

Downtown Easton Neighborhood Improvement District (NID) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common are assessment-funded Improvement Districts and what other communities have implemented them?

According to a 2010 study commissioned by the California Travel and Tourism Commission, there are currently over 700 Improvement Districts in the United States. There are approximately 30 districts operating in Pennsylvania, including at least 16 in Philadelphia and in other communities including Reading, Wilkes-Barre, Lancaster, Harrisburg, and West Chester. Some of these districts have been operating for over a decade and have been voluntarily re-authorized by their property owners (in some cases, multiple times).

How were the boundaries of the proposed NID determined?

The programs to be funded by the NID are the Easton Main Street Initiative and the Easton Ambassadors. As such, the proposed boundaries of the NID were set to closely match the previously-established service areas of these programs.

Why should residents or office property owners have to pay into the NID?

The Steering Committee that created the NID Plan felt that all property owners, regardless of use, benefit from the services provided by the Easton Main Street Initiative and the Easton Ambassadors, which provide a cleaner, safer, and more vibrant community. As such, the NID Plan requires all types of property to pay a NID assessment (except non-profit owned properties, which cannot legally be assessed a NID fee).

What funding options other than the NID were considered in order to sustain the Easton Main Street Initiative and the Easton Ambassadors?

GEDP has been considering ways to provide long-term financial stability for these two programs for years. Prior to considering a NID, GEDP examined multiple other funding mechanisms (several of which have been implemented) including:

- ***Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Neighborhood Partnership Program***
- ***Project loan repayment contributions***
- ***GEDP overhead reduction***
- ***Cost neutral programs for Main Street***
- ***Increased sponsorship revenues***

It was only through extensive planning and consideration that the GEDP Board and the Steering Committee that generated the NID Plan came to believe that a Neighborhood Improvement District can be a critical piece of the puzzle to fund Main Street and the Ambassadors. The NID is intended to be a positive part of the solution, but not the entire solution to the long-term financial viability of these two important programs.

How will the NID ensure proper accountability to the NID property owners and transparency in the NID decision making processes?

The programs to be funded through the fees generated by the NID (Easton Main Street Initiative and Easton Ambassadors) have historically been administered by GEDP. In order to maintain programmatic continuity and avoid creating additional bureaucracies, the Revised NID Plan calls for GEDP to serve as the Neighborhood Improvement District Management Authority (“NIDMA”). In order to allow property owners and stakeholders of the NID to have direct authority and oversight over the operations of the NID, the Revised NID Plan calls for the creation of separate Administrative Board within GEDP that exists solely for the purpose of overseeing the NID. The Administrative Board will be empowered by the GEDP Board to make all decisions regarding the NID. While the exact make up of the Administrative Board membership has not been decided, the NID Steering Committee has suggested that the make-up of the Administrative Board could be as follows:

- ***1 Commercial property owner in the NID***
- ***1 Mixed-use property owner in NID***
- ***1 Residential property owner in the NID***
- ***1 Business owner in the NID***
- ***1 Institutional representative in the NID***
- ***Mayor***
- ***1 City Councilperson***

GEDP anticipates accepting nominations and ultimately holding a vote (via mail or otherwise) of all property owners in the NID in order to populate the NID Administrative Board. The Administrative Board would be completely transparent, with open meetings, published minutes, public records, etc. Additionally, a formal Management Agreement would be required between the City and the NIDMA clearly establishing the roles and responsibilities of each party and the requirements for annual audits.

Ultimately, fact that the NID property owners retain control of the funds generated by the NID significantly increases accountability and oversight and minimizes the potential for abuse or unwise appropriation of funds.

Does the addition of a NID assessment fee put Downtown Easton at a competitive disadvantage from a business/residential attraction and retention perspective?

The NID fee is an investment in the cleanliness, safety, and vibrancy of the community. The goal is that this investment will create an environment that is more attractive for new and existing businesses, prospective residents, and private investors, and that property owners will ultimately realize financial benefits that exceed their NID fees.

If the NID is created at some point during 2012, will NID property owners be assessed a NID fee equal to an entire year’s worth of fees for 2012?

No. If the NID is created at some point during 2012, property owners will be assessed a prorated fee for 2012 based on when the NID is created. For example, if the NID is created and begins operations as of March 1, 2012, property owners will be assessed a 2012 NID fee

equal to 5/6 of what their 2012 annual NID would have been (i.e., they will not be assessed a fee for January and February 2012).

I believe my property should qualify as a single family residential owner occupied property, but the NID assessment database is not categorizing my property as such for the purposes of assessing my NID fee. How can I make sure I pay the correct fee?

The data being used to categorize properties for NID assessment purposes is from Northampton County. If you feel that your property is not being categorized appropriately for NID assessment purposes, you may either contact the County Assessment office directly or you may contact GEDP and GEDP will assist you to get your property accurately reflected in County's data. GEDP's goal is that all NID fees will be calculated based on the correct usage of NID properties.

Exactly how do I file a written objection to the Revised NID Plan?

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's NID law places few stipulations on what constitutes a filed objection, other than to state that objections must be submitted in writing to the City Clerk's Office (1 S. 3rd Street, Easton, PA 18042) within 45 days after the final public hearing on the NID Plan. The letter that was mailed to all owners and lessees of property in the proposed NID along with the Revised NID Plan informed owners of how to object. As a courtesy, at the October 26 public hearing GEDP provided a suggested list of information that property owners include as part of their written objection, including

- ***Your name.***
- ***A telephone number and email address where you may be reached.***
- ***The address(es) of the property(ies) you own.***
- ***If your name does not match the legal property owner name, please state how you are legally authorized to represent the owner.***
- ***State that you object to the Revised NID Plan.***
- ***Signature of the property owner or authorized representative.***

Objections that are otherwise eligible (i.e., from owners of taxable property in the proposed NID, submitted within the 45-day objection period, etc.) will NOT be discounted simply for lack of this information, but follow up contact may be required in order to verify the eligibility of the objector if this information is not provided in the written objection.

I represent a not-for-profit organization who owns property in the proposed NID. If I file a written objection to the Revised NID Plan, will it count as a legal objection?

Objections from owners of non-taxable properties in the proposed NID will not count as an objection for the purposes of determining the percentage of eligible property owners who objected to the Revised NID Plan.

In calculating the percent of property owners who have filed written objections to the Revised NID Plan, will parcels owned by non-profit organizations of government entities count toward the total number of parcels in the district?

No. In calculating the percentage of eligible property owner who objected to the Revised NID plan, only taxable properties will be used. The total number of taxable parcels in the proposed NID is approximately 488.

I received a copy of the Revised NID Plan in the mail, but I do not own property within the boundaries of the proposed NID. Why did I receive a copy of the Plan? If I file an objection with the City Clerk's Office, will it count toward the objection process?

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's NID law requires all owners and lessees of property within the boundaries of the proposed NID to be provided with a copy of the draft and revised NID Plans. As such, GEDP mailed copies of the NID Plans to both owners and lessees of property in the proposed NID and stated such in the cover letter that accompanied the plans. According to the NID law, only objections from owners of parcels in the proposed NID count toward the calculation of the percentage of property owners who objected to the Plan, so objections from lessees will not count in this process.

If the 45-day objection period begins the day following the final public hearing on the NID Plan (which was held on October 26), why did the letter I received in the mail say I have until 4:30 PM on December 12 to file my objection?

Based on the public hearing date, the 45 day objection period would have ended on December 10, which is a Saturday. As a courtesy to the property owners, GEDP has asked the City Clerk's Office to accept objections through close of business (4:30 PM) on Monday, December 12.

What process and timeline will Easton be following for collecting and tallying objections to the Revised NID Plan?

Once the 45-day objection period ends, the City Clerk's Office (with GEDP assistance as needed) will determine the results of the voting as follows:

- **Property owner names and addresses will be cross-referenced against tax assessment records to determine that objectors are "eligible to object".**
- **Objections may be verified via follow up contacts (telephone or otherwise).**
- **The percentage of eligible property owners who objected to the Revised NID Plan will be calculated.**
- **The results will be communicated to City Council and the general public.**

The City Clerk is an objective party and will make all final decisions regarding voter eligibility, verification, and totals.

If not more than 40% of the property owners within the proposed NID file a written objection, what process would be required in order to formally create the NID?

If not more than 40% of the property owners within the proposed NID file a written objection, then City Council has the option to pass an ordinance creating the NID per the Revised NID Plan. Based on the current timeline which has the objection period ending on December 12, assuming less than 40 of eligible owners object, City Council could conduct a first reading of

such an ordinance at its December 28, 2011 meeting and vote on the ordinance at its first meeting in January 2012 (likely scheduled for January 11, 2012).

If I have a question that is not answered in this document or in the Revised NID Plan, is there a way to ask additional questions?

Additional questions may be directed to GEDP Executive Director Gretchen Longenbach at 610-250-6719 or glongenbach@easton-pa.gov.