

Economic Vitality Committee  
Virtual Meeting, 4 PM  
July 22, 2020

**PRESENT:** John Boynton, Remon Karian, Mark Martines, Dawn Rennert, Jennifer Schunemann, Debra Stark, Jan Turnquist, Steven Verrill, Beth Williams

**ABSENT:** Cato Anderson, Jane Obbagy

**ALSO PRESENT:** Susan Bates, Select Board; Stephen Crane, Town Manager; Jeremy Romanul, Select Board Asst.; Rick Cleary, Marie Foley, Happy Goethert, Marcia Rasmussen

**CALL TO ORDER AND ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

Co-chair Schunemann stated that she would be chairing the meeting. She announced that new member Remon Karian has been sworn in and now eligible to vote on committee matters.

**MINUTES**

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To Approve the Minutes of July 8, 2020 as amended.

|                     |     |
|---------------------|-----|
| John Boynton        | Aye |
| Remon Karian        | Aye |
| Mark Martines       | Aye |
| Dawn Rennert        | Aye |
| Jennifer Schunemann | Aye |
| Debra Stark         | Aye |
| Jan Turnquist       | Aye |
| Steven Verrill      | Aye |
| Beth Williams       | Aye |

**SUMMER DRIVE-IN MOVIE**

Rick Cleary shared a poster he created for movie nights in July and August. He stated that he and Beth Williams worked with others to propose a plan to the vendor that calls for at least two films to be shown on the field at CCHS on 45-foot and 35-foot screens spaced such that 100 cars could be parked and would allow residents to attend with no admission fees. The Town has agreed to sponsor the event, which enables the costs paid to the vendor to remain low while providing a way to connect retailers to residents in a fun way. It is hoped that businesses will cross promote with dinners/desserts on site or other fun activities. There was robust discussion regarding taking donations rather than setting ticket prices. Reservations may be made online and free donations made to Concord Together. Reservations were opened at the beginning of the discussion and in sixteen minutes  $\frac{1}{4}$  have been claimed.

**UPDATES FROM THE TOWN**

Stephen Crane stated that the application for outdoor dining has been prepared and made available to all interested restaurants. In addition, the Town is working on a permit application that would allow outdoor entertainment at restaurants as well as alcohol to be sold to go. The Town is investigating the possibility of partial relief of alcoholic beverage license fees. Mr. Crane noted that the utility rate relief proposed by the committee will not be pursued further as it could potentially be determined to be rate discrimination. However, the Town is investigating outdoor heaters for use by restaurants and retailers to

help with cold conditions when queuing and dining. He urged that businesses not buy such equipment without checking in first.

Mr. Crane stated that the Town received, as part of a larger group of communities led by the Town of Ashland, about \$200,000 in CDBG-CV assistance for businesses. In addition, we applied for a \$300,000 grant to create shared spaces, like outdoor seating in public spaces, but did not receive any funds from that program. Tied to the outdoor dining proposal, the Town is investing in a number of picnic tables to be located at various spots in Concord Center and West Concord for use by the public. Artists from the Umbrella will collaborate on painting the picnic tables. John Boynton stated that the Library has invested in a number of bistro tables that are placed on the library lawn for use by the public. The Town will arrange for regular cleaning of the picnic tables.

On the matter of relief from HDC signage regulations which the committee has proposed for the duration of the health emergency, Marcia Rasmussen reported that she made a presentation before the Historic Districts Commission and it has adopted the proposal with a caveat. The Commission has required 48 hours to preview each proposal but will not charge a fee or require a hearing. Marcia Rasmussen will make the information available for use by businesses. The free parking program will continue through Labor Day.

Beth Williams reported that the nature of visitors coming to Concord is changing. While it is usual to see many regional, national and international visitors, lately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of visitors have been local. She stated that she is working with hotels in Burlington that get many bus tourists to visit Concord for walking or bike tours or those drawn to *Little Women*. Ms. Williams noted that traffic at the Visitors Center was averaging 30 visitors per day; using three years of data, it was typical to average 50 per day. Visitors are sharing very positive feedback on access to bathrooms and a welcoming atmosphere.

#### **UPDATE FROM COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Steve Verrill reported that his farm business is stronger than a year ago. Typically, a large part of his business is providing fresh products to restaurants and since those businesses have been seriously curtailed, he has offered a 50% discount to his restaurant customers. In the farmstand, he has needed to add additional cash registers to spread out customers as the corn and tomato season brings additional customers.

Debra Stark stated that her business is fine. She is relieved to be in business at all. Sale of produce is going like gangbusters and they have had their first catering job since the onset of the pandemic. She stated that it is harder to do business in the pandemic and doing business costs more. Many of her customers leave Concord for summer.

Remon Karian stated that business at Fiorella's on Walden Street is the slowest of his five restaurants. Business is down 60% in Concord versus being down 40% in other towns. He concurred that many patrons leave Concord for the summer. Mr. Karian stated that he did not elect to provide outdoor dining for a number of reasons: additional costs of seating, lighting, heating/cooling, weather-limited option. He learned that the MA Restaurant Association is concerned at the number of establishments needing help and likely unable to reopen. In his opinion, restaurants are particularly vulnerable and could benefit from Town assistance. There are few options of Town assistance: enabling table set-up in parking spaces, covering outdoor spaces, closing streets to vehicular traffic for table set-up, providing access to shared spaces, streamlining the process to take advantage of options permitted by governors' guidelines. Generating a high enough volume of sales is the crucial part. In his opinion, Mr. Karian stated that any or all of these are not enough to make

restaurants profitable, particularly when capacity has been reduced due to the guidelines. Rent is his biggest fixed cost.

There was discussion of creating something similar to a sidewalk sale or block party festival. This would have safety and public relations issues to be addressed and curtail curbside pick-up. Mr. Karian agreed to share other information he has learned from the Restaurant Association. The Town website lists information from the governor regarding food security.

### **UPDATES FROM CONCORD TOGETHER**

Jennifer Schunemann stated that Concord Together had succeeded in raising \$63,000 to award to local businesses. \$53,000 has been allocated in grants of \$2,500. People were urged to let their colleagues know about this opportunity. The Summer Solstice program is well underway. Already 3 weekly drawings have been made and the program will continue throughout the summer.

### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

Happy Goethert, chair of the Agriculture Committee, stated that the committee is planning for Ag Day to occur on the Milldam on September 12. It will be somewhat abbreviated but will not require any practical changes. Other businesses are encouraged to tie to the day, but nothing specific is planned. As of this time, there is no change of location planned. There was discussion regarding using Monument Square, Heywood Meadow, the high school fields, or the municipal parking lot. The high school was determined to be too remote from the Center and the committee did not want to make use of the parking lot. Mr. Crane stated that Ag Day and its focus as a farmers' market is acceptable under the guidelines, but a festival does not meet the standards allowed.

Marie Foley of Revolutionary Concord reported on a recent virtual conference she attended with 1,800 other retailers from throughout the country. She stated that the number one concern expressed was the impact created by empty spaces that would occur as businesses in the commercial district fail. She is interested in participating in recruiting new businesses that would add to the vitality of the town. Discussion included: rent is a major issue; those who succeed in acquiring federal business loans are very cautious about using them if it is likely that foot traffic will be severely reduced due to other businesses failing; volume is needed; e-commerce could help with creating volume; a centralized business webpage with links to online ordering would be tremendous; holiday sales keep stores alive for the rest of year; volume of sales needs to increase, but volume of shoppers and personnel continues to be limited; when and if stores become empty there should be a program developed that allows the site to be repurposed rather than boarded up; our goal is to stay vibrant, not recreate and compete with Amazon; free business listings were offered by the Town and by *Discover Concord*; Concord values the businesses that do not compete with Amazon; the general public does not understand that they are a critical part of the solution.

Ms. Schunemann stated that preparing for the holidays, rent assistance, e-commerce, and recruiting new businesses are items for further discussion on upcoming agenda.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

Upon a Motion duly made and seconded, it was

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To adjourn the meeting at 5:20 PM.

John Boynton  
Remon Karian

Aye  
Aye

|                     |     |
|---------------------|-----|
| Mark Martines       | Aye |
| Dawn Rennert        | Aye |
| Jennifer Schunemann | Aye |
| Debra Stark         | Aye |
| Jan Turnquist       | Aye |
| Steven Verrill      | Aye |
| Beth Williams       | Aye |

Respectfully submitted  
Cato Anderson, Clerk  
Approved: August 5, 2020