

EconomicVitalityMTG 03-23-2021

Economic Vitality Committee
Virtual Meeting, 4 PM
March 23, 2021

PRESENT: Cato Anderson, John Boynton, Remon Karian, Mark Martines, Jennifer McGonigle, Dawn Rennert, Jennifer Schunemann, Debra Stark, Jan Turnquist, Steven Verrill, Beth Williams, Visitor and Tourism Services Manager

ABSENT: Jane Obbagy

ALSO PRESENT: Stephen Crane, Town Manager; Jeremy Romanul, Select Board Asst.; Susan Bates Select Board Liaison; Marie Foley, Karlen Reed, Erin Stevens Public Information Officer

CALL TO ORDER AND ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Co-Chair Jennifer Schunemann stated that she would take the lead at the meeting. She noted that Ruth Lauer continues to intend to resign her duties and asked anyone with potential replacements to to make them known. Ms. Schunemann stated that Jane Obbagy will no longer represent the Chamber and that Marie Foley of Revolutionary Concord will step up to the role as soon as she has been appointed by the Select Board.

MINUTES

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:
To Approve the Minutes of March 09, 2021.

Cato Anderson	Aye
John Boynton	Aye
Remon Karian	Aye
Mark Martines	Aye
Jennifer McGonigle	Aye
Dawn Rennert	Aye
Jennifer Schunemann	Aye
Debra Stark	Aye
Jan Turnquist	Aye
Steven Verrill	Aye
Beth Williams	Aye

TOWN UPDATE

Beth Williams stated that the Visitor Center will be open by April 5 and fully staffed by April 19. While the Town will be celebrating Patriots Day activities differently this year, visitors are already beginning to drop by the Center. The goal is to make the April season fun with mostly virtual events. Businesses, cultural institutions, non-profits, and residents are being asked to join in to create a spirit. Marie Foley has suitable decorations available. One activity is to post photos on Facebook to be eligible for token prizes. Erin Stevens offered to post the flyer on Town social media.

MMN and the Public Ceremonies and Celebrations Committee are collaborating to create a parade video of years past interspersed with short clips of the current day from all Units that have participated in the past. This will run on a loop.

The newly published *Ecology along Concord Trails* book is available for purchase at the Visitor Center.

Town Manager Stephen Crane reported that the Select Board has voted to re-institute parking meter enforcement by April 19 and continuing until the end of FY21. Jeremy Romanul, the Select Board Asst. has begun outreach to those holding common victualler and/or alcoholic beverages licenses that had permits for seasonal outdoor dining to inform them the permit is extended to this season if the conditions of service have not changed. Mr. Crane stated that the Town is learning mor about new federal recovery efforts. Some assistance will be revenue and he is interested in input of where and how it should be directed.

Mr. Crane stated that the Town had submitted an application to set up a regional vaccination site at either the high parking lot or the former Kmart. It is anticipated that vaccines will become available soon. There are 5,000 residents aged 60 and over in Concord, 4,000 have been vaccinated.

Beth Williams stated that she had applied for a Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) in conjunction with Lexington and Arlington to learn more about numbers of employees, number of employers, retail sales, hotels and meals in order to build the economic impact of tourism in the region. This will generate information for a benchmark study also useful to new businesses. She noted that one more Concord business has applied and received a micro enterprise grant of \$10,000. This brings the total in Concord to 5. She is trying to make it known that many businesses such as artists are eligible and will send information to the Emerson Umbrella.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS UPDATE

Debra Stark reported that she is hard at work with many consultants regarding the build-out of the former West Concord 5%10 into Debra's Natural Gourmet. She declared that it is frustrating coming before departments and committees that require many incremental steps for approval, sometimes to change their minds.

John Boynton stated that Bradford Mill has been planning and is now ready to launch the Concord Sign Museum. He envisions 20 +/- signs from historic Concord enterprises that will hang in the three common areas of the mill and available for self-guided tours during the week from 9AM – 5PM. QR codes will take the visitor to the website to learn more about the significance and history. The West Concord 5&10 sign will be highlighted. He was congratulated for this addition to the West Concord Cultural district. Jan Turnquist noted that Orchard House had an old sign that she would like to be protected and preserved.

Dawn Rennert commended these great ideas and stated that she is seeing more visitors as well as regular patrons, perhaps due to beautiful weather. Marie Foley concurred, stating that everyone seems to have a lighter step. Marie explained that the Concord Chamber of Commerce has joined something called Chamber Hub, a national organization that allows sharing of resources. Bedford, Billerica, Burlington, and Lowell are other Chambers in the region that have also joined. Each will still operate independently. She stated that the local Chamber would be developing a strategizing team to have a membership drive and target different businesses, including home businesses. The Chamber has already spoken with Rotary, Concord Business Partnership and the Town about the plans.

Mark Martines asked for Marie's best description of the Chamber mission. He has some frustration in the fragmentation of the Chamber, Concord Business Partnership, and Concord Together. He believes that the Economic Vitality Committee is the result of many in town pressing for how the entities can work together and better fit with the Town. He stated that the challenge is always resources and time. A goal should be to eliminate redundancy. Marie Foley stated that answers will be forthcoming in a mission statement that fosters business awareness and moves toward being a cohesive resource for all groups. In response to a question regarding participation from West Concord businesses, where all the recent vibrancy comes from, Marie stated that no West Concord representation exists at the moment, but that it is intended to bring them on board. Marie stated that the Chamber website will continue, although refreshed to make it more vibrant and user-friendly. It will have a marketing services plan.

Cato Anderson provided a screen share of ideas to reduce barriers and ease the process for potential new businesses. He mentioned a brochure created by the city of Worcester. In his opinion, what is needed is guidance, fewer unrelated departmental demands, and more support from the Town. Mark Martines stated that this is an opportunity for the Town to be proactive and make the commercial sector a priority. As a Town we need to find a way to balance compliance requirements with reasonable responses to regulations. John Boynton stated that the perception that Concord is unfriendly to business is rooted in decades of frustration. This is a new era, and it is time to be optimistic. It is true that permitting is expensive and that obstacles are well known. Concord Business Partnership has long recommended a permit coordinator in the Town. The EVC has a role to play and could be helpful in gathering information to be provided to potential business owners. The enthusiasm of the EVC will be important in making a concentrated effort to form alliances with the Town.

Debra Stark stated that she recognizes the Town is trying, but it is still almost enough to throw in the towel. Her consultants state that Concord is well known as the most difficult entity to work with as it requires implementation of the letter of the law and never the spirit of the law. In her opinion, the process must be made simpler and more realistic.

Jennifer Schunemann queried whether the obstacles noted are due to complexity or interpretation. Debra Stark replied that each department is ready and eager to struggle with each issue. Jan Turnquist stated that it is not limited to a focus on the letter of the law or businesses. She stated that the School of Philosophy has been closed for seven years due to a discrepancy of understanding between Concord rules and that of the Boston Architectural Access Board that permitted the School project. Steve Verrill stated that 10 years ago the Natural Resources Commission seemed to have the self-imposed duty of stopping or making everything more difficult and running up bills for petitioners. The Town needs to change its focus to make it easier.

Jennifer Schunemann noted that committee members are all volunteers. Perhaps what we are seeing is simply differing opinion and the committees themselves could use more guidance on regulation and Town codes. Mark Martines noted that code enforcement is the purview of the Building Commissioner, an employee not a volunteer. It is a very powerful job. The tone for enforcement should be being set by the Town Manager and Select Board. Debra Stark agreed and stated that EVC and others need to help applicants survive the process. In response to a question by Dawn Rennert about which committees

had roles in the process, it was stated that Planning Board, Board of Health, Historic Districts Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals. Mark Martines stated that there is building by right and only when seeking variances does ZBA get involved. John Boynton stated that he has seen the letter of the law exhibited in the Library construction process when the Corporation wanted to install a kitchen but was blocked by the Board of Health. Debra Stark suggested that we should make use of this wonderful Zoom function that we have learned all about and schedule such meetings to bring all parties together at one time for a discussion and feedback. Mark Martines stated that history has proved expensive and tenants are not willing to make an investment if the outcome is possibly so fragile. Has the tone changed? Actions have not demonstrated a change.

Remon Karian stated that the Town has a reputation; how do we move forward? Can we learn from best practices of other towns? John Boynton stated that EVC could pursue this as a special project, dedicating meetings to preparing and expanding on the information provided by Cato Anderson. Worcester seems to be a great place to start. What would be useful is transparency and welcoming practices. Realtors are pulling together to welcome new residents; we should do something similar for businesses. Some things cannot be “fixed” but we can be transparent. Cato Anderson stated that more and more towns have an Economic Viability Coordinator to “quarterback” the process. John Boynton stated that the next meeting would be devoted to this topic and guests invited to share their experiences. Henry Dane has been helpful over the years

PUBLIC COMMENT

Karlen Reed of Whit’s End Rd. stated that she was pleased that the focus of the Committee could finally shift away from the trials of COVID and begin to focus on the Charge of creating a bridge between Town Government and businesses.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a Motion duly made and seconded, it was

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To adjourn the meeting at 5:15 PM.

Cato Anderson	Aye
John Boynton	Aye
Remon Karian	Aye
Mark Martines	Aye
Jennifer McGonigle	Aye
Dawn Rennert	Aye
Debra Stark	Aye
Jan Turnquist	Aye
Steven Verrill	Aye
Beth Williams	Aye

Respectfully submitted

Cato Anderson, Clerk

Approved: April 6, 2021