

## **WATERTOWN PLANNING BOARD**

DATE: April 8, 2026, PLACE: City Council Chamber TIME: 7:00 PM COMMENCED:7:02 PM

PURPOSE OF MEETING: Public Hearing

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Janet Buck; Jason Cohen; Payson Whitney; Abigail Hammett; Rachael Sack; Sarah Scott.

MEMBERS ABSENT: None.

Upon request from Chair, Staff introduced themselves.

STAFF PRESENT: Sameena Pirani, Principal Departmental Assistant; Gideon Schreiber, Director of Planning & Zoning, Will Downie, Senior Planner; Matthew Neubacher, Planner; Hannah Jury, Administrative Specialist, Zoning.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS**

#### **Approval of Minutes:**

Payson Whitney motioned to approve Minutes of 3/11/2026 meeting.

Abigail Hammett seconded the motion.

VOTE: 5-0 In Favor (Chair Janet Buck, Jason Cohen, Abigail Hammett, Payson Whitney and Rachael Sack)

#### **15-17 Dexter Rd:**

Andy Rojas, Rojas Design introduced himself. He stated that he was accompanied by Victor Torosyan, property owner and petitioner

His presentation outlined a plan to renovate the basement into an approximately 862 sq ft. two-bedroom accessory dwelling unit (ADU). Project would include structural work like lowering the floor, addressing egress windows and installing sprinklers. Building access and site layout would be improved, including reconfiguring the entry and adding a second driveway.

Board asked about window well elevations, parking count discrepancies, driveway safety/compliance, the backyard fence purpose and impervious surface limits. The architect clarified that the window wells provide compliant egress above the basement floor, the parking reduction was a typo (no change in spaces), driveways would be reviewed and permitted by DPW, the fence was for the owner's family use, and any drainage or impervious surface issues would be addressed through permitting, potentially with pervious materials.

Neighbor Rachel Chernick, 10 Oliver Road, expressed support for the project and appreciation for the design improvements and asked about construction hours due to nearby families. The architect said that they would follow city noise regulations and keep neighbors informed with a construction schedule and updates. The neighbor also offered to help coordinate parking during construction.

Payson Whitney made a motion to approve the petition, Jason Cohen seconded. The motion was approved 5-0, with Chair Janet Buck, Jason Cohen, Abigail Hammett, Rachael Sack and Payson Whitney voting in favor.

### **550 Arsenal St**

Nick O'Connor, National Development, described the new owner's plan to reposition tenants at the Watertown Mall with minor site plan changes and a small amendment to an existing special permit, rather than pursuing the previously discussed master plan. Staff clarified that the master plan was no longer moving forward, the amendment was minor (mainly related to internal access) and noted some interim improvements like landscaping unfinished areas while the site continued its current use and permitting.

Boards questions focused on how the change in ownership affected the larger master plan, details of the property boundaries, and what specific site changes were being proposed (such as closing/landscaping certain roadways. They also asked about future plans, including beautification, potential tenants, and whether community priorities from the prior plan—like green space, housing, bike stations, and traffic improvements—would still be addressed.

In response the applicant explained that the master plan was not officially cancelled but would need to be significantly changed (or possibly reworked entirely). They explained site boundaries and confirmed plans for some landscaping and cosmetic upgrades. They noted pursuing new tenants (including expanding an existing restaurant) but could not share full details.

Libby Shaw expressed disappointment that the larger redevelopment plan—especially its green space and tree-planting plans, will not move forward, emphasizing the lost environmental and quality of life benefits. She asked for the preservation of existing trees on the site and appreciated that a local restaurant would remain. Board acknowledged the comments.

### **Rules of Practice and Procedure**

The Board discussed proposed updates to its Rules of Procedure, focusing on improving clarity, efficiency and consistency across meetings, hearings and decision-making. The Board considered adding a recurring review cycle for the rules themselves (either annually or every 3-5 years) to ensure they remain current and actively maintained.

Besides formatting and organization of the Rules document, Board clarified officer roles (chair, vice chair, clerk) with explicit acknowledgement of staff support for recordkeeping and compliance responsibilities. They refined how the Journal of Proceedings was to be maintained and formalized the timing and process for annual officer elections, proposing staff generated reminders of member terms and reappointments. They discussed changes to the meeting structure including refining the order of business, preserving the chair's discretion to adjust agenda order based on the complexity of items. Additionally, they clarified distinctions between administrative business and public hearings.

Administrative improvements included better distribution of annual meeting calendars, use of calendar invites, communication through cable access systems and timely posting of materials to city portal, and clearer communication of rules to petitioners (including presentation time limits).

The Board discussed stronger applicant requirements, such as clearer submission deadlines, development of complete application checklists, requiring narratives or lists of changes after continuances, and reinforcing that late or incomplete submissions may justify delaying or denying a vote.

Public hearing procedures were refined to include more structured management of testimony (e.g., shorter speaking limits, organized queuing, multiple rounds of testimony without restriction but discouraging repetition) and clarifying that speakers acting on behalf of a group or entity must identify who they are representing, but need not list all individuals they represent, and do not receive additional speaking time. The Board agreed that legal notices and public comments can be acknowledged rather than read aloud, with cautious use of high-level summaries. They discussed improving clarity in the sequencing of applicant presentations, board questions, staff reports, and public testimony to avoid unintended pre-deliberation during early questioning. The staff report would be presented earlier in the hearing to better inform questions. They also discussed the importance of clear decision-making criteria and findings of fact to Board decisions and improving transparency for public.

The Board also reviewed executive session procedures (noting they were governed by state law and need not be detailed), discussed whether site plan review language belonged in the rules versus the zoning ordinance, and considered how to document current practices.

Other topics discussed included strengthening guidance on subcommittees, clarifying how such groups were formed and used for Planning work and explicitly requiring compliance with Massachusetts Open Meeting Law. Staff addressed subdivision related procedures, and members discussed formalizing of the Board's authority to designate

representatives to external bodies such as CPC, clarifying terms, appointment process and reporting expectations.

Members addressed concerns about language around Robert's Rules recommending softer or more flexible wording to reduce rigidity and potential appeal risk. Other matters discussed included application completeness expectations, supporting member training and orientation on rules, ethics training requirements, Conflict of Interest disclosure and recusal process clarity, legal requirements and best practices to ensure consistent and informed participation and aligning the Rules with updated City Code and better reflecting actual practice.

The Board's overall focus was modernizing and clarifying procedures to balance legal compliance, transparency, efficiency and practical meeting management.

Meeting adjourned 9:55

Meeting Minutes-----