

Economic Development Committee

Town Hall · 40 Center Street · Fairhaven, MA 02719



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

PLACE OF MEETING: Town Hall for Members & remotely via Zoom for the Public

DATE AND TIME: Thursday, June 22, 2023, at 6:30 PM

MEETING TYPE: Economic Development Committee

Quorum and Attendance:

Present: Cathy Melanson, Chair; Suzanne Dwyer, Karyn Ferreira, Patrick Carr, Jessica Fidalgo, Stasia Powers

Not present for this meeting: John Hinds.

Ms. Melanson called the meeting to order at 6:31 PM and read the open meeting law and explained the closed captioning functionality for the record.

Welcome to New Members:

Ms. Melanson welcomed the other members to introduce themselves as the committee now had several new members. She also noted that Mr. Hinds was in Canada and unavailable to attend this meeting. Ms. Ferreira has lived in Fairhaven since 1993 and opened Tropical Smoothie Café in 2013. She was excited to be joining the committee. Ms. Dwyer has lived in Fairhaven for nine years and works as a business coach and consultant. She joined the committee to find ways to encourage more small businesses to open in Fairhaven and to simplify that process. Ms. Powers has joined as the new Select Board representative.

For returning members, Ms. Melanson explained that she was the chair of both the EDC and the Planning Board and was currently sitting in as planner after Mr. Paul Foley had resigned. Ms. Jessica Fidalgo is also on the Planning Board and serves on the EDC as their representative. Mr. Carr also serves on the Planning Board as well as the Board of Appeals. Finally, Ms. Stephanie Fidalgo introduced herself as the recording secretary for the EDC and other committees.

Review and Approve minutes of the March 16, 2023 meeting:

Ms. Jessica Fidalgo made a motion to approve the minutes of March 16, 2023, and was seconded by Mr. Carr. Before the vote, Ms. Jessica Fidalgo requested that Ms. Stephanie Fidalgo verify if she attended the meeting as she was noted as being absent. The secretary promised to verify that fact before submitting the minutes to the Town Clerk.

Ms. Jessica Fidalgo amended her motion to approve the minutes of March 16, 2023, after checking her attendance for said meeting, and was once again seconded by Mr. Carr. The motion passed unanimously.

Correspondence:

While Mr. Hinds had sent Ms. Melanson a letter, he had sent it to her personal email address. As such, she did not feel comfortable printing it out from the Town Planner's office and wished to address this correspondence at the next meeting.

Use of EDC FY23 Funds:

There were some questions as to the exact amounts and state of the EDC FY23 funds since Mr. Foley's departure. Ms. Powers had spoken to Town Administrator Angie Lopes Ellison regarding the 40R consultants and Ms. Melanson promised to look through the files in the planning department for further information. As such, she suggested tabling the discussion until there was more information.

Ms. Fidalgo made a motion to table the discussion of the EDC FY23 funds until the next meeting and was seconded by Mr. Carr. The motion passed unanimously.

Planning for FY24:

Ms. Powers suggested that the planning discussion begin by defining the role of the committee for the new members.

Ms. Melanson explained that the main goal of the committee was to encourage businesses to open in Town, though the committee serves the whole Town rather than individual businesses. In recent years, the number of vacancies has gone down as new businesses have moved in all around the town. To facilitate further growth, the Town has been working on establishing 40R overlay districts to allow for more mixed-use areas. Ms. Melanson gave one example of what this could be, describing a building with a commercial storefront at the bottom with residential units above. She would also like to see a reduction in the number of empty parking lots and better utilization of the space, specifically citing the new Chipotle restaurant as an example, and noting that she would like to see something similar in the nearby bank building. A balance must be struck though between preserving the quaint beauty of the town alongside new growth, with Ms. Melanson noting planned improvements such as the upcoming Marisol Café which will help to revitalize Route 6.

Mr. Hinds, in his letter to Ms. Melanson, stated his willingness to act as a liaison with local businesses – going out and speaking to the owners to bring their feedback to the board. Ms. Fidalgo recommended that the new members read the EDC Mission Statement and the 2040 Master Plan to see the path of appropriate growth that the Town was aiming towards.

Ms. Powers defined the EDC's role as an advisory committee to the Select Board. She would like members of the board to give their advice and guidance as to where the Select Board should focus their

resources. She noted the upcoming Select Board strategy session and welcomed members to share their thoughts with her to bring to that session. Ms. Melanson suggested that the EDC could be invited to a Select Board meeting in the future to directly offer their feedback and speak of their support for Fairhaven's unique small businesses. Ms. Powers also stated that in the Town's process for hiring a new Planner, they were looking for someone with a strong economic development background. Finally, Ms. Melanson spoke of the importance of having business owners on this committee to ensure that other entrepreneurs feel that someone is here to help them.

Afterward, Ms. Melanson invited the new members to share their ideas, starting with Ms. Dwyer. She brought up her concerns with the amount of work it takes to move or open a business in Town and how many departments one must speak to. All of which can be a deterrent for small business owners and lead them to go elsewhere. She would like to see the process simplified with a clear blueprint. Additionally, she would appreciate the creation of a business directory on the website to make it easier to find local businesses, offering an anecdote about being unaware of Sea Witch Gifts until she went looking for a specialized crystal shop. Ms. Dwyer also had questions regarding why home-based businesses needed to speak to the Building Department before obtaining a business license. In response, Ms. Melanson suggested putting a checklist together and working to change the perception of the Town in the eyes of business owners and other applicants to the Planning Board.

Ms. Ferreira cited her own experience, having difficulties with submitting plans and meeting with the appropriate people. She wants to see further support and promotion for the local small businesses and agreed with the importance of striking a balance between growth and keeping the small-town feel. In particular, she would not like to see too many similar businesses, especially clustered together.

On population growth and housing, Ms. Melanson noted that the Town Population had remained stable at approximately 16,000 for the past 50 years. As for a way to increase housing, both Ms. Powers and Ms. Ferreira support the 40R overlay districts. Ms. Melanson, while supportive, noted that getting buy-in from the property owners in the larger plazas has been difficult. She suggested that Mr. Carr could give a presentation on 40R districts in the future for a better overview.

Given that she is not a business owner in Town, Ms. Fidalgo's views were closer to those of a cheerleader and suggested a reintroduction of the small business spotlight. Both she and Ms. Melanson agreed on the difficulty though on regularly getting attendees. She also voiced her support for updates to the zoning by-laws to allow for smaller minimum lot sizes and cluster zoning and the use of 40R districts to streamline the process.

Turning to Mr. Carr, he used Fairhaven Pharmacy as an example of a spotlight local business. He agrees with collaborating with more than simply business owners as average citizens can also offer valuable feedback. In regards to 40R, he would like to see the Town find ways to better attract investors via streamlining the processes and aiming for a more positive overall reputation to move good, legitimate ideas forward.

Mr. Carr then recounted his experience in Dartmouth and their process of holding Planning meetings with multiple department heads present to get instant feedback on projects during the meetings, which can speed up the process. Requiring a project to move through different departments, each operating on their own schedule, can increase the time a project takes, which also affects the bottom-line costs.

The Town should be able to offer quick answers on whether something can be done or not and keep projects moving at a steady pace.

In her time working in the Planning Department, Ms. Melanson noted that the new building commissioner, Randy Bassett, has been collaborating with her. Ms. Ferreira agreed with both her and Mr. Carr on streamlining the process and making it easier for businesses. Ms. Powers describes the process as very similar to custom service – that Town employees need to treat applicants with respect, guide them through the process, and find solutions.

Ms. Melanson recommended that all the members write up some feedback for Ms. Powers to bring to the Select Board. Building on that, Ms. Powers informed the committee of the Select Board's strategic meeting on July 15.

With the recent hires of the new Building Commissioner and Conservation Agent and the future new Panner, Ms. Melanson hopes to see positive changes going forward. Ms. Fidalgo cited the New Bedford EDC and planning department as a good example to follow and noted that they would be willing to talk with the Fairhaven EDC if invited. Ms. Melanson, Ms. Jessica Fidalgo, and Ms. Powers all agreed on increased social media promotion for local businesses with Ms. Stephanie Fidalgo suggesting speaking to Ms. Alyssa Botelho, who runs the Town's social media for further collaboration. Ms. Powers also suggested collaboration with Fairhaven TV.

The committee discussed the possibility of spotlight nights that would be open to any interested local business. Comparing the concept to New Bedford's AHA nights, Ms. Melanson suggested having local businesses present at the Concert Under the Stars series. Ms. Ferreira also cited the National Night Out as another opportunity for local businesses – even if it was just informational tables or booths. Ms. Fidalgo pointed out that given the event timetable, there was probably not enough time to put together an expansion of Concert Under the Stars for this year.

As for notes for the Select Board, Ms. Powers noted that the ones she had from this meeting were already sufficient and she noted the points she would share:

- A more welcoming and streamlined process with a clear blueprint for businesses,
- More promotion of local small businesses be it via a website directory, social media, or inclusion in other community activities,
- The Town as a supportive partner to local businesses,
- How to increase housing without losing the beauty of the Town.

She promised that she would bring back information from the Strategic meeting at the next EDC meeting. Once the EDC members had drafted a plan from their various ideas, she would like to invite them to a Select Board meeting to share with the full Board. In general, the committee would like to see positive change continue, do further outreach to local businesses to support and promote them and encourage communication between business owners and the EDC.

Going back to the concept of the local business spotlight, both Ms. Melanson and Ms. Fidalgo had spoken to the Rescue Café about attending a meeting. Ms. Melanson has also spoken to Cable Director, Derek Frates, about turning the local business spotlight concept into a show where they would interview different business owners around Fairhaven.

Mr. Carr turned the conversation towards the need for change, particularly in both population and economic growth, considering the cuts that would be required due to the failure of the 2.5% surcharge to pass. He spoke of his conversations with fellow 40R Working Group member, Will Gardner, on other towns in similar situations, specifically citing Morrisville, VT which had been working on balancing growth with maintaining its small-town feel. He would like to see further collaboration and compromise with residents to find viable solutions and research into other towns facing the same issues.

Ms. Melanson agreed with renovating different areas of Town, specifically referring to Route 6. But that requires finding and recruiting investors who are willing to fund new projects. Ms. Powers hopes that with the expansion of the Commuter Rail into New Bedford, it will also attract investment in Fairhaven. Ms. Ferreira agreed, noting the increase in development in New Bedford already, and Mr. Carr pointed out the importance of small apartment growth of 15-20 units at a time and incremental steps to encourage investment. Ms. Melanson brought up her conversations with the owner of the Citizen's Bank building as a place for where that could start.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting is tentatively planned for July 20, 2023.

The motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Fidalgo and seconded by Mr. Carr.

The meeting was called to a close by Ms. Melanson at 7:45 PM.

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

