

EconomicVitalityMTG 02-16-2021

Economic Vitality Committee
Virtual Meeting, 4 PM
February 16, 2021

PRESENT: Remon Karian, Mark Martines, Jennifer McGonigle, Jane Obbagy, Dawn Rennert, Jennifer Schunemann, Jan Turnquist, Steven Verrill, Beth Williams

ABSENT: Cato Anderson, John Boynton, Debra Stark

ALSO PRESENT: Stephen Crane, Town Manager; Jeremy Romanul, Select Board Asst.; Susan Bates, Select Board Liaison, John Hinkling, Marcia Rasmussen Department of Management and Planning, Erin Stevens, Public Information Officer, Karlen Reed,

CALL TO ORDER AND ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Co-Chair Jennifer Schunemann called the meeting to order and noted the presence of a quorum. Minutes of February 2 will be considered at the next meeting. She reminded the committee that Ruth Lauer will be retiring from taking minutes and a replacement is being sought.

TOWN UPDATE

Beth Williams reported that she had applied for a \$55,000 Travel and Tourism grant partnering with the town of Lexington. Funds will be used this season to encourage visitors to come back to the area. In addition, she noted that the Chocolate and History tour sold out and was very popular. She will run that again with additional stops. She is also partnering with Colonial Inn staff to create new tours. Beth noted that she participated in a virtual conference of tour operators from throughout the country and learned that safety and getting the COVID vaccine are of primary importance to those who are likely to be the first visitors –those over 65 with disposable income. Beth also noted the success of a Concord Together highlight – a Valentine Day promotion that got 300+responses. Concord Visitor Center staff will have the first organization meeting of the new season in April.

Marcia Rasmussen reported that she had brought the Committee recommendation regarding making permanent the option of outdoor dining by right at the conclusion of the COVID emergency to the Planning Board. The Board would like a letter from EVC setting out the parameters of the changes sought in the bylaw amendment. Research will need to be done regarding impact on current restaurants as well as any new restaurants to determine whether there are any unintended consequences. Staffing requirements were not waived. If further research can resolve any identified issues, the Planning Board indicated that it would be willing to bring the amendment to Annual Town Meeting. The timeline is tight as the next meeting is February 23 and the Coordination Meeting is on February 27. Jennifer Schunemann agreed to take the lead on drafting a letter that seeks permanent parking relief and additional outdoor seating. Mark Martines asked Marcia if she could assist in a recommendation that could note the “low hanging fruit” inherent in the request. Marcia stated that unintended consequences such as impact on parking should be addressed. Mark noted that some restaurants are using private space for outdoor dining while others are making use of public space that would be the subject of the amendment. Would this bylaw amendment preserve the impact on private parking

and pavement use, or would it provide prospective relief? Jennifer Schunemann stated that impact on private space is not the focus of this proposal, rather the ripple effect on public parking. Marcia stated that analysis from 2012 and 2018 indicate that there is sufficient public parking available to absorb the change.

Remon Karian stated that the goal of the restaurateurs is to increase seats by adding outdoor seasonal seating, not to transfer current indoor seating to outside seasonally. Capacity reductions during the emergency have reduced the revenue possibilities. Beth Williams stated that the primary municipal feedback is a complaint about the extra trash in public areas due to take-out food and picnics that the Town has supported with additional picnic tables in the commercial districts. Foot traffic has increased; this is good. Shopping has increased during the wait time for take-out food. But trash has been the unintended consequence. Complaints are from both residents and other merchants about the appearance of the Center.

Dawn Rennert asked whether the Planning Board might at least be receptive to an extension of the conditions allowed by the Emergency Order. Marcia stated that 1) the change proposed would be a change in the culture of the community and 2) when the emergency expires there will be 60-day period automatically extending the dining changes. Probably all is well for the upcoming season. The bylaw changes to be brought to Town Meeting would affect future conditions and culture. Marcia stated that it is not too soon to seek letters of support from the community. There are tensions between retail and food businesses that center on consuming parking. Jane Obbagy asked whether the amendment to increase seating would affect the requirements for restrooms.

EVC LONG RANGE ISSUES

Ms. Schunemann reminded the Committee that it had recently had a discussion about the Charge and original goals of the Committee when formed by the Select Board. Almost immediately the focus turned from a study of the four retail districts and their connections to the historical and cultural resources that bring tourists to Concord and are enjoyed by the citizens of the Town, to a short-term focus on addressing the economic impact of COVID on the commercial sector of the community. She asked whether in the opinion of Committee members it was time to focus on longer term issues as outlined in the Charge.

There was rich discussion regarding longer term issues such as the sewer improvement fee impact on reusing vacant buildings for businesses with a more intense need for water and sewer, careful attention to the retail mix needed to bolster the community culture, short-term reuse of vacant buildings for art and cultural activities, potential contacts with non-resident landlords, consultation with Public Works Committee regarding sewer capacity issues, prohibitive local fees. The consensus of the meeting was to reallocate committee time between short term and longer-term issues and that a sub-group could begin to tackle information leading to an educational campaign. The information would be useful to both taxpayers and to potential new businesses. This could lead to marketing for the Town regarding grants, business development and mentoring. Concord places a premium on unique shops and businesses that will find it more difficult to locate here than a big box franchise store would. It was further agreed that a short list of questions would be developed to survey current establishments on the difficulties and benefits of having a business in Concord.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mark Martines reminded the Committee of the work being undertaken to prepare for the reuse of the 2229 Main St. Superfund site. In his opinion, it is a unique opportunity to sustain and grow the commercial tax base in Concord. The report is available, and the comment period is open for input. He believes that the EVC should comment to the Select Board regarding the best reuse plan. Steve Verrill noted that this a unique parcel and it is hard to imagine any similar sized parcel that could provide the benefits to commercial.

Jennifer Schunemann stated that she sees before the Committee both short term activity to stabilize the existing business community, medium range goals to remove obstacles to bringing a business to Concord, and long-term goals of creating a 10-year map of growing the commercial center.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a Motion duly made and seconded, it was
UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:
To adjourn the meeting at 5 PM.

Remon Karian	Aye
Mark Martines	Aye
Jennifer McGonigle	Aye
Jane Obbagy	Aye
Dawn Rennert	Aye
Jennifer Schunemann	Aye
Jan Turnquist	Aye
Steven Verrill	Aye
Beth Williams	Aye

Respectfully submitted
Cato Anderson, Clerk
Approved: April 6, 2021