Meeting Minutes
July 8, 2019

EDAB Members Present: Paul Saner, Anne Meyers, Susan Houston, Ken Lewis, Marilyn Newman, Al Raine, Donald Warner, Derrick Choi, Cliff Brown, and Tom Nally

EDAB Members NOT Present: Alan Christ, Carol Levin

Staff: Kara Brewton, Karen Martin, and Meredith L. Mooney

Guest Speakers: Select Board Member Raul Fernandez and Daniel Schwartz from Soofa

Members of the Public: Jennifer Gilbert, Wendy Machmuller, Jules Milner-Brage, and Richard Nangle

Materials Presented: Draft May 6th Meeting Minutes (5/6/2019); Draft June 25th Meeting Minutes (6/25/2019); PowerPoint presentation “Route 9 Corridor Study: Market and Development Opportunities” by Pam McKinney (6/25/2019); Link to Soofa video and memo from Pedestrian Committee member David Trevvett (5/23/2019); Draft Boylston Street Corridor Study Committee Charge (6/20/2019); and Draft Small Business Development Committee Charge

With a quorum present, Anne Meyers opened the meeting.

- Approval of Meeting Minutes:
  
  o The May 6, 2019 meeting minutes were unanimously approved as amended.

  o The June 25, 2019 meeting minutes were approved as amended by a vote of 9-0-1. Cliff Brown abstained from the vote.

- Debrief on Pam McKinney’s June 25th Presentation:

  o EDAB members asked staff clarifying questions about real estate consultant Pam McKinney’s June 25th presentation, which explored potential uses (i.e. office, lab, hotel, retail, housing, health care, mixed use and parking) along the Route 9 corridor to inform future Boylston Street Corridor Study Committee discussions.

  o The Brookline Interactive Group (BIG) will upload the presentation to YouTube soon.

  o Paul Saner announced that Brigham and Women’s had just purchased 830-850 Boylston Street. The purchaser’s tax-exempt status will likely increase other’s taxes given that 830-850 Boylston Street had previously generated $2 million in annual taxes.
- **Update from Select Board Member Raul Fernandez:**

  o Raul Fernandez presented his vision for the new Small Business Development Committee, which the Select Board will be voting on at its meeting the following day.

  o As a complement to EDAB’s focus on bigger picture economic development issues in Brookline, the Small Business Development Committee (SBDC) will explore additional ways in which the Town can support the development of small businesses in Brookline, maintaining a particular focus on supporting women and minority-owned businesses.

  o The solutions-oriented SBDC will examine the headwinds facing small businesses, study various tools to promote vibrant commercial areas (e.g. Business Improvement Districts, pop-ups, public markets, place making programming), and determine if the Town should be involved in recruiting and incubating small businesses.

  o Committee members will include residents, property owners, and experts in public art and small business assistance.

  o EDAB members were invited to ask questions and comment on the SBDC’s committee charge:

    ▪ Does it make sense to have an EDAB representative on the committee? Or will staff serve as the liaison?

        • Raul: An EDAB representative would be very welcome on the SBDC, but it’s not required in the committee charge.

    ▪ Conviser will be attending the September EDAB meeting to provide some additional insight into the Brookline retail market. The SBDC might be interested in that presentation.

    ▪ Will the group be looking at overall retail trends in Brookline and Eastern Massachusetts?

        • Raul: Yes. Some of the issues Brookline’s dealing with are regional, so it’s important to have that context when thinking about how to solve issues in our commercial areas.

    ▪ The work of the former Small Business Tax Exemption Committee would be a valuable resource and reference for the SBDC, particularly around the issue of defining small business, which is a term that can have many different meanings.

    ▪ A foreseeable challenge for the SBDC will be gathering data from businesses, an issue that arose during construction in St. Mary’s construction. Business impacted by the construction requested relief, but were very reluctant to share their financial information. This was also an obstacle in the Coolidge Corner Storefront Lease Study undertaken a few years ago.
- The Brookline Improvement Coalition (BIC) recently became a community development corporation. The SBDC should reach out to BIC to explore potential access to new grant funding and other resources.
  - Raul plans on attending an upcoming BIC meeting.

- Will the SBDC be considering alternative leasing models? For example, subsidizing rent through a community development corporation? Or through a public-private partnership?
  - Raul: There are many different models to consider (e.g. Boston Public Market, Bow Market), some of which are public-private partnerships.

  - Raul invited EDAB to continue to provide feedback and guidance to the new SBDC, which will hopefully be formed by September 2019.

- Boylston Street Corridor Study Committee:

  - Regarding the draft Boylston Street Study Corridor Study Committee charge included in EDAB members’ meeting packets, Tom Nally pointed out the long list of committee objectives and commented that it would be interesting to see how those objectives are prioritized by the committee. Paul Saner added that commercial development was one of 10 objectives.

- Soofa Presentation (Guest Speaker: Dan Schwartz, Government Affairs for Soofa):

  - Kara Brewton introduced Dan Schwartz from Soofa, a Cambridge-based start-up that installs and manages digital signs that serve as community message boards. The company has proposed a year-long pilot program with the Town which would include the installation of several Soofa signs in Brookline Village, Coolidge Corner, St. Mary’s, and Washington Square. Would EDAB be willing to recommend favorable action on this pilot program to the Select Board?

  - Dan Schwartz gave a short presentation about Soofa, their proposed pilot program, and a summary of Soofa’s outreach efforts to various Town departments, boards, committees, and elected officials.

  - Soofa hopes that the Select Board will vote on the proposed pilot program in late July or August.

  - EDAB member questions:

    - Approximately how many signs would be in Coolidge Corner?
      - Between 3 to 6 signs depending on community feedback.

    - Will the Planning Board weigh in on specific sign locations?
      - Karen Martin: Given that the signs will be located in the public way, the Department of Public Works will be weighing in on specific sign locations.

    - Will there be a revenue sharing agreement between the Town and Soofa from the business advertising proceeds?
- Yes. 20% to the Town and 80% to Soofa.
  - What’s the estimated revenue potential for the Town?
    - Soofa will follow-up with EDAB with municipal revenue from other comparable communities.
  - The signs would be gifted to the Town by Soofa.

- How is sign content controlled? And what happens when controversial content is called into question?
  - Soofa staff manages sign content based on a list of criteria and established guidelines.
  - The Town would have the ultimate decision over whether controversial content is appropriate or not.
    - Kara Brewton: A specific Town authority regarding those types of decisions has not yet been identified.

- How will the static vinyl poster on the back side of the Soofa sign be utilized?
  - Examples of potential uses include wayfinding map listing local businesses, other maps, etc.
  - The vinyl posters can be updated regularly (e.g. every several months).

- Has Soofa received any feedback on visual clutter?
  - Soofa works with the community to develop valuable, visually appealing content – not flashy or distracting signs.

- From the staff perspective, what are the potential negatives of the sign?
  - Kara Brewton:
    - Positive aspects:
      - Simple 4-bolt installation process would make for easy sign removal.
      - Effective outreach tool for local organizations, businesses, and the Brookline Arts Commission, which currently displays static posters.
  - Karen Martin:
    - The Planning Board expressed concerned about Soofa contributing to sidewalk and visual clutter – particularly following the e-scooter pilot program – and questioned the need for Soofa signage given social media and other communication resources.

- Anne Meyers added that she’s attending Soofa’s presentations to both the Coolidge Corner Merchant’s Association (CCMA) and the Brookline Chamber of Commerce. Both business organizations were very enthusiastic about these signs.

- Have any communities branded the Soofa signs to reflect the commercial area?
  - Yes, in Atlanta, local artists designed the backs of the signs to convey the unique character and identity of the neighborhood.

- A year is a long time, are there any fail-safes?
  - Kara Brewton: Yes, there would be provisions that the signs can be removed at any time.
Public Comment – Jules Milner-Brage: As someone who recently went through the process of getting a poster installed in one of the Blue Bikes kiosks, these signs appear to have real benefit to the business districts.

Anne Meyers asked if EDAB was prepared to vote on this pilot proposal. After some initial discussion about whether EDAB members have received enough information to vote on this recommendation to the Select Board, it was decided that the majority of EDAB members were comfortable with moving forward with a vote.

EDAB members unanimously approved the following recommendation to the Select Board:

- EDAB recommends the Select Board pursue the opportunity with Soofa with the following suggestions:
  - Ensure that there is no cash investment required by the Town;
  - Coordinate with appropriate staff/departments to work with Soofa to select sites that will have perceived maximum benefit and minimizing negative impact;
  - Appoint appropriate staff to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot program; and
  - Assure that the Town can terminate the pilot for any reason at any time without penalty.”

- Board Member Updates:
  - Land Bank Study Committee – Marilyn Newman:
    - The study committee has been meeting since the end of 2018.
    - The Land Bank Study Committee is considering recommending a fall Town Meeting warrant article to enact a 1% real estate transfer tax that would only apply to real estate transactions of $500,000 or more, which would require Home Rule legislation at the state level.
    - The proposal differs from the 2018 warrant article in that it doesn’t establish another government structure or different budget process for disbursement of the funds. Instead, it would allow for a 1% transfer tax to go into a revolving fund. The proposal no longer includes a land bank institution, but instead a real estate transfer tax to use as a resource to purchase land that would serve a public good.
    - The Select Board would then make recommendations to Town Meeting about how to appropriate those funds (e.g. for parks, open space, affordable housing, school expansion).
    - The Land Bank Committee is currently seeking feedback on the broader economic impacts of this type of proposal. Would it impact Town assessments and values? Where would the burden of this tax fall? How would a real estate transfer tax impact the types of larger development projects that EDAB works on?
    - EDAB Discussion:
      - What other Massachusetts communities have a transfer tax?
• Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket.
  • In recent legislative sessions, some municipalities have proposed transfer taxes to fund affordable housing.

• Does the tax apply to the $500,000 or only value beyond $500,000?
  • The first $500,000 is exempt, and any greater amount is taxed.

• Cliff Brown: The Land Bank Committee has spoken with the Brookline Fiscal Advisory Committee (BFAC). It seems likely that BFAC will make recommendations that conflict with this idea. These potential conflicts need to be discussed sooner rather than later.

• Ken Lewis: Most of the sites that we’ve looked at for redevelopment aren’t even close to highest and best use, so the 1% wouldn’t move the needle in terms of feasibility. The potential impact on the Town’s taxes isn’t clear; specifically, how much of the increased revenue from the transfer tax would be off-set by lower assessed valuations on commercial properties?

  ▪ Marilyn encouraged EDAB members to share any evidence-based policy information about this type of proposal with the Land Bank Study Committee.

  o Brookline Fiscal Advisory Committee (BFAC) – Cliff Brown

  ▪ Cliff Brown introduced the agenda item, but then had to leave the meeting and was unable to participate in the discussion.

  • The Town will be $28 million in the red if it continues to operate business as usual.

  • There are very few levers to pull to generate additional revenue: taxes, overrides, commercial development, and benefits from things like the marijuana tax, local auctions tax, etc.

  • BFAC is in the process of talking with various Town Hall departments. In a few weeks, BFAC will meet with Economic Development to determine potential magnitude of the commercial development lever.

  • BFAC has asked staff to address that very challenging question, and hopefully that exercise will enable BFAC members to embrace the need for more commercial development.

  • The committee already believes that economic development is critical. We’re trying to help BFAC estimate how big of a number should be incorporated into our model around economic development.

  ▪ Economic Development Division BFAC Presentation – Kara Brewton:

  • Configurations of potential prototypes for various uses along the Boylston Street corridor (i.e. medical office, lab, hotel, and residential) that
maximized commercial tax revenue for each site were presented, with the goal of providing a magnitude of a number, not to identify specific uses for certain sites, for potential commercial tax revenue from development along Boylston Street.

- A range of potential tax revenues were presented for each use.
- Depths of parcels were identified as limiting factors. For the purpose of the exercise, aggregation was assumed to be possible along Boylston Street, but not with adjacent residential parcels.
- Kara sought EDAB’s input on building value comparisons for various uses.
  - EDAB members commended Kara and Karen on their analysis of this challenging exercise.

- **CHAPA New Municipal Affordable Housing Engagement** – Paul Saner:
  - The Housing Advisory Board (HAB) is interested in applying for the CHAPA New Municipal Affordable Housing Engagement grant, which helps communities building support for affordable housing production.
  - HAB is seeking endorsements for various boards, committees, and organizations (e.g. Brookline Improvement Coalition).
  - Paul Saner suggested that EDAB vote in support of this grant for the Town.
  - **Motion:** All in favor of EDAB conveying its support for the HAB’s application and these resources in the Brookline community. The motion received unanimous support.

- **Staff Updates:**
  - **30 Webster Street Hotel Proposal** – Karen Martin
    - There will be a Planning Board meeting on the 30 Webster Street Hotel proposal to discuss issues that the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) wanted the Planning Board’s input on.
    - The project will return to the ZBA on July 18th with additional Planning Board input.
    - There are concerns about the project’s minimal hotel staffing model.
    - Paul Saner planned on attending the ZBA meeting and encouraged other EDAB members to join him.

- **Other Items:**
EDAB members inquired if Economic Development had conducted an exit interview with Gen Sou En, which recently closed. Staff reported that they had, although the feedback they’d received was confidential. That said, the challenges that the Town’s seating capacity limits, which are tied to zoning requirements in the Town’s zoning, was touched upon.

Meeting adjourned.