

## **Dedham Commission on Disability Mother Brook Arts Center Accessibility Resolution**

On November 14, 2022 Dedham Town Meeting Members will vote on Article 9 which, if passed, would approve funding to make the Mother Brook Arts and Community Center (the “MBACC”) accessible to Dedham’s disabled residents. As of today and Dedham residents with accessibility issues must enter the building through the back door and all but that floor and a gymnasium area (through a lift) are inaccessible. MBACC offers a wide array of arts programs for all ages and abilities at this Town-owned site. Unfortunately, programming is inaccessible to disabled Dedham residents with accessibility challenges. Access to all floors will allow for a more inclusive environment and will allow every Dedham resident to enjoy all that MBACC has to offer for classes, programs and events.

The Dedham Commission on Disability (the “COD”) is charged with protecting the interests of disabled Dedham residents, including those with accessibility issues, and seeks to increase opportunities for disabled Dedham residents by, among other things, advocating for all public buildings and spaces in Dedham to be ADA compliant. Despite significant progress over the past 30 years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, disabled Americans remain decidedly disadvantaged with respect to access to learning and social opportunities.

Dedham has been on the forefront of taking initiatives to enhance the lives of its disabled residents. *Over twenty years ago*, Dedham performed an accessibility audit and commenced the process of making all public spaces accessible. In 2021 the Select Board directed the Town Manager to enter into an “Accessibility Best Practices” compact with the Baker-Polito administration to adopt and follow an ongoing, advanced program to make all public spaces accessible. Many recent gains are noteworthy. The Early Childhood Education Center is a model of accessibility with its single story structure, large occupational and physical therapy areas and accessible “pour and play” playground surfaces. The new Town Hall has been completed and is also fully compliant with the ADA. In 2021, the COD received a \$180,000 grant from the Massachusetts Office on Disability (“MOD”) to reconstruct the Riverdale Playground to make that area more accessible and to add adaptive equipment. Finally, the Town has embarked on a process which could result in all elementary schools in Dedham becoming ADA compliant and fully accessible.

There is still much to do. Only one of Dedham’s four elementary schools is currently fully accessible both inside and in outside recreation areas. Of all the parks in Dedham, including elementary school play areas, only Riverdale, Condon Field, Avery and ECEC play areas are accessible. Recreational programs for disabled children are particularly limited and, in recent years, Dedham has been required to place disabled children out of district due to lack of fully accessible facilities.

Article 9 will fund the construction of an elevator at the Mother Brook Arts and Community Center to make all four levels accessible to community members who have accessibility challenges. This request comes with a relatively small price tag due to the hard work of Dan Hart, Jean Ford Webb and others in the community. The Commonwealth, Dedham Savings Bank and individual sponsors have provided grants and donations to dramatically reduce

the cost of this project. The Commission on Disability has applied for a \$250,000 MOD grant for the project. In passing this Article, Town Meeting has a wonderful opportunity to show its commitment to fulfilling the promise of the ADA and deliver a badly needed improvement to a town-owned building that will benefit and provide opportunities for disabled residents. We ask Dedham to commit to improve the lives of residents with disabilities by approving this measure and funding the construction of this badly needed improvement.

Over the past several months there has been much discussion and disagreement regarding whether Dedham is legally required to approve this project. But this open question misses the point. This community committed to accessibility efforts over twenty years ago. By entering into a community compact with the Baker-Polito administration to adopt “Accessibility Best Practices” the Town committed to do more than merely comply with the law. Dedham committed to “Universal Participation” – a designation and initiative of the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The Universal Participation Initiative aims to activate the aspirations of the Americans with Disabilities Act to break down the barriers that prevent full civic participation in Massachusetts’ cultural sector and supports organizational change through inclusive design practices, community engagement strategies, and peer learning networks. The Dedham Commission on Disability believes this to be more than a question of legalese. It is a moral imperative. We have a principled obligation to encourage and support accessibility of arts and cultural facilities and events in the community, particularly for our children.

The Dedham Commission on Disability unanimously urges Dedham Town Meeting to vote in favor of Article 9.

Respectfully and unanimously submitted, The Dedham Commission on Disability:

Vicky Berg, Bridgett Burkhardt, Bernie Chirokas, Kenneth Cimeno (Dedham Building Commissioner and ADA Coordinator), Ellen Conway, Matthew Jameson, Shari Laurent, Diane Loud, Mary Nikolaidis, and John Tocci (Chair).