

Meeting Minutes Committee on General Government

April 3, 2023

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Meeting Recording:

Zoom meeting link: https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/-6LUa0Wi_obphm7ckPu_ttlXq5JRdSMiN9bsWD2DjxGIC5aNvJuyjWxeC28hMuU.aBw87qxUJHjVclAs

Members

Heather Shand, Chair

Byron Lane, Councilor Ward 6

Bruce Vogel, Councilor-at-Large

Other Participants

Sharif Zeid, Councilor Ward 1

Jennie Donahue, Councilor Ward 2

Jim McCauley, Councilor Ward 5

Connie Preston, Councilor-at-Large

Molly Ettenborough, Recycling & Energy
Manager

Andrew Levine, Chief of Staff

Andy Port, Planning Director

Agenda

- COMM00467 Municipal Buildings Report Sec 5-47
- COMM00464 Brown School RFI Cllr Zeid Redlines (COTW) -COMM 461 Brown School Gymnasium Considerations (COTW)
- ORDR00428 Request for Expressions of Interest (RFI) for Brown School Property (COTW)
- COMM00468 Brown School Proposal (COTW)

Meeting called to order at 5:32.

COMM00467 Municipal Buildings Report Sec 5-47

Molly Ettenborough – shared she worked with Andrew Levine on the report. FY22 was first year that we've met our goal of 20% total reduction in energy usage from the 2009 benchmark year. DPS vehicles and Schools account for a lot of the efficiencies.

Answers to questions from Councilors Vogel, McCauley and Zeid.

- We have no oil furnaces; Kelly and Brown schools had the last ones.
- Efficacy of the data is that it points to which buildings may need help getting to state goals of net zero by 2050. Ettenborough is in close contact with the state regarding goals and requirements and continually applies for grant money to help us reach those goals.
- We do not have current plans to generate our own electricity via solar panels. There are not many locations available to us, and we have done a good job over the years of utilizing programs like Community Solar.

Motion to receive and file passes 3-0.

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COMM00464 Brown School RFI Cllr Zeid Redlines (COTW) -COMM 461 Brown School Gymnasium Considerations (COTW)

Councilor Zeid opens by stating his positions.

- The gym should not be a part of the RFI.
- The city should retain control of the 1970 structure and we do not need the input of a third party on it.
- Getting a sensible outcome for the neighborhood is front and center for him.
- Strong deference should be given to the existing zoning.
- Getting an efficient RFI that drives action versus generating more questions.

Councilor Zeid steps through his redlines and suggests the following additions:

- With regard to financial feasibility, he believes ongoing feasibility is a consideration – what will it take to maintain the property over time?
- He also believes the city needs to set some guardrails on future development that consider the narrow streets in the neighborhood, etc.
- Zeid added language regarding transparency, to know which developers were invited to submit versus those that submitted an unsolicited response to the open RFI.

Chair Shand shares how she wants to give voice to the various preferences she has heard:

- Retaining the gym and use some of the first floor for municipal office space.
- Tear down the gym and build affordable housing, potentially adding a few more units where the gym was located.
- Asking Ethan Manning to step everyone through those options from a financial perspective. What would it mean longterm to have the gym and office space as municipal property? What are the various considerations in terms of the city's affordable housing inventory and qualifying for low-income tax credits?

Councilor Vogel believes the Ad Hoc RFI was open enough to include the gym and municipal space and affordable housing. It included instruction to developers that if the building will not feasibly support all those uses, tell us why. He believes the redlines introduce dissention into the document.

Vogel says he is agnostic on the gym, and believes affordable housing and 40B protections are far greater needs for the city than retaining the gym. He does not know from a development / refurbishment perspective what is feasible for the building; and believes an open RFI is the way to find out.

Councilor Zeid advocates for settling the question on the gym before an RFI goes out. He believes going out to market is the anti-thesis of public policy. He also does not support declaring any municipal property surplus as long as there is a potential use for it.

Councilor Vogel believes it is vital to first establish that affordable housing is a goal. And if we can't get affordable housing and retain the gym, what do we do?

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Councilor Donahue feels a level of stewardship for the building as the Ward 2 councilor.

- She has consistently prioritized affordable housing as a need. She receives constituent calls from senior residents who are faced with being priced out of Newburyport and need an affordable housing option. Donahue called it a “dire need” for the city.
- She notes that rehabing the gym and ground floor would cost many millions of dollars. She notes how few people a gym and offices would serve, and also notes how the Council continues to debate spending a similar amount on NYS at Low Street even though that facility would serve many more people.
- Donahue said that locating a municipal structure in such a dense residential neighborhood just “doesn’t add up” for her.

Councilor McCauley:

- Believes the assessed value in the objective is incorrect. It is stated as \$6.3 million and he believes the 2022 assessment is \$9.3 million.
- Challenged the work of the Ad Hoc Committee as not living up to its charter to find the best uses for the property by emphasizing affordable housing.
- Notes placement in affordable housing is done by lottery and there’s no guarantee that Newburyport residents will get in.
- Restates that he is a fan of the gym as community space.
- Shares he does not believe the city is a good partner in housing development and states that building affordable housing will require city investment. He believes we can get affordable units built on the property while retaining the gym and without needing an investment. His rationale is that if we retain the gym and sell the other buildings for \$6 million, those proceeds will fund refurbishment of the gym, or potentially other city projects.
- His concern is that a new RFI is going to get us the same information we got in 2017. He believes issuing an RFI is “kicking the can down the road”.

Chair Shand leads detailed discussion on the redlines among the councilors. Planning Director Andy Port was consulted on some of the redlines.

Agreement reached on many redlines. Remaining item is whether to include the gym in the RFI or decide it will remain a city asset and exclude it from the RFI.

Director Port will try to capture all the amendments in a draft. Chair Shand

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Public Comment

Stephanie Niketic – agrees that we should require a response that complies with current zoning. She advocates for a dedicated public meeting before issuing the RFI. Chair Shand agrees a meeting dedicated to public comment will be held before the RFI is issued. She also wants to hear from the Finance Director and the Affordable Housing Trust before the RFI is issued.

Jane Snow – she believes we’re putting the cart before the horse in these deliberations because we don’t know where we are headed. She notes the recent public session Amesbury held on affordable housing. Snow also notes recent news reports that developers receive public funding for affordable housing and the units built aren’t actually what low-income people can afford. She urges us to internally gather information such as what is our current housing inventory (Sullivan building, Steam Mill, etc) and make this a broader, more fact-based discussion.

Committee adjourned at 7:10 pm.