

BLACKSTONE/FRANKLIN SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Minutes for its meeting of September 27, 2018

D4 Police Station Community Room,
650 Harrison Avenue, Boston, MA 02118

Convened at 7:05 PM

Welcome and Announcements: 7:05 PM

BFSNA co-president Toni Crothall welcomed attendees and made a few brief announcements about upcoming events.

Record Keeping: 7:08 PM

Toni gave the Treasurer's Report: The BFSNA operating balance is \$6,993.27. The Scholarship Fund account balance is \$30,554.51. (In 2018, the Scholarship committee awarded 18 scholarships totaling \$34,500, which was the most dollars in its history.) The Friends of Blackstone and Franklin Squares account balance is \$23,272.74.

Introductions: 7:09 PM

None. State representative-elect Jon Santiago and representatives of Burro Bar and Bar Lyon were not able to attend due to conflicts with this rescheduled meeting. We have invited them to attend a future meeting.

Proposed 591 Albany Street Medical Marijuana Dispensary: 7:10 PM

BFSNA board member David Stone made introductory remarks about the several pending marijuana businesses proposed for the South End and the state and municipal licensing and approval process. He said that the purpose of tonight's presentation is to hear from Liberty Compassion about the nature of its proposal and for Liberty Compassion to answer questions members and attendees may have and/or receive comments.

Vincent Giordano of Liberty Compassion Inc. made a presentation about his company's proposed dispensary and the medical marijuana regulatory regime and market in Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts medical marijuana system is highly regulated. To access medical marijuana, a person has to consult with a doctor and be certified to receive a patient card; it is a significant process. By law, dispensary companies must be vertically integrated: growing what they sell. Liberty Compassion is currently building a medical marijuana dispensary in West Springfield, negotiating with Freetown and Fall River and constructing a cultivation facility in Clinton. They would like also to be in the Boston market. It is very difficult to find potential locations and banks do not want to lend money on property that has a marijuana business. The Albany Street site is appealing for multiple reasons. The size and format are attractive to Liberty Compassion, it is accessible, and it is zoned “conditional use,” rather than “forbidden use.”

Questions and comments were taken.

Question: What due diligence did you do with regard to the opioid issue in the South End in the course of considering this proposal? Answer: I recognize it's a big problem and many, including me, know people personally who are dealing with addiction. I am not arguing that our product is something that will solve that problem. Follow up: Many residents believe the South End can't handle any more services, including marijuana facilities. Answer: I don't see our proposal as being a service that is aimed at that same population. This is not akin to a methadone clinic, it's more in the nature of the services provided by the hospitals in this area, for example, both potentially providing services to cancer patients. Answer (Jack Hart, attorney for Liberty Compassion): The recreational marijuana ballot measure was approved in the South End by a wide margin. It requires that Boston cannot cap the number of marijuana outlets at less than 50 (which is 20% the number of liquor stores). So it's likely that every neighborhood will host at least some facilities.

Comment: A resident living at East Canton Street and Harrison Avenue stated that he has no problem with this proposal. There is no overlap between the customer base for this facility and those who are struggling with opioid dependence.

Comment: A resident said medical marijuana represents a valuable alternative to addictive pain treatments like Percocet that can get people hooked and lead to opioid abuse.

Comment: A resident said he worried the proposed dispensary might later offer recreational sales. Answer: I have no plans to go recreational. And if I ever were to seek that, I would have to go through the same process to get state and local approval.

Question: Is community approval required for a dispensary or recreational store to be licensed? Answer: No, it is not required, but it is a factor in getting approval.

Question: How will you give back to the community if you are approved? Answer: The specifics are to be determined and it would be presumptuous of me to tell you what you need. I welcome input. Follow up (David Stone): BFSNA could help collect this feedback and facilitate.

Question: Do you agree that your proposed location lies within ½ mile of the 633 Tremont and 60 East Springfield sites? Answer: Yes, it appears that way but it's close and I am not a surveyor

and I can't state with certainty. Regardless, I like this location and am not interested in the situation of others.

Comment and question from a representative of The Abbey Group: At the South End Forum working group meeting you said you were going for medical marijuana, not recreational, but as a businessman you were not willing to put that in writing. Now you have your money men here. Have you run any financial numbers for the recreational scenario? You say you don't have the data but what about the precedent in Colorado? Answer: No, I have not run the numbers for recreational; the recreational market is too much of an unknown and Colorado is too different to extrapolate, whereas there are three dozen dispensaries in Massachusetts on which to make medical marijuana projections. Follow up: He's not answering my question. Answer: I realize that no matter what I say on this some people will feel they have only my word. It's not a bait and switch.

Comment from Leggat McCall, developer of abutter The Smith (Harrison Albany Block), via their representative David Newman: "Leggat McCall worked for over two years with the community to create a new project that is now investing hundreds of millions in the neighborhood. It's a significant mixed-use project that will enhance the area, add amenities, and new connections in the South End. This proposal at this location goes against recent progress in the area. Leggat is strongly opposed to this use at this location, and we encourage the proponents to consider more suitable sites."

Question: Can you describe the typical amount of customer traffic you expect? Answer: There might be 8 to 10 customers in the dispensary at maximum and around 200 people a day.

A number of persons in attendance offered comments during and immediately after the close of the meeting to the effect that marijuana businesses were coming to the South End regardless and that, in this context, it was most important to focus on ensuring negative impacts were mitigated and community benefits maximized and/or supporting proposals that were relatively acceptable and opposing those that were truly objectionable.

Friends of the Squares: 8:10 PM

Toni and Joe Schutt, of BFSNA and the Square Dog, a Facebook group to help people enjoy the Squares with their dogs, gave an update on ongoing efforts to make Blackstone and Franklin Squares pleasant, happy places for people and dogs alike.

People and dogs sharing our parks is a positive but co-existence between those with and without dogs can present some challenges. Dogs have a long history in Blackstone Square. Circa the 1980s, a residents' vote was held that endorsed dogs being off-leash in the Squares, notwithstanding the leash law. If there is a problem with an off-leash dog, people can call 911, but that is not an ideal approach. There are not enough Dog Recreation Spaces in the South End; Peters Park, Carlton Court and Underground at Ink Block being the only ones. We met with Commissioner Chris Cook about these issues and he acknowledged they are not easily solved.

Joe explained that the Square Dog was inspired in part by his experience while living on Beacon Hill, where he helped start a program called Common Canine that successfully surmounted some of the same difficulties we face in the South End. The Square Dog and Friends of the Squares have undertaken a few initiatives:

“Franklin Fridays” was an effort to encourage some part of the large community of dog owners who frequent Blackstone Square to instead sometimes use Franklin Square, by having a number of dogs and owners go over together on Fridays. The hope was to persuade people to see Franklin Square as a good place to take their dog, to better activate that park while giving dog owners more choice. Unfortunately, some instances of negative reaction from existing Franklin Square users (like someone’s claim “you belong over there”) undermined enthusiasm for the endeavor.

“Tidy Up Tuesdays” are ongoing sessions to clean up litter in the parks to make them more appealing and usable and build trust and goodwill by showing that the dog-owning community are good stewards with regard to their use of the Squares.

The “Human Quadrant” is an attempt to establish one section of Blackstone Square (the section bordering Washington Street) as being for the exclusive use people and forbidden to dogs. This is to better accommodate users who want to be able to enjoy a park space without free ranging dogs or concern for dog waste, a sentiment held by a fair number of residents based on what we’ve heard directly and observed on Facebook. Earlier in the summer, the Friends of the Squares posted signs explaining the new policy and marking off the quadrant in question. As signs were lost or torn down, they were replaced multiple times; a few are still in place. Compliance is hardly perfect, but it has made some difference.

A discussion followed among dog owner and some non-dog owner users of the Squares in attendance. One resident noted that there are bona fide reasons why dog owners use Blackstone Square in preference to the dog parks at Peters Park and Carlton Court. The latter have hard surfaces that can be tough on some dogs’ joints and are not really big enough for large dogs to fully exercise. Another resident told how some families without a dog at home come to the Square expressly so their children can meet and play with friendly dogs.

The general sense was that progress is being made in accommodating the interests of those with and without dogs in the Squares, even if it is sometimes slow going. We will continue the Human Quadrant effort through the winter and going forward, recognizing it will take time and ongoing education to incorporate this change into the dog culture of the Squares.

Adjourned at 8:35 PM.

Elected officials or their representatives in attendance:

Ana Calderon, aide to Boston City Councilor Ed Flynn
Faisa Sharif, Office of Neighborhood Services, City of Boston