



Economic Development Committee Minutes
3 November 2023
12:00 PM

These are the minutes of the EDC meeting of 11/3/23, held virtually via Zoom.

Called to Order: 12:07 pm

EDC Members Present: Catherine Usoff, Michael Carpenter, Patty Sutherland, Ann Chang, Dan Malloy

EDC Members Absent: Shirley Ming, David Cote,

Also present: Julie Pierce, Fran Arsenault, Sharon Tchon Gruet, Paul Kampas

Preliminaries

Call the Roll – attendance is noted above.

I. Regular Business

- Review of meeting minutes from previous meeting October 13, 2023.
- Meeting minutes were approved by all members in attendance.

II. New Business

The meeting began with a brief presentation by Paul Kampas on the “Acton Leaf Blower Bylaw Initiative” that is being prepared for the Town meeting in the Spring 2024. The proposal would regulate and then eliminate the use of gas-powered leaf blowers over the next 3 years (2025 to 2027).

The proposal would mandate that commercial landscape companies and Acton residents be prohibited from using gas-powered leaf blowers starting in June 2027. It is estimated that approximately 50 commercial landscape businesses (not including all town-based landscape support staff and departments, e.g., cemetery maintenance) currently use this type of equipment.

The rationale for the proposal is to reduce noise and air pollution and to reduce greenhouse gases. While Mr. Kampas made bold statements regarding the economic benefits of switching to battery powered leaf blowers, there was a sense from some committee members that the financial impact on the commercial businesses operating in Acton was not accurately or fully represented.

Mike strongly contested the analysis that was included in the presentation and believes the environmental and economic statements are misleading. The assumption around usage of the battery powered tools was completely unrealistic (40 weeks/year @ 15 hours per week) and was central to his economic assumptions. In addition, the town would have to create a part-time position to support permitting and enforcement, which would not be offset by the costs associated with proposed fees.

When asked why the alleged “economic benefits” wouldn’t lead to broader and more rapid adoption of BLBs on their own without government intervention, Mr. Kampas did not have a legitimate answer why the town needed to get in the middle of this migration.

The discussion ended with a call to action for the EDC to get a better understanding of the financial impact on landscape businesses. The EDC should consider how education and incentives for contractors would be a better strategy than another mandated regulation administered by the town.

EDC Goal Setting for 2023-2024

Catherine described the revisions to the proposed EDC goals for 2023-24 (please see the repository for the FINAL goals document). There was overwhelming support for the content and format of the goals proposal. The addition of supporting activities linked to objectives was particularly helpful and provided a road map for how to proceed. The EDC voted to approve the revised goals and will build an operating plan based on the content.

We discussed the reference to the need for bylaws that better serve the needs of businesses. More specifically, we focused on the Historic District bylaws that are influencing the revitalization plans for South Acton. For example, the proposal for improvement to 27 School Street has been stuck in gear for years based on outdated logic that is preventing progress at the parcel. Julie has received feedback from businesses that the historic commission bylaws do not match the need to modernize buildings in the area (e.g., environmental compliance) and to allow them to contribute to the tax base of the town.

The consensus was that the EDC needs to be better educated on the historic commission bylaws (Fran will distribute the current version) and should develop a plan to engage with the HDC to determine how we can work together more effectively. The goal should be to influence the HDC attitudes toward economic development and propose options for how we can meet both parties’ needs. It will be more productive to better understand the historic commission bylaws and figure out how to work with them rather than attack the value of the bylaws.

EDC Work Groups 2023-2024

While the adopted 2023-24 goals represent a broad range of activities and engagement (e.g., Select Board meetings, monitoring the sewer commission., advancing ideas for the Town's economic development master plan and supporting ongoing activities championed by the Economic Development Director – upcoming Small Business Saturday), there were several activities that would require more focused planning.

Catherine identified 3 topics that would require subgroups to work on and plan out a strategy for how to advance them. The objective would be to advance a plan that could be assessed with measurable outcomes and a plan for communicating the results. These activities which were derived from the adopted goals include:

- EDC's Response to Leaf Blower Initiative (Dan and Catherine)
- Business Networking and Communication Plan (Mike and Patty)
- Review of the HDC Bylaws (Catherine)

During the meeting we attempted to align resources with each of the initiatives (as reflected above). Catherine will summarize the discussion and assignments around these projects and describe how to advance the work plans. We also had 2 members missing that should also be factored into the planning. We will attempt to operationalize these sub-groups at the next EDC meeting.

III. Update from Economic Development Director - Julie Pierce

Julie sent out in advance her update and briefly commented on upcoming events and requested assistance or volunteers to attend or participate as representation from the EDC. She also announced the release of the Acton Business Guide and the Acton Business Directory. Please see her write-up for a broader description of the activity.

The following table summarizes the commitments made by EDC members to this request.

Event	Date	EDC Participant
Small Business Saturday/Shop Local Promotion	Nov/Dec 2023	Distribute/Collect Signs: Catherine Usoff / Dan Malloy TBD - Outreach to Businesses
PowderMill Road Planning and Zoning Update – Community Information Session	Nov 15th @ 6PM	Ann Chang
West Acton Street Scape Survey	online	All

Other Economic Development – EDC Member Updates:

On Thursday (11/2) Catherine and Ann represented the EDC at the following event.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) hosted an event to forge meaningful connections between trails and downtowns, fostering inclusive communities in Acton as well as other neighboring communities. The workshop is part of the Regional Trails Creative Placemaking Strategy project that Metropolitan Area Planning Council's (MAPC) Arts & Culture and Transportation Departments are currently working on with the Minuteman Advisory Group on Interlocal Coordination (MAGIC) and MetroWest Regional Collaborative (MWRC) subregions, as well as with the Town of Acton and the Town of Holliston.

The meeting related to using art (both performance art and visual art) to bring the trails and the business communities together. The workshop was intended to provide participants with an understanding of the process of creative placemaking, how it can be used as a tool to build intuitive connections between trails and downtowns or commercial areas while fostering inclusivity in communities.

The feedback from Ann was that the group lacked meaningful criteria for how to consider the placement of art along the rail trail that would complement the business community and was biased toward making “Inclusion and Diversity” criteria the litmus test for the appropriateness of placement of art. She felt the meeting did not address the need for a meaningful connection between the rail trail and the businesses that surround it. Signage that places the businesses in the context of the rail trail would be more helpful. For example, giving bike riders information on where bike racks exist adjacent to the businesses along the trail would be a more tangible benefit.

Julie – it may be worth sharing this feedback with the sponsor and highlighting the need to be more focused on the interdependence between the rail trail and the businesses.

Other Brief Updates

Catherine reported that the South Acton Village is looking to be designated as a “Cultural Center.” No details on what that means or entails has been provided yet.

RH Adhesive’s meeting with the Conservation Commission is scheduled for 11/15

Next Steps and Action Items

Catherine will flush out the work group plan and coverage based on the discussion.

The meeting adjourned at 1:11 pm.

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