

Economic Vitality Committee
Virtual Meeting, 4 PM
May 18, 2021

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

ABSENT: Remon Karian, Dawn Rennert

ALSO PRESENT: Susan Bates, Select Board Member; Jeremy Romanul, Select Board Asst.; Marcia Rasmussen, Director of Planning and Land Development

CALL TO ORDER AND ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Co-Chair Jennifer Schunemann called the meeting to order and reminded the Committee to be thinking of potential alternatives for taking Minutes as Ruth Lauer intends to retire.

MINUTES

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

VOTED by roll call: To Approve the Minutes of April 4, 2021.

Cato Anderson	Aye
John Boynton	Aye
Marie Foley	Aye
Mark Martines	Abstain, not present
Jennifer McGonigle	Abstain, not present
Jane Obbagy	Aye
Jennifer Schunemann	Aye
Debra Stark	Aye
Jan Turnquist	Aye
Steven Verrill	Aye
Beth Williams	Aye

TOWN UPDATE

Beth Williams stated that the Town was mildly surprised at the announcement regarding re-opening services before the anticipated date and that the Senior Management Team is working on appropriate standards. New guidelines can be expected shortly. There has been confusion between Massachusetts and CDC criteria. Memorial Day is the first event that will respond to new guidance. Susan Bates announced that Memorial Day celebrations will have only Veterans participating. As usual there will be a ceremony in West Concord at 9 AM and in the Center at 11 AM.

It was stated that outdoor dining rules will continue for 90 days after the cease of MA State of Emergency on June 15. The Select Board has placed the Warrant Article regarding amending the bylaw to allow outdoor dining to become a permanent option on the Annual Town Meeting Consent Calendar.

Marcia Rasmussen reported that the Town is scrambling to respond to other aspects of the Governor's Order, i.e., that standard Open Meeting Law requirements for governmental meetings will resume such that Zoom meetings will cease. It is anticipated that participation will lessen. In addition, Town buildings are not yet operational, and it will be a challenge to schedule meetings outdoors with appropriate sound and lighting.

Beth Williams stated that she had anticipated a return to tourism, but not with the quantities being seen. There are more requests for tours than can be fulfilled; she is hiring more guides. The Inn is reporting excellent bookings as well.

Debra Stark reported that West Concord merchants have planned a four-day festival with sidewalk sales, concerts, and special events for the enjoyment of all. John Boynton reported that this will be the soft opening of the Concord Sign Museum as well.

Jennifer Schunemann stated that with the arrival of new MA and CDC guidance, it is perhaps to time to consider how the various entities involved in economic vitality move forward. For instance, should EVC continue to meet two times per month or return to monthly meetings. Discussion included: once per month to work on large topics should be enough; while making time away from business for meetings is difficult, more that needs to be done warrants making the time; meetings could be divided into sub-committees but this has Open Meeting Law requirements as well; while the end of the emergency is wonderful, it is not time to declare victory; the business community will not bounce back quickly; core issues remain; the new project discussed at the prior meeting will create more for the Committee members to accomplish. The consensus of the meeting was to continue with two meetings per month.

CONCORD TOGETHER

Jennifer Schunemann stated that with the emergency quieting, there was a rally to help clothing and accessory stores, but few chose to participate. In the meantime, Concord Together is ramping up to reprise the Summer Solstice passport that was successful last summer. It generated more that 2,000 responses. The mechanics are in place to repeat. Wacky Wednesday that has been successful will also continue. While Concord Together prepared to wind down, Chamber of Commerce activity is ramping up for the season. Its Advisory Committee will meet quarterly.

PROJECT VITALITY

John Boynton did a screen share to update members on how the homework they completed was folded into the project plan. He provided an overview of Objectives, Scope, and Data gathering. Discussion included: identifying and reducing barriers to new business in Concord fits well with the Committee Charge; sources of data include committees, staff, businesses, residents; the project needs to connect to and build on the optimism of tourism and the non-profit sector; rather than identify regulatory hurdles, the project could reverse engineer those hurdles out of existence; certain elements of the regulatory process cause pain to businesses; the project could improve function and help all components to be successful; the outcome of the project is to provide a recommendation to the Select Board that could assist them in decision-making; the timing of the project should stay alert to demands of 2022 Town Meeting cycle; the objective is to identify and remedy obstacles in order to grow and improve the vibrancy of the business community.

Regarding data collection, there was discussion regarding what information needs to be collected, from whom, and how what is learned could be folded into subsequent conversations. For instance, should residents be interviewed on their perceptions and preferences before or after studying regulations and bylaws; should what is learned from business owners be part of a survey for staff; how would project activities elucidate the spirit versus the code; some information needs to be gathered in one-on-one meetings; it seems that the project could learn what works as well as how it works in Concord; the state of emergency has enabled some practical concessions and compliance changes while not turning health and safety laws on end; it will be important to learn what prompted certain regulations and whether they remain relevant; major employers in the Town should also be consulted; commercial, retail, historic attractions, and lodging venues are all amongst the property owners to be consulted; transportation and parking are amongst the accessibility issues for businesses; most entities that are not interested in starting a business are unaware of the hurdles; public education will be the foremost challenge in presenting a recommendation to the Select Board and Town Meeting; often residents with

a particular passion, such as sustainability and resilience, find themselves out in front of the Town's abilities and interests;

Marcia Rasmussen noted that due to the COVID emergency the Planning Department was not able to consume funds set aside for other projects. She will consult with the Town Manager whether some of that could be used for a consultant who could assist through focus groups or data gathering. There was consensus that this would be very helpful, especially regarding what the process is in other towns and regions.

There was agreement on the proposed timeline for data collection, analysis, report development. Jennifer Schunemann, John Boynton, and Mark Martines offered assistance with a survey. Beth Williams offered to reach out to Department heads. There was discussion regarding the constraints of sub-committees. Individuals could work with a consultant without breaking Open Meeting Law.

Mark Martines raised the issue of setting the tone in the community. Is this left to interested residents to raise issues of open land and/or sustainability, the Town Manager, or the Select Board. Does business have a voice? Who sets policy? Select Board Member Susan Bates stated that the Board reflects the wishes of the Town; it has primacy in policy matters and is informed by Town Manager who is informed by Department Heads as well as citizen drive. The Town is required by law to create a long-range plan, the recommendations of which will inform many goals. The Economic Vitality Committee arose from the recent Long-Range Plan. The Economic Vitality Committee can think in short, medium, and long-term goals. Its recommendations could cause bylaw and regulation changes and generate new volunteers for new committees to implement some recommendations. Right now, tone is crucial: if the Select Board and Town Meeting act to support a more business friendly climate, this will filter down to those in Departments and Boards who implement those choices. Vitality is a giant project.

It was stated that some aspects of permitting are the greatest source of pain: Health Department regulations and the Public Works Sewer Improvement Fee. There is no intent to claim nefarious intent but that more information and interpretation would be practical. Jennifer Schunemann stated that on some matters business and residents are in agreement, for instance fewer franchise businesses. The challenge for both is that rising rents limit choices. Perhaps consideration should be given to changing the tax structure or entertaining an earlier idea for a non-profit Concord commercial conservation trust to mitigate rising taxes as suggested by John Boynton.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment offered.

The next meeting will be on June 1 when this discussion will continue.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a Motion duly made and seconded, it was

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To adjourn the meeting at 5:25 PM.

Cato Anderson	Aye
John Boynton	Aye
Marie Foley	Aye
Mark Martines	Aye
Jennifer McGonigle	Aye
Jane Obbagy	Aye
Jennifer Schunemann	Aye
Debra Stark	Aye
Jan Turnquist	Aye
Steven Verrill	Aye

Beth Williams

Aye

Respectfully submitted
Cato Anderson, Clerk
Approved: June 1, 2021