

Economic Development Committee

Town Hall · 40 Center Street · Fairhaven, MA 02719

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TOWN CLERK



PLACE OF MEETING: Hybrid - Town Hall and remotely via Zoom 2022 MAR 24 P 2: 14

DATE AND TIME: Thursday, January 20, 2022 at 6:30 PM

MEETING TYPE: Economic Development Committee

FAIRHAVEN,
MASS.

Quorum and Attendance:

Present: Kevin McLaughlin (Chair); Travis Rapoza; Jessica Fidalgo; and Bob Espindola.

Paul Foley, Planning Director, was also present.

Mr. McLaughlin called the meeting to order, reviewed attendance for a quorum and read the open meeting law for the record.

Review and Approve Minutes of the December 16, 2021 meeting

Mr. Rapoza made a motion to approve the minutes and was seconded by Ms. Fidalgo; vote was unanimous (4-0).

Correspondence: Members Conflict of Interest and Open Meeting Law Regulations and Forms

Committee members had been forwarded the Conflict of Interest and Open Meeting Regulations and Forms with the acknowledgment of receipt needing to be completed and returned to the Town Clerk's Office by March 31, 2022.

Additionally, Mr. Foley submitted the committee's annual report to be included in the full town report. This report summarized the activities of the EDC throughout 2021 with special mentions of the Route 6 project and the matching grants offered to various town projects.

Business Journal Headlines & Trends

Continuing from the last meeting, Mr. Foley summarized a number of relevant business journal articles for the committee.

The articles covered are as follows:

- The end of a return-to-office date (BBJ 12/17)
- Data shows Boston's retail vacancy rate has recovered from pandemic (BBJ 12/21)
- Census Bureau Projects U.S. & World Populations on New Year's Day (Census Bureau 12/30/21)
- Wu weighing higher developer fees, including for lab projects (BBJ 12/21)
- Wu cuts parking mandates at some affordable housing projects (BBJ 12/22)

- Amazon leases warehouse space in Bridgewater (BBJ 12/23)
- Despite inflation, pandemic, retail real estate on a road of recovery (BBJ 12/27)
- What's next for the BPDA under the Wu administration? (BBJ 12/27)
- How to split a \$4 billion public-spending pie: ARPA puts billions into Mass. Economy (BB 12/29)
- What the BPDA approved in 2021, by the numbers (BBJ 12/30)
- Amazon buys Westborough distribution center site for \$65M (BBJ 12/30)
- Playbook for 2022: How companies can rethink remote work in 2022 (BBJ 1/2)
- People are moving out of Mass., while few are moving in, studies suggest (BBJ 1/3)
- New ranking puts Mass. among worst in US for business tax climate (BBJ 1/7)
- How will the labor market evolve in 2022? Here's what experts predict. (BBJ 1/10)
- CVS Health to close one-in-10 stores over three years (PBJ 1/11)
- Rite-Aid to close 63 stores (PBJ 1/11)
- Holiday sales soar at Mass. small retailers this season (BBJ 1/11)
- Offshore wind giant takes bigger stake in Mass. Project (BBJ 1/12)
- Remote work is contributing to burnout. Here's how to combat it. (BBJ 1/12)
- Rhode Island Ready program to market pre-permitted industrial sites (PBJ 1/14)
- Economic outlook: challenges, optimism ahead (BBJ 1/17)
- Why hybrid workplace models could fall out of favor in 2022 (BBJ 1/17)
- Wu: State will allow Boston to withdraw its downtown waterfront plan (BBJ 1/18)

In response to the articles, there was a discussion over the "Great Resignation" trend resulting in an increasingly competitive markets for hiring, which require either raising salaries or offering perks for employees, and how that leads to shrinking margins for small and local businesses.

As well, there was discussion about how Boston mayor Michelle Wu's plan to withdraw Boston's downtown waterfront plan could affect MHP plans all along the Massachusetts coastline. Mr. Foley also mentioned speaking with the new Executive Director of the New Bedford Port Authority, Justin Poulsen, at the Seaport Economic Council Meeting, noting that the committee may want to invite him to a future meeting.

Web and Social Media Responsiveness: Civic Plus

Mr. Foley described the CivicPlus CivicOptimize webinar. Registrants will receive a copy of the presentation and he will forward that information to the committee. Mr. McLaughlin cited the Paso Robles, CA town website mentioned in the previous meeting. The site allows residents to receive information on different town updates, committees, and departments, giving citizens the option to custom tailor the information sent to them. He explained that even as an active Fairhaven citizen with positions on committees, some pieces of town business still escape his notice, giving specific examples of changes to regulations and zoning that affected his business. He would like to see more outreach on the part of the town to make it easy to involve citizens in local government.

Mr. Espindola brought up several steps that the town has taken to increase accountability and accessibility. He used the recent water ban as an example where citizens were unaware of how and where to sign up for updates from the town's existing RAVE communications system. Additionally, there is the concern that too many notifications can create an information overload that could lead to pertinent updates being missed. He would like to know what percentage of citizens make use of programs like CivicOptimize in the municipalities where they are offered.

Mr. Foley also brought up the possibility of submitting preliminary meeting agendas further ahead than 48 hours in order to have meeting information placed on the calendar sooner. Additionally, given that most issues take multiple meetings to resolve, being informed of even one meeting can help raise awareness.

Ms. Fidalgo found the format of the CivicOptimize email to be fairly convenient to navigate and read.

Mr. Espindola noted that he plans to suggest a program such as CivicOptimize during the Saturday, January, 22nd Special Select board meeting.

Action: Mr. Foley to forward the webinar to the committee members and carry over this agenda item to the next meeting.

Local Business Spotlight

There had been plans to invite a local business to this meeting but the process of choosing a local business and the format for presentation had not been developed yet. A discussion followed on how best to structure the spotlight for future meetings. Mr. McLaughlin suggested the format of a roughly 10 to 15-minute presentation to highlight the business within the town, giving them both exposure through the committee along with a forum to offer feedback to the town. He would like the spotlight to be open to any business within the town.

Mr. Foley suggested running an article in the Fairhaven Neighborhood News along with a posting on the website. Mr. Espindola and Ms. Fidalgo added that social media would also be a good avenue.

Action: Mr. Foley and Mr. Espindola to work together to write a press release to invite local businesses to be a part of the EDC's local business spotlight.

Recent assessments to waterfront property

Mr. McLaughlin presented concerns from waterfront property owners and marina operators in regards to increases to their real estate taxes. He reached out to the assessor's office to find out the reason behind the changes to their evaluations. The assessor's office significantly increased the value of several waterfront business properties, which resulted in a major real estate tax increase. While it is a relatively small number of businesses affected, they are important ones as part of the working waterfront and they are seeking abatements. He noted that raising the tax rates would be better received if it had been done over several years rather than this sudden jump.

When the discussion turned to the COVID funding the town had received, Mr. Espindola recounted that \$841,000 was received as part one of a two-part disbursement of ARPA funds, and an additional \$3,000,000 offered by Bristol County, though with certain rules on how that money can be used.

Mr. Espindola also clarified that the Select Board only voted on the tax shift between commercial and residential properties. Principal Assessor Del Garcia and the three members of the Board of Assessors are the ones who vote on these issues. This change in the real estate tax was due to a change in classification for those properties. Mr. Espindola also supported a step increase over time and suggested that the committee could ask a member of the Board of Assessors to speak on this issue.

After Mr. McLaughlin inquired if there was a correlation between the funds granted as compared to revenue lost by the town due to COVID, Mr. Espindola explained that these funds were distributed via a per capita formula. At a Bristol County Commissioners meeting, a decision was made to distribute the \$109,000,000 that the county received on a per capita basis rather than on a needs basis. He also doubts that the Board of Assessors took these COVID funds into account when making the classification changes.

Mr. McLaughlin expressed his frustration with the real estate tax increase in the middle of the COVID pandemic and how that action goes against the policies in place in town to support businesses.

Mr. Rapoza inquired if other municipalities have similar assessments on their marinas and waterfront businesses. Mr. McLaughlin explained the businesses currently pay an occupation fee along with a Chapter 91 license fee to occupy a certain square footage of the water, in addition to other fees, legal costs, and requirements by different boards. Also, several other towns do not assess marinas separately.

Mr. Espindola wanted to reach out to the Board of Assessors to get further information of how they came to this tax increase. Mr. McLaughlin also expressed his concerns that this decision was not fair to the business owners and this could have a ripple effect that would put businesses at a disadvantage.

Mr. Espindola cited the November 4, 2019 Select Board document from FY21, and its section on inter/intra government cooperation to improve services and reduce costs. This issue is a clear example of a change in taxes or policy that needs to be addressed, and he planned to do so at the Select Board special meeting.

Action: Mr. Espindola to reach out to the Board of Assessors on this issue along with bringing up this issue at the Select Board special meeting.

Union Wharf Feasibility Study Proposal Update

Mr. Foley met with the consultants at FXM and Foth Engineering via Zoom on January 19th. They provided a draft site assessment, though Mr. Foley requested some additional details for the final version. They also provided some proposed site improvements, with plans to make several iterations covering minimum to maximum amounts of investments. They would also create a few variations of the different proposals, noting the possible creation of new buildings and possible parking space arrangements. Mr. Foley will also conduct further interviews with Union Wharf users and boat owners.

Action: If possible, have Foth make a presentation on the work done so far at either the next EDC meeting or Marine Resources Committee meeting.

Mr. Foley hopes that this aspect of the project will be ready by spring. Mr. McLaughlin recommended that there should not be any parking around the edges of the marina since it could interfere with the boats. Mr. Foley agreed he thought parking should be on the interior and possibly marked for when it was available. Mr. Foley would also like to see improving the launch with an increase in destinations in the harbor.

RT. 6/240/Opportunity Zone Redevelopment Study, Town Planner Update

Mr. Foley is putting together a scope of services and RFP to hire consultants to help write a 40R Bylaw and develop graphic design guidelines. A separate consultant would be hired to work on transfer development rights.

With the site readiness group, they have completed phase 1 at 194 Bridge Street. Currently, it is being considered for usage with public safety and also as a location to move the transfer/recycling station. Phase 1 is also complete for the Drive-In property. Work on Phase 1 at Koopman Lumber Company is underway. There are concerns about an isolated wetland created inadvertently by improperly maintained drainage.

The goal was to have a 40R Overlay bylaw on the Town warrant for the spring 2022 Town Meeting but the timeline was affected by delays in receiving grants. As such, completing a 40R bylaw and design guidelines will either be handled at a special town meeting this fall or at next year's town meeting.

Any other business reasonably anticipated 48 hours prior to the posting of this meeting

Mr. Espindola brought up that SRPEDD had requested him and/or Mr. Foley present a spotlight presentation on the Phoenix Bike Trail and how it has impacted businesses along the way. The EDC could weigh in on its economic benefits. Mr. Foley is looking forward to further improvements such as adding a North-South corridor and connecting with more towns via the South Coast Bike Way Alliance. There are hopes that expanding the network would increase the economic impact. While studies often show a correlation between bike paths and economic benefits, it is hard to pin down the benefits specifically for Fairhaven beyond anecdotal evidence.

Mr. Rapoza suggested adding signs on the bike path to inform visiting bikers about local shopping and attractions. Mr. Foley noted that there were previous plans for way-finding signage and informational kiosks funded by the CPC that the bike committee is discussing updating. As the bike path network expands, Fairhaven and the various businesses in town should cater to that market. Mr. Espindola wanted to make sure that the path wouldn't become too commercialized but would be fine with local plaza owners advertising.

Mr. Foley brought up the Complete Streets Money and the town's plan to add bike lanes along Alden Rd to create the start of a North-South connection along the route of the various shopping plazas.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for February 17, 2022, with the possibility of being postponed one month.

Mr. Rapoza made a motion to adjourn and was seconded by Ms. Fidalgo. Motion passed unanimously (4-0).

Respectfully submitted,
Stephanie A. Fidalgo
Recording Secretary,
Economic Development Committee