

West Newton Armory JAPG
Notes from April 2, 2020 Meeting
Via Zoom
7:00 – 9:15 p.m.

JAPG Members in Attendance: Larry Bauer, Kelley Brown, Jonathan Katz, Anita Lichtblau, Ted Hess-Mahan, Sue Parsons, David Koven, Mitchell Fischman, and Barry Abramson

Others in Attendance: Amanda Berman, Director of Housing and Community Development, Eamon Bencivengo, Housing Development Planner, Barney Heath, Planning Director, Jonathan Yeo, City Chief Operating Officer, Josh Morse, City Public Buildings Commissioner, David Olson, City Clerk, Ward 3 City Councilors Andrea Kelley and Julia Malakie, Ward 6 City Councilor Vicki Danberg, and members of the public

Approval of March 11, 2020 Meeting Notes

The minutes of the JAPG meeting of March 11, 2020 were presented and approved unanimously after Susan Parson suggested that the statement regarding setting meeting agendas should note that the JAPG Chair and Vice-Chair have input into meeting agendas, and Barry Abramson noted that the investigation into uses of other former Massachusetts armories was focused on non-housing uses.

Appointment of Rotating Secretary

David Koven volunteered to serve as Secretary for the meeting.

Presentation By Jonathan Yeo, Newton COO, and Josh Morse, Public Buildings Commission on Municipal Building Needs

Jonathan Yeo (JY) indicated that the City has 88 buildings (including schools), 3 million SF, and is challenged to keep up with that portfolio. City not in position to take on new building that does not generate cash to pay for itself (acquisition, rehab, operation), and does not see a municipal use here now or in future. Considered the Armory site for NewCal and Police HQ, but neither is desirable. The City feels affordable housing is the only option (not considering private market/commercial uses) that could pay for itself. Archives getting space in main Library and other archive spaces could include Jackson Road and vacant Newton Corner Library building.

Josh Morse, Public Buildings Commissioner, stated that there had not been much positive feedback in a public meeting for the Armory as site for NewCal, because of both the building's limited exterior appeal and its being on the busy Washington Street.

Larry Bauer questioned whether the main Library would not provide sufficient space, but Josh replied that needs are diminishing as some departments (e.g., Police, Fire) want to keep their own records and JY said general there is a trend away from paper towards scanning/digitizing and that Jackson Road could provide ancillary space. Larry is also concerned about compliance with state standards, though it appears that no municipality fully meets these standards. Jonathan Katz (JK) noted that need for climate control pointed toward consolidation into one location.

Mitchell Fischman noted that the Hyannis Armory was sold to the town for \$1 and later special legislation was passed so that the town could lease to a for profit museum. Could the City buy and lease out? JY said that any municipal purpose purchase would be for significant, if below fair market value,

cost, and the City cannot afford to do that. Amanda Berman said we could not change the language in the existing special legislation for the West Newton Armory.

JY stated that the City is not now looking at uses other than housing. Anita Lichtblau noted that the City Clerk has in past indicated the Armory could be a possible site for archives. JY said there are other options for this.

JY said that housing could use CPA funds without taking away from mother municipal uses. Councilor Malakie pointed out that there are other uses for CPA funds. JK stated that the site would be expensive for housing and that City's direction toward housing had started before the adjacent Dunstan East project, which used no City funds. Amanda indicated that Dunstan East's affordable units were set at 80% AMI, and the Armory could generate a deeper level of affordability (i.e., serve households with a lower % AMI). Barry noted that housing would be the best way to bring in outside funds.

Councilor Malakie suggested that a combination of recreation (gym space) and archives might be more economically sensible, and that CPA funds are able to fund historic preservation. Josh indicated that having the City maintain and operate the building would be expensive. He also noted that mothballing and simply paying for heat would cost in the \$50,000-\$60,000 range.

Susan noted that the JAPG may ultimately recommend that housing is not the best use here, and Barry stated that JAPG will also think about what the private market might want to do with the site if the City declines to purchase it from DCAMM. Anita echoed this notion, stating that the charge to the JAPG is quite broad, and Ted Hess-Mahan said that Jonathan, Josh, and David Olson were invited to speak to the JAPG in order for the JAPG to get a sense of non-housing uses that the City might desire at the Armory. JY said that NewCal was the only potential new municipal use in the pipeline but this Armory site is not a worthy site for that use.

Kelly Brown asked what the City's other priorities are for space in its existing portfolio. JY replied that this is discussed in the annual Capital Plan, which outlines the City's projects and related budget demands, and mentioned that the capital budget includes asset management costs. Councilor Danberg pointed out that there is a long capital improvement list and not all items are sure to be funded, especially in light of COVID-19 repercussions, and while it may be clear what the Mayor would like to do, the mission of the JAPG is to consider the highest and best use.

Barry asked if the City could purchase and lease to multiple nonprofits, though he acknowledged that this would not likely be financially feasible. Anita said it was hard to imagine how the City would program the administration of this type of operation. Later in the meeting Anita wondered why the Carr School would house arts organizations and not the Armory. Barney pointed out that DCAMM does not want City to make money off the use of the site. Josh pointed out that the cost of rehabbing the property would be about \$600/SF, or over \$20 million (with prevailing wage being required), and combined with significant (if below market) acquisition costs, would far outweigh what rental revenues could support. Larry suggested that it would be preferable for the City to let DCAMM put the site on the market rather than invest significant local resources.

Presentation By David Olson, City Clerk, on Archives

Clerk David Olson (DO) has been looking at how to expand/improve archive storage for 10 years, looking at space, accessibility, and climate and fire controls. A strategic plan was conducted a few years ago.

Currently, archival documents are spread out beyond the main Library, where most of the documents are legislative and mayoral as distinct from departmental. Considered trying to get everything into a single location, but expanding the Library is too expensive and the Library has other space needs of its own. No ideal centralized alternative within the municipal portfolio. Structural and fire suppression needs are very costly.

DO thinks the Armory has potential as an archive storage location but he was less sure about the cost/benefit analysis, and acknowledged that it would not be inexpensive to convert in light of fire suppression and shelving and renovation costs, and that the total Armory space is larger than the archives need. He likes the basement space because of the slab floor and the office spaces that could be created in the front “castle” portion. He also noted that basement access for vehicle pull-up was good. In response to Councilor Danberg, he referred her to the Strategic Plan for information regarding annual increased space needs.

Larry raised the possibility of creating housing above the archives and replacing the gym floor with a noncombustible surface that would be the ceiling to the archives. JK raised the possibility of renting space at a commercial storage facility for the archives but DO said this would be costly and would inhibit quick retrievals.

Case Studies

Eamon will format responses the Committee Members submitted regarding disposition and use of other armories in MA into a criteria/use matrix and asked Committee Members to think about categories, and this will matrix be part of the next meeting’s agenda. Ted said that Webster had taken title to an Armory but had not created the agreed upon use and yet the state did not take back the property, but Mitch and Amanda said the state was recently more stringent about exercising its right of reversion. Barry was skeptical about the utility of these comparisons until JAPG zeros in on true comparables. Larry again indicated that he thinks that the open market will have interest in the site via public auction if the City does not take it.

DCAMM

Barney Heath noted that DCAMM will set a time limit on creating the proposed use following transfer. JK wondered how long it might take to get housing moving and David Koven said at least two or three years. Eamon agreed that City would talk with DCAMM about an extension beyond the June 30th response deadline (regarding City’s interest in acquiring) but only after JAPG had a bit more focus.

Consultant Proposals

Proposals were due today and there will be an Evaluation Committee meeting on April 17.

Next JAPG Meeting

Scheduled for April 16 at 7:00 p.m. via Zoom.

Meeting adjourned at 9:15 p.m.