint meeting but feels the ZBA should be included and the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA). Mr. Block noted the CEA met yesterday and has named a number of priority recommendations to the Select Board but left the planning to the Planning Board.

Ms. McKnight stated that the report suggests, if a developer wants to build parking spaces at a rate more than needed, the developer could be made to share parking or pay a per space fee to help with initiatives. She does not see the rationale for a fee. It says the Town can serve as a mediator. If a special permit is involved for off-site parking, she would like to see the lease. Mr. Schrieber noted the Town would want to have shared parking agreements on file. The Town can become the agent for shared parking arrangements and educate and protect the Town's interests. Ms. McKnight stated they use special permits a lot in Town. She asked if the shared parking agreement was because a waiver was sought. Mr. Schrieber stated that is correct. He feels it should be said up front that the town requires applicants to say how many spaces they are using each year. That is better than a lease. Above a certain increment could be made sharable or there could be a payment in lieu. Ms. Espada asked if he had any examples of suburbs that have adopted this TDM. Mr. Schrieber stated Waltham, Salem, maybe Framingham, and Cambridge is at the beginning of it.

Mr. Alpert noted, if Mixed-Use shares parking, the Board needs to look at the nature of the uses. He agrees the Board should look at that with the parking requirements. He noted that was done at Temple Beth Shalom. There is a child center in the morning, religious school in the afternoon and the sanctuary at night. Each is at different times. He likes the idea of formalizing the analysis. Mr. Schrieber stated people should be educated about sharing and about liability. Ms. Espada left the meeting at 10:15 a.m.

Mr. Block stated there needs to be zoning reform for the parking By-Law to maybe begin in October or May. He would like to understand removing the minimum and moving toward the maximum only. Mr. Schrieber stated Stantec is at the end of their scope and their fee. He noted they will provide insight review and feedback. Mr. Block thought he heard Stantec would be part of the public meetings. Mr. Alpert noted that would be up to the Select Board, if the contract expires at the end of May and the scope of the work is complete, if they want to come up with more money. Ms. McKnight noted she had wanted a baseline parking study for downtown, since the Board frequently asks special permit applicants to hire someone to do a study. She asked if this study could be used, and the Board might not require applicants to do studies. Mr. Block is not sure if this could be used in lieu of site-specific parking studies.

Correspondence

Mr. Block stated he and Ms. McKnight met with Alex Clee, Needham Housing Authority Chair Reg Foster, Karen Sunnarborg and a consultant from the Cambridge Housing Authority. Mr. Foster came to the Planning Board in February to say the Housing Authority would pursue a friendly 40B with the ZBA. The purpose of this Chair/Vice-Chair meeting was to inform the Board that the Housing Authority may instead go to the October Town Meeting for a zoning by-law change. They are looking for financing and would need approval from the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) by October to get funding for that year. The Housing Authority sent a letter to the Planning Board, noting they would like to come before the Board in June. Mr. Alpert spoke with Mr. Foster, who told him DHCD would not talk to the Housing Authority until the zoning is in place.

Ms. McKnight noted, if Town Meeting has adopted the zoning to be sought by the Housing Authority, DHCD will process the application even though the Attorney General has not approved it yet. Currently there are 18 units per acre at Linden/Chambers. The Housing Authority wants 30 units per acre. Mr. Foster said at the meeting they would be focusing on Maple Street and on Linden Street. Mr. Block noted, on page 30 in the Planning Board meeting packet, there is a road map for the October 2023 Special Town Meeting. October 23 is a week before the end of October, by which they would need some sort of zoning by-law amendment approval. He is not sure the timing works. He would want a couple of Planning Board hearings on this and the language of the zoning would need to be finalized in the middle of the summer when everyone is away. Mr. Crocker noted that is a valid concern. He feels the Board could make it work if it was publicized in a lot of different places.

Mr. Block noted this is also going up to 4 stories. Ms. McKnight clarified there is one building at the rear of the property where the property changes elevation. She stated there was no support for 4-story zoning for the nearby Hartney Greymont site. She noted that Robert Smart suggested an overlay district, but she does not see the need when the only underlying uses are those allowed in single residence and general residence districts. None of the existing apartment zones fit the need. They will have to wait and see what is proposed. The Board may need to write up new apartment zones. They currently have Apartment 3 zoning and no land is zoned for it. She feels the Board could use that and create the dimensions needed. Mr. Block noted there would need to be a map change also.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Crocker, and seconded by Mr. Alpert, it was by a vote of the four members present unanimously:

VOTED: to adjourn the meeting at 10:38 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Donna J. Kalinowski, Notetaker

Jeanne S. McKnight, Vice-Chairman and Clerk