



Town of Concord
Economic Vitality Committee Meeting Minutes
January 5, 2022

- Present:** John Boynton, Jennifer McGonigle, Dawn Rennert, Steven Verrill, Beth Williams, Cato Anderson, Debra Stark, Jennifer Schunemann, Marie Foley , Jennifer McGonigle and Mark Martines.
- Staff:** Marcia Rasmussen, Director of Planning and Land Management, Susan Bates, Select Board, Mary Hartman, Finance Committee
- Others:** Gregory Higgins and Karlen Reed

The meeting was called to order at 4:00 P.M.

TOWN UPDATES

The indoor mask mandate was reinstated on December 28, 2021. The message was conveyed to the business community along with a sign for them to hang in their establishments. They felt that the uniform sign was a good idea because it conveyed the same message to everyone that visited their shop. While the business community is pleased that the mask mandate has been reinstated the public is not happy about it. The Board of Health is preparing a statement of rationale for the implementation of the mask mandate and will be posting it on their website. The next Board of Health Meeting will be held on January 25, 2022. Ms. Rasmussen suggested that if someone does not agree with the mandate that they put their issue in writing and the Board of Health will discuss it at their next meeting. Chief O'Connor wants to remind the business community to call the police if customers are becoming verbally abusive to staff. At this time the Town Office hours will remain as posted. The Concord and Fowler Libraries have reduced their evening hours because of staffing issues.

Ms. Williams stated that the Tourism Group will be meeting this Thursday at 12:00 P.M. She wants to convey that many places in town remain open in the winter including the Concord and Fowler Libraries, The Umbrella Arts Center, local shops, Orchard House and the Concord Museum.

The Concord Chocolate Tour will be beginning on a Saturday in February. Stops will include Graem Chocolate, Priscilla Candy Shop, The Cheese Shop and the Colonial Inn where will stop for a piece of chocolate cake.

Ms. Williams is teaming with the Adult and Community Education to offer 3 fitness walks of 2+ miles in the Spring. She is also writing a proposal for the Office of Tourism Grant.

Ms. Rasmussen stated that she had a very productive conversation with Kerry LaFleur, Interim Town Manager. She stated that Ms. LaFleur is aware that the business community was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and she will doing what she can to support the business community. She is looking for ideas to create a sustainable economic life for Concord. Ms. Stark stated that Ms. LaFleur spoke at the Concord Business Partnership meeting and she understands what the business community is experiencing.

The Winter Issue of Discover Concord is available now. The E-Book will be going live this week. As far as planning for the year ahead Ms. Schunemann is happy to work with Ms. Foley and Ms. Williams and is always open to ideas. The Board of the Umbrella Arts Center will be meeting to decide what to do about live performances while the Omicron surge is upon us.

It was reported that Concord Together has been absorbed by other organizations. The members still work as a think tank to come ideas to benefit Concord.

Ms. Foley reported that the Chamber of Commerce has had some issues with their website but they are working to alleviate those issues. The membership drive begins on Monday. There will be a Chamber of Commerce meeting on Friday and Ms. Schunemann and Ms. Williams will be in attendance. Business Owners are reporting that they had a strong 4th quarter but are worried that the Omicron surge will cause shoppers not to visit their establishments.

Ms. McGonigle stated that she has been open 5 years in April. She had a strong year for sales but is experiencing many customers who are impatient and feel entitled. She would like it if people would be more kind to business owners in town. She is experiencing backlash online from customers which is not warranted. Ms. Foley stated that she feels that customers anxiety levels are rising with the new Omicron surge. She suggested approaching customers with as much kindness as possible. Mr. Boynton stated that he knows a business owner who was berated online because they did not have a piece of clothing in the customer's size. The Board agreed that COVID fatigue has made customers rude and angry.

Ms. Stark stated that supply chain issues are impacting everything. She found an essay on How to get through times like these and she will share it with the group.

Ms. Bates stated that the Select Board had a in depth discussion on conduct and how the Select Board and Committee Members interact with staff. There is an entitlement factor in Concord and everyone, including staff, are under a lot of stress.

Mr. Martines asked how we are with identifying issues with retail establishments and restaurants that need to be addressed. The year of 2021 was the year of concessions and compromises and we need to move on from there.

The Business owners are interested in having a conversation with the town and with property owners to discuss the last 2 years and how it has impacted their business. There is interest in having a meeting with this committee and the Chamber of Commerce, Town Staff and the Concord Business Partnership to discuss how we move forward as a community.

The committee expressed a desire to see a longer term solution for businesses going forward. They mentioned leases with businesses but know that information is confidential between the lessor and lessee. The retail community has some issue that should be discussed in an honest way.

Ms. Rasmussen stated that she has received 464 responses from the community to the survey that was sent out and only 5 responses from the business community. She was hoping to see more

responses from the business community as to what they would like to see in Concord going forward. She stated that the survey focused on brick and mortar stores rather than those that did not have physical space. The consultant is reviewing what would be beneficial for businesses in the future. She would like to schedule focus groups to see what people are looking for in the future. She would like to improve the relationship between the town staff and the business community related to permitting and inspections. It was noted that the business community is not responding to the survey for fear of retribution through the permitting process. She will send the survey out to the business community again and see what kind of response she receives. Ms. Foley stated she will promote the survey to business owners and encourage them to complete it.

PROJECTS FOR 2022

Mr. Boynton asked the Committee what their goals were for 2022. They listed the following:

- Review Permitting Process
- Uses for Starmet
- Transportation Issues
- 2025 Celebration
- Cellular Issues
- Diversity in town
- Growth in town

The Committee liked the idea of creating a guide on how to start a business in Concord to help potential new businesses navigate the permitting process. This could include links to various applications and who to contact with questions. They will present this idea to the Select Board for their input.

The Committee suggested creating a new position as a Business Liaison to help potential businesses navigate the process. Ms. Rasmussen stated that any new position would have to be approved by the Town Manager.

Mr. Anderson stated that a potential business, Walden Campers, was interested in opening a business in town but could not determine what type of business category they aligned with according to the Town Bylaws. It was stated that they wanted to do their business out of their home and it didn't fit with the bylaw. They eventually opened their business in Woburn and are thriving there. The town should reexamine their bylaws because businesses are different now than they were 20 years ago.

Ms. Rasmussen stated that if the committee would like to reexamine the Bylaws they would need to start a conversation now for 2023. This will be a long conversation because people will look at the negatives before they look at the positives.

It was asked how do we make the town more friendly for potential businesses and with town staff. The town has made strides with the tone of what they are conveying but the tone doesn't match what is actually happening. There should not be more restrictions on businesses when we have empty storefronts. It has been suggested that the Planning Board is pushing through the Thoreau District project and the Select Board should reexamine this more closely.

Mr. Boynton suggested that the Committee focus on:

- Supporting Businesses
- Zoning Bylaw
- Transportation Issues
- Defining the EVC role in town government
- Zoning the Thoreau District

The Committee stated their concerns with the Cellular Infrastructure in town. Many times calls will be dropped throughout the center of town. This becomes a safety issue when calls are unable to place calls in certain areas of town. The Balloon Test was performed on December 10, 2021 to see when it could be seen from Historic Sites. The town is looking at possibly putting up a smoke stack, to replicate what has previously been in town, to hide the tower. It was agreed that this does not need to be a point of focus for the EVC.

Mr. Boynton asked Ms. Bates what the Select Board is looking for the EVC to do? Ms. Bates stated that they would like the committee to focus on 3 to 5 items. She stated that the Select Board would welcome a chance to speak with the committee and they should notify the Select Board and ask to speak with them at one of their meetings.

Ms. Rasmussen reminded the committee that the role of the Select Board is to oversee Policy and the Direction the Town is taking and the Town Manager is in charge of staff. Any information the EVC sends to the Select Board should also be sent to the Town Manager.

Ms. Williams spoke about her job description which is to strike a balance between tourism and economic development. Also to optimize the Economic Contribution that tourism brings to Concord as well as industries outside of Concord.

Ms. McGonigle will write a draft for the Select Board on how to make the town more business friendly. Ms. Anderson will write a draft for the Select Board on reviewing the Zoning Bylaws as they pertain to businesses.

Mr. Higgins stated that the EVC should be a spokesperson for the business community. They should also have input when choosing one member of the Planning Board.

It was asked whether the Select Board is looking for community input as to who should be the new Town Manager. Ms. Bates stated that the process has not started yet and she will inform the committee when it does.

Ms. Hartman stated she is the Finance Committee Liaison to this committee and she can bring back ideas to the Finance Committee of what this committee needs to be successful.

Ms. Reed stated adopting 5G Cellular Service would improve life in the downtown area. The town is working with Verizon to find someplace to put the new tower. Currently towers are located in Church Steeples, Emerson Hospital, Wastewater Treatment Plant and Annursnac Hill.

ADJOURNMENT

On a **MOTION** made by Ms. Schunemann seconded by Mr. Anderson, it was **APPROVED** by roll call vote:

Ms. Foley -	Aye
Ms. McGonigle -	Aye
Mr. Anderson -	Aye
Ms. Williams-	Aye
Ms. Rennert -	Aye
Ms. Stark -	Aye
Mr. Martines -	Aye
Mr. Verrill -	Aye
Mr. Boynton -	Aye
Mr. Schunemann -	Aye

to **ADJOURN** the meeting

The meeting was adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Carolyn H. Dee