

DRAFT

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Thursday, August 8, 2024 @ 6:30 pm

Moved to Town House, 17 Common Street, from Heritage Park
as Noticed Onsite due to Rain / Inclement Weather

DRAFT MEETING MINUTES

7 Meeting Summary: The EDC discussed the impact of zoning regulations on commercial businesses and housing affordability in Southborough, updates to the EDC tracker, meeting minutes, strategies to improve the EDC's recruitment and visibility efforts, and expectations from constituents. EDC members emphasized the importance of tracking milestones, resources in local government, and solutions to wastewater capacity.

1. Call to Order

EDC Chair Michael Nordstrom called the meeting to order at 6:46 p.m.

EDC present: Karen Anglim (KA), Khoi Nguyen (KN), Michael Nordstrom (MN)

Town/Contract Staff present: EDC Coordinator Leah Emerson (LE)

2. Administrative

a) Housekeeping item | Approval of EDC signatories Chair M. Nordstrom and EDC Coordinator L. Emerson on ONE FORM per Town Accountant Carla McAuliffe

MOTION: KA moved to make Chair Michael Nordstrom and EDC Coordinator Leah Emerson signatories for EDC-related invoices, budget items, and EDC communications and correspondence, seconded by KN.

K Anglim-Aye, M Nordstrom-Aye, K Nguyen-Aye (3-0-0)

b) Review and approval of 3/20/24, 5/15/24 and 5/22/24 draft EDC meeting minutes

LE and KA discussed the approval of minutes, upcoming meetings, and venues. MN requested meeting materials via email a day or two in advance to allow enough time to review the information before the next meeting.

MOTION: MN moved to approve the EDC's March 20th, May 15th and May 22nd, 2024 draft meeting minutes, seconded by KA.

K Anglim-Aye, M Nordstrom-Aye, K Nguyen-Aye (3-0-0)

c) Review EDC Tracker | MN asked if there were any action items from the previous meeting. LE replied that the AI transcription may have some, but they needed to be verified. LE said that the AI generated transcriptions of EDC meetings too often contain extraneous information, discussion topics out of order, without proper context, and with numerous inaccuracies, but that it was useful for prompting her memory and identifying action items. She said she would add action items to the tracker upon verification, as needed.

MN and LE discussed the importance of tracking developments as part of the EDC's charge in which the EDC has an interest. MN was concerned about short-term action items and following up on them. LE emphasized the differences between the private and public sector, which proceed at a vastly different pace due to the legal requirements governing local government processes. Practically speaking, MN and KN were also looking for the best way to access and share files using their Town Microsoft 365 account.

EDC Resources | For the sake of productive meetings, LE also offered to share resources on Roberts Rules of Order and Planetizen that would be helpful to the EDC. LE, KA and MN discussed zoning laws and their impact on communities based on KA and MN's completion of the Planetizen course 'How Zoning Shapes Cities, Communities and Regions' by Jenny Schuetz. Ms. Schuetz conducted research in 187 Massachusetts cities and towns around greater Boston on a project led by zoning policy expert Amy Dain, principal of Dain Research. LE recommended Amy Dain's report 'Exclusionary by Design' re: well documented, well researched exclusionary zoning practices in MA as well as her 'Upzone Update' newsletter, published in partnership with the Boston Foundation's research center, Boston Indicators.

Implications for Housing and Local Businesses | LE and KA discussed the impact of ADUs on single-family zoning in Massachusetts. KN agreed that it's important to bring back the flexibility of zoning laws to accommodate changing lifestyles and demographics. They saw the potential for gentle density, the importance of local regulations working in tandem with the new laws, as well as the complexity and challenges in implementing updated zoning policies, particularly in the face of resistance from long-time residents.

The EDC is concerned that outdated zoning regulations in Southborough have led to business 'leakage' to surrounding towns. In light of a recent loss of a fitness-based business, LE suggested advocating for zoning amendments to allow more uses in the IP - Industrial Park zoning district, citing outdated use restrictions as a contributing factor in the gym's relocation to Westborough.

MPIGs | LE provided Planning Board member and Master Plan Implementation Committee Chair Debbie Demuria with a tracker documenting current EDC work related to 2021 Master Plan Implementation Goals for Debbie's biannual report to the Planning Board. LE is also in the process of updating the DBA spreadsheet with larger business entities in Southborough that are solely registered with the State Corporations Division. She continues to share the DBA spreadsheet with constituents upon request.

EDC Recruitment, Visibility and Promotion | Committee members discussed future meeting locations, events and branding materials. LE feels that increasing the EDC's visibility at local events, by sporting EDC branded collateral, etc. might be an easy way to pique interest and to connect through casual conversations in order to raise awareness about the EDC and its activities.

Meal Tax Increase | LE brought up a meal tax increase and asked whether the EDC wanted to advocate for its implementation with the Select Board. The Healey-Driscoll Administration's Municipal Empowerment Act gives MA cities and towns the option to increase their meal tax from .75% to a flat 1%, a modest .25% increase. Revenue from the local meal tax increase goes directly into the general fund. LE pointed out that the meal tax isn't paid solely by residents but workers and visitors as well, and that if EDC members dine in neighboring towns, they're likely paying a meal tax to that municipality rather than Southborough. MN wanted more information before advocating for an increase to the Select Board. LE recommended that EDC members meet with local officials such as the Town Assessor, the Town Administrator, etc. to get their questions answered and to learn more.

d) Coordinator Report

Business updates | LE mailed a note of welcome to Walker Development signed by the EDC via USPS. LE said that zoning issues continue to be a concern for realtors, brokers and developers, with commercial property sales at an all-time low post-pandemic. Conversely, LE and KN noted that many smaller businesses can't afford the high lease rate at corporately owned Southborough locations. KA shared that her local salon, Hashtag Beauty at Town Center in Cordaville, may be displaced by a new tenant and wondered if LE could put together a list of properties where the salon might relocate. MN supports helping businesses by providing information

on zoning and potential options for relocation and/or expansion. Likewise, KN wanted to confirm that an interested party is pursuing the proper licenses (entitlements) to open a restaurant at the former Tomasso location on Route 9. LE explained that businesses are responsible for relinquishing a liquor license when they vacate the premises in Southborough before the Town can issue a new license. She said she would keep them posted on the status at that location and would assist the beauty salon owner in the meantime.

One Stop FY26 Route 9 Zoning draft application | LE reiterated that the Planning Board needs MBTA Communities zoning to pass in order to more fully participate in a One Stop grant application process for Route 9, as planning staff will need to contribute time toward putting a grant application together. The Select Board has taken the lead in working with the Planning Board to that end.

3. Discussions:

Review of EDC FY25 Budget - Other Contracted Services | LE expected that a final draft of the Lombardo Associates Wastewater Management Action Plan would be furnished shortly by grant project manager Claire Reynolds (CR). Similar to her suggestion at July's EDC meeting, LE recommended a not-to-exceed contract for the fiscal year to continue the work, which could be reasonably and easily covered under the EDC's FY25 budget. When MN and KN questioned the best course to take, LE offered that Town Administration could provide guidance in executing a contract.

4. Public Comment

None.

Next Meeting | September and October EDC meetings TBD pending scheduling poll results among EDC members.

5. Adjourn

MOTION: KA moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:12 pm, seconded by MN.

K Anglim, M Nordstrom-Aye, K Nguyen-Aye (3-0-0)

REFERENCED ITEMS | DOCUMENTS at 8/8/24 EDC Meeting

1) EDC Tracker spreadsheet, 8/24

2) Master Plan Implementation Goals EDC spreadsheet, 7/24

3) *Municipal Empowerment Act* Press Release, 1/19/24

4) *Report: Sales in 495 West down 91% so far in 2024, as MetroWest office landlords deal with vacancies*, Worcester Business Journal article, 7/29/24

Category	Responsible Party	Tasks - Goals - Objectives	Issues-Obstacles	Actions	Partners-Contacts	Projected Completion
Meeting Protocol	MN, KN, KA, LE	Review Robert's Rules of Order for basic understanding of meeting practices and protocols for timely, orderly meetings	Common issues		Vanessa Hale MMA	Ongoing
Zoning	KN	Take Planetizen course " How Zoning Shapes Cities, Communities and Regions " by Jenny Schuetz	In order to have an informed discussion re: economic development, businesses and potential businesses in Southborough, a basic understanding of zoning, its history, application and current zoning-related issues, this course is required . EDC members should also familiarize themselves with Southborough zoning and its basic provisions, use restrictions and dimensional requirements within current local bylaws.	EDC approved \$3k for Planetizen as a training and educational resource for the EDC, the PB, and some members of the ZBA through 6/25. Karen Anglim completed the course as requested by the 7/18/24 EDC meeting. Michael completed course. Please avail yourself of this resource.	Planetizen Rep Victor Castillo	8/7/24
EDC	MN, KN, KA	EDC recruitment	Time / opportunity / suitability. Reminder: all current EDC member's terms end on 6/30/25	LE is working on EDC branded items for the committee to be presented by or before the 9/24 EDC meeting (below)	CCR, VA, MP, SB	5/25
EDC	LE	Create draft welcome postcard for businesses relocated to and recently opened in Southborough	Need to fine tune logo in vector program (Affinity Designer or Inkscape)	See draft marketing materials for samples.	EDC	10/24
EDC	LE	Website updates	Time constraints, needs an overhaul / updates / reorganization.	Reviewed Economic Development and organizational structure in 17 nearby cities and towns, and created a spreadsheet in the process with hyperlinks to municipal websites. Some are worse than ours, some are better. Good exercise as an overview, providing ideas for website updates.	IT	Ongoing
EDC	MN, KA, KN	Review Lombardo Associates Wastewater Management Action Plan for Route 9 and DT Southborough	Need Select Board review, guidance on next steps, with the SB taking the lead on wastewater solutions.	EOEEA grant project manager Claire Reynolds furnished the final report 8/9/24. Provided the SB with both W & S and Lombardo Associates wastewater reports on 9/10/24 .	CCR Select Board	9/24
EDC	MN, KA, KN, LE	Review 9/30/24 Town Meeting Warrant	Attendance at Town Meeting	Attend Town Meeting and VOTE!	Select Board	9/30/24
Town	EDC SB	The Municipal Empowerment Act bill gives municipalities the option to increase their hotel, motel, and other rental tax from 6% to 7%, and their meal tax from the set .75% to 1% . Does the EDC want to advocate this to the SB to consider? Meal tax revenue: FY23 \$119,348 FY24 \$124,718 a 4.5% year-over-year increase	Time and Town priorities	Research specifics	Town Admin Select Board	3/25

Category	Responsible Party	Action Items per Otter.ai	Follow-up	Partners	Completed
Business Assistance	LE	Look into available commercial properties for relocating hair-salon business	Emailed list of properties with available s.f. and zoned for use	KA	8/12/24
Administrative	LE	Set dates for September and October EDC meetings via Google Form survey	Emailed Google Form survey Sun 8/11/24	KA, KN, MN	8/11/24
Review	MN, KA, KN	Review Lombardo Associates Wastewater Management Action Plan	Final report provided by Claire on Fri 8/9/24. Provided a copy of both reports to Select Board on 9/10/24 .	CCR	9/24
Review	LE	Send EDC tracker spreadsheet to committee members	Emailed updated EDC tracker	KA, KN, MN	9/11/24

Category Lead		Tasks - Goals - Objectives	Actions	Issues - Obstacles	Partners-Contacts	Projected Completion
MPIG	SB, TA	1.7 Apply the findings from the Wastewater Management Feasibility Study and find solutions to wastewater issues, including development of localized wastewater treatment plants, using current technology where feasible. Seek grant funding to support wastewater management. Track technological developments to enable more effective, large scale wastewater treatment in the future.	Claire Reynolds retained Lombardo & Associates, Weston & Sampson and former town BOH Director Paul Pisinski to evaluate locations that can accommodate wastewater treatment and disposal through pre-feasibility reports and analysis via a 2022 EOEEA grant award. Subsequent reports were issued by Weston & Sampson in July '23 and by Lombardo Associates in July '24. Claire will be sharing these with the SB for review and consideration.	The Select Board needs to take the lead on pursuing properties and wastewater solutions downtown and townwide. The National Grid parcel behind the Southborough House of Pizza is contaminated. National Grid's asking price is well above what the town is willing to pay for a site where hazmat remediation is likely needed. The most promising site is 33 School Street, a Tony Kwan-owned property that was permitted as a solar and septic field, the latter of which has the capacity to service downtown and potentially wastewater from other town locations.	CCR	2028 2030
MPIG	PB	3.1 *Increase the use intensity for currently underutilized parcels.	Working with the SB and PB on a FY26 One Stop grant application for Route 9 zoning review and analysis.	Requires zoning amendments to the I, IP, BV and BH zoning districts.		2027 2028
MPIG	EDC	3.2 *Increase commercial tax revenue by reducing office vacancies and encouraging development of targeted, high potential sites, such as Dell EMC.	" " "	Zoning amendments that allow for mixed use (multiple uses) are needed to overcome the single use provisions within the current bylaw that govern all town parcels with the exception of the Downtown District.		2027 2028
MPIG	LE	3.3 Improve Southborough's commercial marketing by distinguishing it from the towns of Westborough, Framingham, Northborough, Marlborough, Ashland and Hopkinton.	An FY25 One Stop grant application was submitted for wayfinding around the Downtown District in preparation for Southborough's 300th birthday in 2027; this branding exercise will provide the basis for future branding and marketing efforts for the villages.	Limited hours and capacity (19.5 hrs / wk).	Tricentennial Committee	2027 2028
MPIG	EDC, PB, SB	3.5 *Continue to look for ways to leverage the Route 9 corridor for increased CIP - Capital Improvements Program tax revenue, e.g. changing zoning to allow taller buildings, or creating a DIF - District Improvement Financing district.	Working with the SB and PB on a FY26 One Stop grant application for Route 9 zoning review and analysis.	The first step before introducing a CIP or DIF are zoning amendments to the I, IP, BV and BH zoning districts.		2028
MPIG	EDC, PB, SB	3.7 *In collaboration with the PB, explore the opportunity to revise Route 9 zoning bylaws to allow for mixed use development and taller buildings with the aim of reducing vacancy and providing expanded amenities to offices and residents.	" " "	Limited resources and capacity due to the PB's current obligations and workload (including MBTA Communities).		2024 2027
MPIG	EDC, SB, TA	3.9 Evaluate options for resourcing grant research and application processes, especially for large scale projects that would be difficult or expensive for the Town to support on its own, including wastewater, connectivity and targeted development through DIF and other programs.	Claire Reynolds retained Lombardo Associates, Weston & Sampson and former town BOH Director Paul Pisinski to evaluate locations that can accommodate wastewater treatment and disposal through pre-feasibility reports and analysis via a 2022 EOEEA grant award (see above).	Longer term undertaking and endeavor. Requires involvement from the SB, coordination and outreach to their contacts in surrounding municipalities. In addition to possible state grants, federal grant opportunities should be researched and evaluated to help meet these goals.	CCR	2025 2030
MPIG	EDC, PB, SB	PS 3.6 *Evaluate options for more intensive commercial development along Route 9, with activities such as selective rezoning, building wastewater treatment capacity, etc.	Claire Reynolds retained Lombardo Associates, Weston & Sampson and former town BOH Director Paul Pisinski to evaluate locations that can accommodate wastewater treatment and disposal through pre-feasibility reports and analysis via a 2022 EOEEA grant award Working with the SB and PB on a FY26 One Stop grant application for Route 9 zoning review and analysis.	Requires zoning amendments to the I, IP, BV and BH zoning districts.	CCR	2025 2027
EDC	EDC, PB, SB	We should ensure businesses can locate to appropriate locations in Southborough - EDC Chair Michael Nordstrom	Working with the SB and PB on a FY26 One Stop grant application for Route 9 zoning review and analysis.	*Zoning amendments are needed in the I, IP, BH and BV zones to enable us to better meet this need, and to streamline the permitting process administered by the ZBA, PB and the BC per town bylaws.		2025 2026

Category	Lead	EDC 2021 Master Plan Implementation Goals	Issues - Obstacles	Partners-Contacts	Projected Completion	Completed
1.0 Downtown		Enhance the Downtown to provide a vibrant hub that is attractive to both businesses and residents				
	EDC, SB	1.5 Identify potential Downtown District • DD redevelopment sites and take a leadership role in building relationships and working with current owners and potential developers on the purchase, leasing or conversion into mixed use projects consistent with DD, including the National Grid parcel				
	SB, TA	1.6 Evaluate the options and develop plans for creating a 'community green space' within the Downtown District.				
	SB, TA	1.7 Apply the findings from the Wastewater Management Feasibility Study and find solutions to wastewater issues, including development of localized wastewater treatment plants, using current technology where feasible. Seek grant funding to support wastewater management. Track technological developments to enable more effective, large scale wastewater treatment in the future				
	SB, DPW	1.8 Gain approval from CSX Transportation to allow the Town to replace the pipes under the tracks on Main Street in order to resolve the stormwater issues in the Downtown area				
	EDC, DPW	1.9 Where appropriate, encourage preservation by repurposing historical buildings and ensure DPW plans for Downtown align with historic and beautification priorities • HC				
	EDC, SHOPC	1.10 Work with SHOPC • Southborough Housing Opportunity Partnership Committee to determine whether mixed use development within the Downtown District can support affordable housing needs and goals				
2.0 Villages		Encourage the sense of community within Southborough's villages by supporting the expansion of local businesses through better infrastructure and access				
	TA, SB	2.1 Develop a comprehensive listing of Town owned properties that are already developed; evaluate and prioritize their use and potential based on agreed upon criteria				
	DPW	2.2 Define, plan and implement improvements to the sidewalk network for the Fayville, Cordaville and Southville Village Districts				
	DPW	2.3 Increase parking in the Fayville Village District, e.g. by reconfiguring playground parking				

	DPW, SB, EDC	2.4 Connect the commuter rail station to office and commercial areas in Town via improved sidewalks, shuttle bus service and bicycle lanes			
	PB	2.5 Develop an approach and plan to enhance retail convenience around the commuter rail station in accordance with expected 'MBTA Communities Housing Choice' development			
3.0 Route 9		Develop an economically strong, diverse and self-sustaining business community, i.e. an economic engine along the Route 9 corridor			
	PB, SB	3.1 Increase the use intensity for currently underutilized parcels			
	EDC	3.2 Increase commercial tax revenue by reducing office vacancies and encouraging development of targeted, high potential sites, such as Dell EMC			
	EDC	3.3 Improve Southborough's commercial marketing by distinguishing it from the towns of Westborough, Framingham, Northborough, Marlborough, Ashland and Hopkinton			
	SB	3.4 Stay connected with the state and actively participate in the Route 9, I-90 and I-495 highway projects			
	EDC, PB, SB	3.5 Continue to look for ways to leverage the Route 9 corridor for increased CIP • Capital Improvements Program tax revenue, e.g. changing zoning to allow taller buildings, or creating a DIF • District Improvement Financing district			
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	PB	3.7 In collaboration with the PB, explore the opportunity to revise Route 9 zoning bylaws to allow for mixed use development and taller buildings with the aim of reducing vacancy and providing expanded amenities to offices and residents		SB, PB	
	SB, EDC	3.8 Establish a quarterly 'roundtable' meeting between the EDC, PB, local and regional business leaders to discuss infrastructure and business issues, including last mile transit solutions, encouraging the use of public transportation, reducing congestion and environmental impacts			
	EDC, SB, TA	3.9 Evaluate options for resourcing grant research and application processes, especially for large scale projects that would be difficult or expensive for the Town to support on its own, including wastewater, connectivity and targeted development through DIF and other programs			

	PB, EDC, SB	<i>PS 3.6 Evaluate options for more intensive commercial development along Route 9, with activities such as selective rezoning, building wastewater treatment capacity, etc</i>		SB, PB		
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Category Lead		Tasks - Goals - Objectives	Actions Taken	Issues - Obstacles	Partners-Contacts	Projected Completion
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	SB, TA	<i>1.6 Evaluate the options and develop plans for creating a 'community green space' within the Downtown District.</i>			
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	EDC, SHOPC	<i>1.10 Work with SHOPC • Southborough Housing Opportunity Partnership Committee to determine whether mixed use development within the Downtown District can support affordable housing needs and goals</i>			
2.0	Villages	<i>Encourage the sense of community within Southborough's villages by supporting the expansion of local businesses through better infrastructure and access</i>			
	TA, SB	<i>2.1 Develop a comprehensive listing of Town owned properties that are already developed; evaluate and prioritize their use and potential based on agreed upon criteria</i>			
	DPW	<i>2.2 Define, plan and implement improvements to the sidewalk network for the Fayville, Cordaville and Southville Village Districts</i>			
	DPW	<i>2.3 Increase parking in the Fayville Village District, e.g. by reconfiguring playground parking</i>			
	DPW, SB, EDC	<i>2.4 Connect the commuter rail station to office and commercial areas in Town via improved sidewalks, shuttle bus service and bicycle lanes</i>			
	PB	<i>2.5 Develop an approach and plan to enhance retail convenience around the commuter rail station in accordance with expected 'MBTA Communities Housing Choice' development</i>			
3.0	Route 9	<i>Develop an economically strong, diverse and self-sustaining business community, i.e. an economic engine along the Route 9 corridor</i>			

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	SB, EDC	3.8 Establish a quarterly 'roundtable' meeting between the EDC, PB, local and regional business leaders to discuss infrastructure and business issues, including last mile transit solutions, encouraging the use of public transportation, reducing congestion and environmental impacts			
	EDC, SB, TA	3.9 Evaluate options for resourcing grant research and application processes, especially for large scale projects that would be difficult or expensive for the Town to support on its own, including wastewater, connectivity and targeted development through DIF and other programs			
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Menu



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(n) > Governor Maura Healey and Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll (/orgs/governor-maura-healey-and-lt-governor-kim-driscoll)

PRESS RELEASE

Governor Healey and LG Driscoll Announce Municipal Relief Package to Help Local Government Deliver Critical Services and Improve Operations

Governor also announced new Chapter 90 legislation and significant new Local Aid for cities and towns to be included in Fiscal Year 2025 budget

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

1/19/2024

Governor Maura Healey and Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll

Executive Office for Administration and Finance

Massachusetts Department of Transportation

MEDIA CONTACT

Karissa Hand, Press Secretary

Phone

[617-725-4025](tel:617-725-4025) (tel:6177254025)

BOSTON — Today, at the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA)'s Annual Meeting, Governor Maura Healey and Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll announced that they will be filing a significant package of municipal reforms to help cities and towns generate the resources they need to maintain and deliver vital services, streamline operations and attract talented workers to local government.

The Municipal Empowerment Act will expand on tools available to municipal leaders to generate revenue by allowing them to increase local option taxes on meals and lodging. The bill would also create a new local Motor Vehicle Excise surcharge option – a provision that could benefit every city and town in the state. The bill would also make permanent a number of popular COVID-era allowances for hybrid public meetings, outdoor dining permits and to-go cocktail sales.

"Massachusetts is home to 351 cities and towns that are the bedrock of our state. From day one, our administration has been committed to giving them the support and resources they need to build strong communities and grow their economies," said **Governor Healey**. "The Municipal Empowerment Act proposes multiple reforms that municipal leaders have asked for to improve the services they can provide to their communities and make operations more efficient. We are also proud to be increasing funding for roads, bridges, schools, and municipal services to improve quality of life in all of our communities."

"I've spent the past year traveling the state and meeting with municipal leaders to hear directly from them about how the state can best support their needs. What we heard loud and clear was a desire for partnership to improve municipal finances and operations," said **Lieutenant Governor Driscoll**. "The Municipal Empowerment Act is a direct result of these conversations. This package reduces red tape that municipal leaders far too often encounter and gives them more options to utilize tools that will make their communities stronger."

The bill is a product of the municipal listening tour led last year by Lieutenant Governor Driscoll and other members of the administration. They heard from over 130 managers and administrators from 112 different municipalities and solicited input from professional associations representing local leaders and employees – receiving feedback from more than 20 such groups. What emerged from these sessions were concrete suggestions for how the state can better partner with our cities and towns – from solutions to acute workforce challenges, to relief from specific administrative burdens, to new tools to make local management more efficient and effective.

Governor Healey also detailed some of the Local Aid support cities and towns can expect to see when she files her annual budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2025 next week. The administration's Fiscal Year 2025 budget will recommend increasing Unrestricted General Government Aid by 3 percent to \$1.31 billion. Consistent with Governor Healey's State of the Commonwealth address on Wednesday night, the budget will also propose to fully fund the fourth year of the Student Opportunity Act, boosting Chapter 70 aid to local public schools to \$6.86 billion, a \$263 million or 4 percent increase over Fiscal Year 2024. Overall, Local Aid in the budget will total \$8.7 billion, a 3 percent increase over the current fiscal year.

"The budget we will file next week will reflect this administration's commitment to Local Aid and desire to keep our partnership with cities and towns at the forefront of so much we hope to accomplish," said **Secretary of Administration and Finance Matthew J. Gorkowicz**. "The funding we have identified for unrestricted aid and Chapter 70 for schools will complement the reforms proposed today in the Municipal Empowerment Act to make sure our communities remain vibrant, attractive places to live and work."

The administration also plans to file a two-year, \$400 million Chapter 90 bill alongside the Municipal Empowerment Act, proposing a multi-year authorization to help build in predictability for municipalities looking to plan longer-term projects. The annual Chapter 90 authorization would be supplemented by another \$100 million for local road and bridge repairs through Fair Share surtax spending proposed in the Fiscal Year 2025 budget, and an additional \$24 million dedicated to rural communities. Additionally, Lt. Governor Driscoll has directed MassDOT and the Executive Office for Administration and Finance to assemble a working group of state and local officials to review Chapter 90 administration and recommend ways to reduce the complexity and burdens of applying for and receiving these vital transportation funds.

"Whether you drive, bike, walk, or take public transit, transportation impacts every part of our lives. I want to thank Governor Healey, Lieutenant Governor Driscoll, and the legislature for supporting Chapter 90 funding," said **Transportation Secretary Monica Tibbitts-Nutt**. "This funding will help us to repair roads and bridges and make key capital improvements and investments across the state. I look forward to working with the Healey-Driscoll administration as we continue to deliver equitable, reliable, and resilient transportation options for all 351 of our cities and towns."

The Municipal Empowerment Act is designed to arm local governments with greater tools and supports to chart their own course and make local management more efficient and effective.

Like state government, businesses and households across the state, municipalities have budgetary challenges that impact their ability to deliver services that residents depend on and expect. To empower communities to generate more local revenue, the bill includes several local options:

- **Increasing the maximum local option lodging tax on hotel, motel and other rentals** from 6 percent to 7 percent of the price of a room (6.5 percent to 7.5 percent for Boston)
- **Increasing the maximum local option meals tax** from .75 percent to 1 percent of the sales price of a meal at a restaurant or local store
- Adding a new 5 percent local option **Motor Vehicle Excise surcharge**, a fee charged by every city and town on vehicles registered in their communities based on the vehicle's value

Other highlights focused on fiscal and staffing stability include:

- **Creating new property tax exemptions for seniors** to allow cities and towns to adopt a Senior Means Tested Property Tax Exemption for qualifying seniors and to increase existing senior property tax exemptions.
- **Addressing long-term benefit funding pressures** by establishing a new OPEB Commission to take a fresh look at opportunities to address unfunded liabilities from non-pension employee benefits.
- **Allowing the creation of Regional Boards of Assessors** to allow municipalities to create streamline duties and reduce significant staffing challenges.
- **Creating additional flexibilities in post-retirement employment** by expanding the process for seeking exemptions to post-retirement employment rules.

The flexibility for municipalities that began during the COVID-19 public health emergency to permit outdoor dining and takeaway liquor sales, as well as hosting hybrid public meetings to encourage remote participation, would also be made permanent by this legislation.

Additional reforms proposed in the Municipal Empowerment Act include:

- **Procurement law reform:**
 1. Clarifying that groups of cities and towns can award multiple contracts through an RFP process under Chapter 30B and purchase both supplies and services from collectively bid contracts;
 2. Equalizing 30B thresholds for advertised procurements to \$100 k for all municipal purchasing – not just schools;
 3. Eliminating the requirement to publish notice of invitations for competitive bids on COMMBUYS;
 4. Streamlining procurement for electric school buses and charging infrastructure by allowing single procurements for both under Chapter 30B.
- **Enforcement of double pole removal** after 90 days by giving municipalities enforcement authority, with penalties for utilities that fail to comply.
- **Establishing central valuation of telecom and utility property** through the Department of Revenue's Division of Local Services (DLS) to relieve cities and towns of the cost of individually hiring experts and consultants.
- **Updating borrowing rules for school projects** to increase from 30 years to 40 years the bond term to more closely reflects the life expectancy of the project.

The Governor intends to file the Municipal Empower Act and Ch. 90 bill on Monday. The full bill texts will be available at that time. More details on the provisions of the Municipal Empowerment Act can be [found in the policy briefs \(/municipal-empowerment-act\)](#) on **Fiscal & Staffing Stability, Local Flexibility and Operational Efficiency, Rural Supports and FY25 Local Aid.**

Statements of Support

Adam Chapdelaine, Executive Director & CEO, Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA)

"The MMA is deeply grateful to the Healey-Driscoll Administration for this robust proposal, which would benefit each and every one of our Commonwealth's 351 cities and towns. The Municipal Empowerment Act includes strong recommendations based on input from local officials, with a focus on supporting our communities, modernizing practices, and improving efficiency in the delivery of essential services provided by our cities and towns."

Easthampton Mayor Nicole LaChapelle, incoming President of Massachusetts Mayors Association

"Municipal government is entirely unique in that the work we do has a direct and immediate impact on the lives of our residents. We must be nimble and flexible, but most importantly, we must be efficient because municipal budgets are small and tight. The efforts here by the Healey-Driscoll Administration help us enhance and balance the needs of our residents and the changing financial landscape municipalities experience. I want to thank Governor Healey and Lieutenant Governor Driscoll for their commitment to supporting cities and towns in every corner of the Commonwealth."

Michael Ward, Director of the Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management University of Massachusetts Boston

"This bill contains many great improvements and fixes to help municipalities operate more efficiently and effectively. In particular, the improvements to procurement and financial processes will reduce burdens on managers and finance officials, freeing up significant time and energy to focus on other critical issues. We are also thrilled to be able to assist the Administration with its new workforce development initiatives, given the overwhelming recruitment and retention problems facing local governments across the Commonwealth."

This press release has been edited to reflect the final version of the bill filed.

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July 29, 2024

Report: Sales in 495 West down 91% so far in 2024, as MetroWest office landlords deal with vacancies



PHOTO | COURTESY | JLL

251 Locke Drive in Marlborough

By Eric Casey

A high number of vacancies and low demand for office space in the Interstate 495 belt is making life difficult for commercial landlords, according to a report produced by a Wayland-based commercial real estate firm.

Sales of office properties in the 495 West region for the first half of 2024 totalled just \$5.05 million, down 91% from the total of \$56 million seen in the first half of 2023, according to R.W. Holmes' Greater Boston Market Report for the second quarter of 2024.

"The [495 West] market continues to see tepid interest in sales, and we do not see that changing in the near future. 251 Locke Drive in Marlborough went up for auction in late June, but did not sell," the report reads, referencing the 40-year-old, three-story office building on Marlborough's west side that has been available since 2017. "Even with nationally known companies occupying nearly 2/3 of the building, the remaining vacancy deterred investors from stepping up to the plate."

R.W. Holmes defines 495 West as communities close to Interstate 495, stretching north from the interchange with the Massachusetts Turnpike in Westborough up to Littleton, including municipalities like Marlborough, Northborough, Southborough, Hudson, Sudbury, and Acton.

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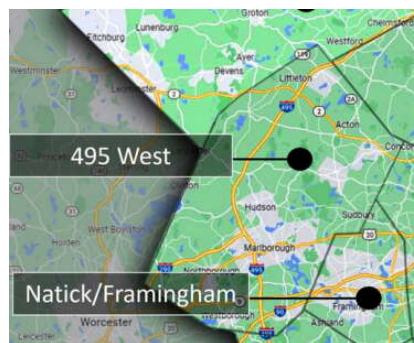


IMAGE | COURTESY OF R.W. HOLMES

Office buildings in the 495 West area are facing high vacancies and a lack of sale interest, while landlords in Natick and Framingham are having difficulties in leasing large office spaces, according to a report from Wayland-based R.W. Holmes.

Despite sales struggles, Craig Johnston, senior vice president at R.W. Holmes, doesn't see banks taking over properties failing to attract tenants.

"We thought at one point the banks were taking back some of these assets that weren't leasing," he said. "In my opinion, the banks don't want these [properties] back. They're not geared up to take them back. They're not key enough to run them, to manage them and then try to sell them."

With the decline in 495 West sales aside, Johnston said there's still a strong appetite for purchasing buildings overall, with interest rates beginning to come down and other sources of capital making up for a lack of willingness from banks to loan.

In addition to low sales, the 495 West region's vacancy rate for office properties is 23.75%. This is lower than the rate of 30.7% seen in October 2020 during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, but higher than the national average office vacancy rate of 18.1% in June, according to data from real estate software firm CommercialEdge.

“We met with a group out of Hudson this morning, and they were talking about shutting down their operation, because corporate was thinking that working from home is a better model,” said Johnston. “The folks that we were working with out of Hudson didn’t feel the same, but it’s an interesting dynamic.”

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The Framingham/Natick region is faring better in terms of office vacancy, with a rate of 10.25%. The area’s proximity to Boston has usually led to lower vacancy rates than places further west, said Johnston.

But commercial landlords in Natick and Framingham are facing some struggles in filling larger office spaces. The median number of months spaces larger than 10,000 square feet are sitting vacant is in excess of 16 months, according to the report.

More landlords will begin to explore carving these larger spaces into smaller leasable spaces in order to tackle this problem, Johnston said.

“If you’re sitting with a 20,000-square-foot floor plate as a landlord, I would think you’d have to be geared up to subdivide that floor down to two tenants or maybe four or five tenants,” he said.

Eric Casey is a staff writer at Worcester Business Journal, who primarily covers the manufacturing and real estate industries.

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