

EconomicVitalityMTG 09-19-2020

Economic Vitality Committee
Virtual Meeting, 4 PM
September 16, 2020

PRESENT: Cato Anderson, John Boynton, Remon Karian, Mark Martines, Jennifer McGonigle, Jane Obbagy, Dawn Rennert, Jennifer Schunemann, Debra Stark, Steven Verrill, Beth Williams

ABSENT: Jan Turnquist

ALSO PRESENT: Stephen Crane, Town Manager; Jeremy Romanul, Select Board Asst.; Susan Bates, Select Board Liaison; Marcia Rasmussen, Director of Planning and Land Management

CALL TO ORDER AND ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Co-Chair Jennifer Schunemann called the meeting to order.

MINUTES

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To Approve the Minutes of September 2, 2020 as amended.

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

TOWN OF CONCORD UPDATES

Beth Williams and Marcia Rasmussen reported that further information has been received from the town of Ashland, which is taking the lead on administering the Block Grant. \$5 million is available and only 37 applications have been received from the 23 communities in the region. HUD and DHCD have provided some clarification on number of employees, tax year, median income levels, expenditures allowed by the grant, and the state Certificate of Good Standing required as part of the process. The grant may not be used to pay for something that was already covered by another grant. Businesses run out of homes, such as artists, caterers, those with DBA (doing Business As) certificates, or other Schedule C businesses are also welcomed to apply for the grant. It is important to spread the word to those potentially eligible who might not know the grant exists for them.

Beth Williams reported that there are ongoing discussions regarding a sidewalk sale on September 26. All the West Concord shops and nearly all the Concord Center shops consulted support the idea. Perhaps auto traffic can be rerouted to make the anticipated increased foot traffic safer. In addition, there is sponsorship for a third drive-in movie on October 1, 2, or 3. The vendor is scouting likely locations since the high school field is not available. It was suggested that October 1 be avoided as that is a possible late-night

shopping event. Beth noted that Concord has been getting great media exposure and is seeing increased visitor traffic.

The Montague Gallery on Walden St. has closed, due to the owner's retirement, not as a response to the COVID emergency.

Town Manager Stephen Crane reported that Annual Town Meeting outdoors at the high school went very well. There was seating for 500 and 371 attended. There was good discussion on budget and other matters; amendments were considered, and most articles were approved although some Petition Articles were not. The entire meeting took 3 hours and 15 minutes while in an ordinary year it would take several evenings! The 2021 Budget is 2% less than the 2020 Budget.

The Thoreau St. shopping district article was not approved. There was great opposition from neighbors and objections to the timing of the request as a broader discussion of the zoning and uses in the Depot area is underway.

Mr. Crane stated that the new Chair of the Select Boars when it reorganizes will likely be Linda Escobedo, the current Clerk. She is undertaking a review of the calendar for the 2021 Town Meeting schedule as Town Meeting this year was delayed. There is also the possibility of a Special Town Meeting, a primary topic on which will be the business assistance program that was recommended by the Economic Vitality Committee via a proposal from Henry Dane. There was not time to address this in the 2020 Town Meeting Warrant.

There is no update on the MA Vacant Storefront incentive program.

CONCORD TOGETHER UPDATE

Jennifer Schunemann asked how local businesses could be supported. She urged everyone to pick up Invest in Concord signs for front yard or windows. There was discussion regarding if and when late night store openings could commence; whether there was any interest staying open all night and/or really early. Jane Obbagy noted that the Chamber of Commerce has polled retailers and the consensus is to begin late Thursday openings in October. Staying open all night and/or really early is of interest on a case by case basis with some retailers not interested and others, such as Debra's Natural Gourmet having a history of great success with it. There is discussion of tying late opening to a restaurant or wine experience, but it is not yet clear how. Remon Karian stated that what is important is enticing new customers in, perhaps by bringing a receipt from one shop to another for a premium of some kind. The bottom line for restaurants is very fragile. Jennifer Schunemann suggested doubling the passport stamps for visiting a restaurant with special drawings for eateries. She stated that the Fall Passport ends on October 20.

Debra Stark asked whether it was possible to use vacant storefront windows to advertise events and be the site for exchanging a Concord token such as a candle, hat or t-shirt, or something from one of the cultural institutions that also remain closed. This could be part of the late-night opening offerings. Beth Williams stated she has pencils imprinted with "Little Women" to offer. John Boynton indicated that he would contact the owner of Colonial Stores to check interest on this. A similar opportunity in West Concord could be offered outside or under a tent near Concord Teacakes. Jane Obbagy suggested that if storefront use is not possible, the Visitor Information Center could remain open during late night sales. Remon Karian suggested a subcommittee in each shopping district to work together to best address the needs of that district. He stated that those working in restaurants are already overextended and tied up in operations to survive.

Marcia Rasmussen stated that the West Concord Cultural Council is looking for an opportunity to gather people to note and celebrate the West Concord Five & Ten, which is closing after multiple generations of ownership by the Forbes family.

Holiday shopping is on the minds of all local businesses. Most are not ready or experienced in e-commerce. It was asked whether the Town could provide grants or personnel to help get businesses started. Dawn asked whether there are mentors available such as SCORE mentors from the Small Business Association. Jane Obbagy volunteered to determine whether such people are available in Concord and to collect some general advice on the matter. John Boynton recommended that all members put out a call to their networks to find those who could step up and to check with the Community Chest whether the grant funds it is administering could be used for this purpose. He suggested we put out a call for volunteers and then seek funding if needed.

Mark Martines suggested that we might make use of inserts in the tax bill or utility bill to remind residents of the importance of shopping local to our community. In the absence of an insert, perhaps there could be a short slogan printed on envelopes coming out of the Town.

Jane Obbagy stated that while she is in favor of e-commerce, her members have expressed concern at the cost of any returns. On the one hand students who are generally more tech-savvy could be used to help develop appropriate websites, they could also help with curbside pick-up and returns. This is one more component to be investigated and addressed.

OTHER BUSINESS

Cato Anderson asked for opinions on the meeting schedule and timing now that school is in session. He finds 4PM difficult and others found noon similarly difficult. There was consideration of a schedule with alternating times, but after discussion, it was agreed to do a Doodle poll to find the best result.

Dawn Rennert asked whether landlords should be consulted on posting Invest in Concord signs.

Beth Williams stated that she had an excellent response to a call for volunteers to paint picnic tables and suggested she would do the same for painting murals, signs, or art on empty storefronts, with the owners' permission. The goal will be to create an inviting ambiance in the area. This will attract tenants

Beth Williams stated that she will consult with Greg Higgins of the Concord Business Partnership on committee activities.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment offered.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a Motion duly made and seconded, it was

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To adjourn the meeting at 5:10 PM.

Cato Anderson	Aye
John Boynton	Aye
Remon Karian	Aye
Mark Martines	Aye
Jennifer McGonigle	Aye
Jane Obbagy	Aye

Dawn Rennert
Jennifer Schunemann
Debra Stark
Steven Verrill
Beth Williams

Aye
Aye
Aye
Aye
Aye

Respectfully submitted
Cato Anderson, Clerk
Approved: September 30, 2020