

Economic Vitality Committee  
Virtual Meeting, noon  
April 15, 2020

**PRESENT:** Cato Anderson, John Boynton, Mark Martines, Jane Obbagy, Dawn Rennert, Jennifer Schunemann, Steven Verrill, Beth Williams

**ABSENT:** Marcia Rasmussen, Debra Stark, Jan Turnquist,

**ALSO PRESENT:** Susan Bates, Select Board; Stephen Crane, Town Manager; Kate Hodges, Deputy Town Manager; Jeremy Romanul, Select Board Asst.; Kate Carr, Henry Dane, Greg Higgins, Cynthia Rainey, Karlen Reed

**CALL TO ORDER AND ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

Co-Chair John Boynton called the meeting to order and summarized the situation that has resulted in virtual participation for only selected essential meetings. Similar to the Town's remote participation policy, votes must be by rollcall. In the future, Cato Anderson, the Committee Clerk, will work with Jeremy Romanul and the Town Clerk regarding agenda, minutes, and posting meetings. Minutes of the February meeting will be available at the next meeting.

Mr. Boynton reported that he had discussed committee membership with Helen Brady and Remon Karian owner of Fiorella's Restaurant. He learned that Helen is already serving on the Board of Registrars and therefore ineligible for membership. Remon indicated that he is enthusiastic and submitted a Green Card. Ms. Bates stated that the Select Board will nominate Mr. Karian at its upcoming meeting and will appoint at a meeting as soon as Town business resumes. He is encouraged to participate in the committee while the process is being completed.

Mr. Boynton asked members with additional names to forward them to the co-chairs.

**AMENDED CHARGE**

Ms. Bates reported that a variety of staff and Town officials have been in discussion with community leaders including merchants, members of Concord Business Partnership, and others concerned with the impact of the health emergency on local businesses and residents. She suggested the EVC committee was the suitable organization for pursuing and addressing these concerns. This resulted in amending the Charge to allow the Committee to meet and work on the current situation.

At the most recent Select Board meeting the Board amended the Duties of the Committee by inserting the following: Explore and recommend methods the Town and community can take to support local businesses during the emergency and recovery. Ms. Bates noted that she will make the changes and circulate to the committee.

Mark Martines asked what the pathway back from the crisis would be, the process for committee feedback. Since the committee role is advisory, Ms. Bates stated that the committee could respond to her to forward to the Select Board or to the entire Select Board and cc the Town Manager. Stephen Crane stated however they arrived, the recommendations would be considered by both Select Board and Town Manager.

**COVID IMPACT AND RESPONSE – TAX RELIEF**

Mr. Boynton stated that recently the Select Board took action regarding local taxes and fines. Mr. Crane explained that under the auspices of recent State omnibus relief legislation the Select Board could extend the deadline for tax payments and/or waive fines and penalties for the late payment of

taxes. In consultation with the Town Assessor and Chief Financial Officer, the Board adopted the provision that retains the tax payment deadline but permits waiving fines and penalties for late payment for those for whom this is a burden. This process provides some relief but also enables continued revenue generation to provide Town services to the community. Mr. Crane stated that those not helped are encouraged to contact the Finance or Assessor departments.

Mr. Boynton asked how many were aware of this important information and how the Town intended to make the information more widely available. Mr. Crane stated that he had included this in the recent “robocall” update of the local situation. Those calls reach 70% of the Town. Kate Carr stated that she sent the information to all Concord Business Partnership members. Kate Hodges, Deputy Town Manager, stated that the information was also included in various social media postings as well as “News and Notices” on the Town website. Mr. Crane stated that the Town has a limited toolbox in terms of notifications and has been using all of them due to the quickly shifting nature of the crisis. There is no model for this crisis. Mr. Crane stated that the most recent comparable predicament might be the economic situation of 2007--09. While historically, Concord has had a high collection rate for property taxes –90+%, and there was minimal impact from the 2007—09 economic crisis, no one knows where this situation will go and how long it will take.

Regarding the impact on collections from the commercial base in 2007--09, Mr. Martines stated that this time we might find collections severely skewed by landlords who cannot collect rents for 25% to 33% of the year. Mr. Crane stated that the commercial base makes up approximately 8% of the tax base. Jennifer Schunemann asked whether the new legislation referred only to taxes and not assets of companies. Mr. Crane stated that State legislation focused on property tax and while Town revenues include taxes on meals and lodging, the bulk is property tax.

Beth Williams, Town Visitor and Tourism Manager, reported that she, Brandon Roberts, and John Harris in the Finance Department had begun to reach out to businesses to learn more about local impacts and offer Town support and access to appropriate loan applications. She is learning on the go and adding helpful information to the Town website. To date about a dozen businesses have worked with the Town team. Mr. Crane reported that this is not part of Ms. Williams job as Visitor and Tourism Manager, but she has volunteered to take it on as the situation unfolds.

Mr. Martines stated that from his experiences in other towns, Concord should be applauded for getting ahead of the situation. This Town is willing to assist while many are not. Mr. Crane noted that we will need to engage broadly and to exhibit patience in dismantling all the preparations we have taken. We will stay attuned to state and federal legislation as well as other sources of data.

### **COVID IMPACT AND RESPONSE-- BUSINESS QUESTIONNAIRE**

The committee discussed what was known about the source, purpose, and desired outcome of the Survey. Mr. Boynton stated that he and Co-chair Jennifer Schunemann have participated in an *ad hoc* group called Concord Together initiated by Jane Obbagy and Sharon Spaulding. It has been proposed that the Town would coordinate a survey of local businesses to understand how they are being impacted by COVID so that we can together figure out the best way to support businesses through this time. One obvious thing is to encourage Concordians to support local businesses to the greatest extent they can right now. The survey will gather initial data on how businesses are being impacted so we can think through the right response to be undertaken.

Mr. Boynton offered to share with the committee a draft of the survey being proposed by the various non-profit groups and perhaps post it on the Town website. The hope would be to fine tune it within a few days, get it into circulation, and begin to generate data as early as next week.

## COVID IMPACT AND RESPONSE -- BRAINSTORM

This brings up the question of how the Committee should conduct its activities. Should the Committee be principally responsible or a clearinghouse or coordinator of others' recommendations for action. It may be better for an *ad hoc* non-governmental organization (NGO) to take action rather than an official committee that comes with limitations such as open meeting and public records laws. In earlier meetings when discussing goals for the committee there was an orderly plan for topics, guests and experts that the current duty does not fit. The priority of COVID response seems to require a quick and decisive reaction that doesn't fit that orderly and elegant plan.

Ms. Schunemann stated that the core challenge for the Committee seems to be the crisis. There is a lot of exciting activity occurring in the private sector that should be shared and developed. Concord Together has created a You Tube channel for businesses to post a video about their offerings as a marketing initiative, the survey is another idea for responses as is discussion of special events. In her opinion, at a minimum, committee members should ensure that they provide rapid links to any information they learn. A consolidated venue for sharing ideas is what is needed.

Ms. Williams stated the new Town Tourism website is live. There is a COVID page. She is contacting businesses for free listings of resources and is listing what businesses are doing. More needs to be heard from the You Tube channels and cross promotions. Ms. Schunemann stated that *Discover Concord* page will connect as well for cross linking.

Mr. Martines stated that it is the role of the committee to act as an intermediary channel between businesses and the Select Board and Town Manager. We all need to acknowledge the crisis now and use tools available such as data gathered from the survey e.g. sales and projections, to prepare for when the crisis lifts. It is important to avoid or at least lessen the surprises. Now is the time to reach out to constituencies to identify the pain points and plan for the future. We need to educate people to support local businesses or prepare for a flood of abatements and/or problems with businesses paying taxes.

Steve Verrill stated that since the Economic Advisory Committee is advisory to the Select Board and Town Manager, discussion needs to be refocused on committee recommendations, not actions. Mr. Crane stated it depends on what kind of action. The Committee must stay within the scope of its Charge. Ms. Schunemann asked whether the committee, rather than recommending the survey become a Town instrument, could recommend that the survey, generated by an NGO, be made accessible via Town communications channels. This might generate a higher level of participation. Mr. Crane stated that the Town is already promoting essential businesses on the website; links to or hosting the survey is fine. In his opinion, it is a dialogue in and amongst businesses that will generate essential data.

Mr. Anderson stated that in his opinion the survey generated by the Business Partnership and others is the way to go to demonstrate independent action and support for each other. Greg Higgins responded his agreement. In his opinion, speed is essential in order to gather needed information to go forward. Also, we need to learn how other communities are preparing to get back to normal. Who is going to do that research has still to be determined. Mr. Martines asked how the survey can be formulated to be empowering and incentivizing for the businesses filling it out. Response rates need to be robust to create solutions. Ms. Schunemann acknowledged the typical issues with surveys and added that in addition, this one would be asking delicate questions such as anticipated revenues, number of employees, etc. Not everyone will respond. Perhaps it needs to be made clear to the businesses up front how the data will be used and shared. Perhaps the Committee needs to make the recommendation to the Select Board that when the survey is available it is forwarded through Town channels to be widely available. In her opinion, Ms. Schunemann stated that the survey should include open ended questions—what 3 things could town do to support your business?

Mr. Higgins stated that the Concord Business Partnership could work through landlords to get to tenants. Survey anonymity will generate more responses. Contact information for appropriate Town staff or departments for those with additional needs should be provided.

Mr. Crane noted that Town documents become public records. Therefore, the Partnership and Chamber should likely collect and analyze the data. As far as how the Town will reopen? Concord will take its cue from Gov. Baker, being very careful. All actions will be planned and depend upon case data. In his opinion, that is still at least 4-6 weeks away. Unfortunately, it is likely that the Town will learn about some businesses when they do not open when given the opportunity. Businesses should be encouraged to complete the survey as if they were writing to the Governor to tell him of their needs and what he can do to help.

Mr. Boynton suggested the Committee needs to stay alert for responses and best practices in other places or organizations. As an example, a Maine seasonal community is considering not reopening because it is unclear when the population will be able to engage. In his opinion, there will be a much higher survey response if it clearly identifies ways to support businesses. Once the analysis is complete then the information can be made available to advise the Town. Mr. Crane stated that town managers are in regular communication on many issues, but no one is discussing reopening yet.

Mr. Verrill suggested that it might be more fruitful if the survey avoids matters such as revenues and employees and instead addresses matters that are limiting the business –such as density of seating. Mr. Martines stated that his time as a landlord recently has been focused on rents due, mortgages due, and agreements for deferrals or abatements. Information coming from tenants to landlords who can sanitize information gathered could help uncover the breadth and depth of the local problem. Greg Higgins concurred that information gathering through landlords might garner more data than a single business might be comfortable sharing. Regarding the survey, the NGO should make known that the survey is amongst the steps available to help selves if businesses can tell what is needed and ask for it. There should also be contact information on agencies or officials who can help. Ms. Schunemann suggested that the Committee review the draft survey at its next meeting in preparation for making a recommendation to Select Board and Town Manager.

Mr. Boynton raised the question of how frequently the Economic Vitality Committee should be meeting to allow it to be truly helpful. An NGO that operates without the limitations of a governmental committee can meet as frequently and openly as it chooses and can get a job done sooner than a Committee.

Mr. Anderson stated that we wanted the survey sooner, so it could be reviewed and sent on to the Town. He would like to see the draft after the meeting. Ms. Schunemann agreed to attach the survey to the agenda for the next meeting. However, circulating it as soon as possible so that Cato can collect suggestions and comments would be better.

After discussion, it was the consensus of the meeting that meeting as often as every other week is doable, but the midday time frame was difficult. It was agreed to meet every other Wednesday at 4PM.

Mr. Boynton stated that Kate Carr was collecting survey comments on behalf of the Concord Business Partnership and Jane Obbagy was doing the same for the Concord Chamber of Commerce. Committee members with no affiliation with those groups should funnel information to Cato Anderson.

Mr. Crane stated that he and the Town would appreciate any information that members of the business community are learning from trade publications, fraternal organizations, lobbyists, or other organizations that have opinions, data, or forecasts for the new normal.

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

There were no public comments offered.

## ADJOURNMENT

Upon a Motion duly made and seconded, it was  
UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To adjourn the meeting at 1:35PM.

|                     |     |
|---------------------|-----|
| Cato Anderson       | Aye |
| John Boynton        | Aye |
| Mark Martines       | Aye |
| Jane Obbagy         | Aye |
| Dawn Rennert        | Aye |
| Jennifer Schunemann | Aye |
| Steven Verrill      | Aye |
| Beth Williams       | Aye |

Respectfully submitted

Cato Anderson, Clerk

Approved: May 13, 2020

| Committee Roster          | edress   | telephone    |
|---------------------------|--|--------------|
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