

Minutes
Council of Economic Advisors
Wednesday, April 15, 2020, 10:00 a.m.
Zoom Meeting ID 701962884
Approved May 13, 2020

Members Present: Stuart Agler, Adam Block, Anne Marie Dowd, Virginia Fleisher, Maurice Handel, Robert Hentschel, Adam Meixner, Rick Putprush, Tina Burgos, David Montgomery, Michael Wilcox, Bill Day

Members Absent: Ted Owens, Matthew Talcoff, Glen Cammarano

Others Present: Lee Newman, Director of Planning and Community Development; Daphne Collins, Zoning Specialist; Cyndi Roy-Gonzalez, Public Information Officer

Adam Block, Chair, opened the meeting at 10:00 a.m.

1. Minutes of March 11, 2020

Mr. Handel moved to adopt the Minutes of March 11, 2020 with a minor edit proposed by Mr. Montgomery. Mr. Putprush seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

2. COVID19 State of Emergency – Needham Business

a. Issues and Concerns

Ms. Burgos, owner of Covet + Lou, a high end clothing store, reported that the pandemic has seriously affected business. There is no longer any walk-in traffic in the downtown. Her physical business closed on April 13, 2020. Her business has a strong online presence which has been a strategic focus of her business plan. 95% of her business is online. She currently has three employees on reduced hours. She is mostly selling small household goods reflecting the new home nesting conditions.

Retailers are having difficulties obtaining product to sell with production and the supply chain so severely impacted. She reported that some businesses have resorted to panic selling at deep discount which is concerning as July is traditionally a slow time in Needham.

She said the community has been very supportive and have been buying gift cards. However, she felt that the initial good-will shopping was not sustainable with so much need and unemployment.

She was concerned with the survival of small businesses in the downtown since most small businesses do not have an online presence and rely on foot traffic. She thought businesses

who were creating an online presence in response to the pandemic were facing a serious challenge. She was concerned that many would not bounce back.

b. State and Federal Business Assistance

Ms. Burgos noted that there has been a mixed experience with the various state and federal disaster relief assistance programs for small businesses. The process has been confusing with banks rolling out the assistance programs at different times. The State program ran out of funds within 24 hours.

Ms. Burgos felt that the psychological confidence of customers will determine when business will realistically return despite the official lifting of the State of Emergency.

Mr. Putprush inquired about any financial assistance for independent contractors. Ms. Burgos believed that the PPP loan program was open to them on April 10th. Mr. Block noted that these loans are challenging for independent contractors to obtain because their separate checking account isn't classified as a business one.

Ms. Dowd reported that the \$20 million fund made available by Mass Development has been exhausted. They are referring new borrowers to the SBA.

Mr. Handel was looking for input from businesses and the real estate community about what the Town could do to be helpful. He requested that any ideas be conveyed to the CEA

Greg Reibman, President of the Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce, reminded that all sectors of the business community were facing challenges. He was very concerned about the rent crisis that will become more critical in May. He suggested a possible municipal/federal rent relief program. Mr. Handle responded that the Town does not have the resources to provide a rent relief program.

Mr. Reibman was concerned about the PPP program running out of funds before some businesses can find a lender. He noted that the PPP program was problematic because it's not always as financially advantageous for an employee over unemployment.

Business support suggestions were:

- Gift cards;
- Purchasing take out;
- Ecommerce purchasing;
- Business survey;
- Provide content to the Public Information Officer highlighting Town businesses;
- Support business webinars regarding rent relief options for Landlords and Tenants;
- Posting business relief resources and contacts on the Town website.

Mr. Hentschel reported that his tenants were all being impacted. 15% of his tenants have requested rent relief. He is working with all his tenants one month at a time and is in contact

with his lenders. He is concerned about the survival of his restaurants. All new business has dried up.

Mr. Putprush shared that the mortgage covenant for his medical office building restricts any adjustments to rents without approval of the lender.

Mr. Wilcox reported he was working with his tenants. His tenants have approached him for rent relief. All potential new businesses deals are discontinued. The company is looking at cash preservation to buffer the uncertain future. A bright spot was for the lab sectors as they are deemed essential and are still working.

Mr. Wilcox noted difficulties getting Certificates of Occupancy for open projects from the Building Department. The Building Department is now relying on affidavits from engineers and architects with photographs of completed work. He inquired about the Building Department services. Ms. Collins reported that the Building Department is accepting building permit applications through their newly implemented Viewcloud website but has stopped processing new permits since April 6 unless the project is an emergency. The Building Department is fully staffed Monday, Wednesday and Friday and are conducting inspections of open projects.

Ms. Fleishman reported that her tenants are also seeking rent relief beginning with the retail sector. Any accommodations are based on a rental deferrals. The key has been maintaining open communications with lenders and investors as well. She'd like to see the CEA explore discussions on rent relief options for landlords and tenants. A possible webinar sponsored by the Chamber and experts was suggested.

Ms. Dowd inquired about the Town's position to respond to the downturn. Mr. Handel reported that the Town is in good condition because of its conservative approach to budgeting and borrowing. However, forecasts are limited because of the duration of the downturn is unknown. Mr. Handel noted that the Town has limited authority and finance to assist.

Ms. Dowd and Mr. Block reported that the Chamber had done a good job providing information on state and federal resources. Ms. Dowd will forward the information and presentation of the seminar to Ms. Roy-Gonzalez so that the information can be posted on the Town website.

Ms. Newman shared that the Town of Concord has a business website about available federal and state resources and contacts. Ms. Roy-Gonzales will review the Concord business website.

Mr. Day reported that Needham Bank was available for PPP funds. They are assisting both new and current businesses.

c. Preparing for Recovery

Mr. Block proposed that a discussion be scheduled between the CEA, Select Board, the Town Manager, the Public Information Officer and the Director of Health about recovery efforts

3. Economic Balanced Scorecard Update

The Babson/Needham Team will be presenting the final report on the Needham Business Inventory and Needham Scorecard at a Joint Meeting with the Select Board at the end of the month. Zoom meeting invitations will be forwarded.

4. Industrial Zoning (HC1) – Update

Ms. Newman reported that the HC1 zoning change is scheduled to be presented to Town meeting for May 2021. A new traffic study will be conducted to understand the impacts of different development options on traffic at key intersections. An Article is being forwarded to Town Meeting to fund the study for the Spring 2020 Town Meeting. A small working group will be convened to steward the project.

Mr. Handel noted that the Select Board was concerned that the study will not reflect the traffic demand under the present conditions. Ms. Newman thought there is enough flexibility in the project scope to adjust the study.

5. Planning and Community Development Business Update

Ms. Newman reported that the redevelopment of Children’s Hospital was going forward. The Planning Board is holding a hearing for the rezoning of this project on April 15, 2020.

The representatives of Avery Manor, a proposed independent and assistant living project at the former Carter’s Building, are in discussion with Ms. Newman and are looking to rezone.

Ms. Newman said that the Farmer’s Market is coming before the Planning Board as well as a minor modification to the Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital-Needham.

Ms. Collins reported that the ZBA will be reviewing Special Permit applications for the Wireless Communications Facilities located at 350 Cedar Street and 140 Cabot Street; and for the first Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU).

The Planning Department staff is continuing to process applications before the Planning Board, the Conservation Commission, and the ZBA remotely.

6. Scheduling Next Meeting

Wednesday, May 13, 2020 at 10am

7. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:20 a.m.