



**Blue Ribbon Committee to Reopen Portsmouth 2021
City of Portsmouth, New Hampshire
Remote meeting via Zoom
January 6, 2021 – 2:00 p.m.**

CALL TO ORDER:

Co-Chair James Petersen called the meeting to order at 2:00 p.m. and read the following declaration:

Per NH RSA 91-A:2, III (b) the Chair has declared the COVID-19 outbreak an emergency and has waived the requirement that a quorum be physically present at the meeting pursuant to the Governor's Executive Order 2020-04, Section 8, as extended by Executive Order 2020-25, and Emergency Order #12, Section 3. Members will be participating remotely and will identify their location and any person present with them at that location. All votes will be by roll call.

ROLL CALL:

Voting Members Present: Co-Chairs James Petersen and Mark Stebbins; Alan Gold, Ann Birner, Bianca Monteiro, Jeff Goss, Karen Bouffard, Kathie Lynch, John Golumb, Valerie Rochon, City Manager Karen Conard, City Health Officer Kim McNamara.

Non-voting Member Present: Councilor Petra Huda.

Voting Members Absent: Deborah Anthony, Jim Lee, Joe Scarlotto, and Sen. Martha Fuller Clark, Sarah LaChance.

Other City Staff Present: City Attorney Robert Sullivan, Legal Secretary Marian Steimke.

WELCOME AND APPROVAL OF 12/23/2020 and 12/30/2020 MEETING MINUTES:

Alan Gold moved to approve the minutes of the 12/23/2020 and 12/30/2020 meetings, seconded by Co-Chair Mark Stebbins. On a roll call vote 12-0, the motion passed.

Co-Chair Petersen gave an overview of the agenda, which included an update on the vacancies and clarification on the new charge. He and Co-Chair Stebbins had met with the Mayor in order to get clarification.

VACANCIES UPDATE

City Manager Conard stated there were seven new applications for consideration, five of which are Portsmouth residents. The Mayor has received all seven of those. She will let the Blue Ribbon Committee (BRC) know if any of the names move forward.

Councilor Huda asked if the BRC goes through the Council or only the Mayor. Attorney Sullivan said the BRC is a local, not a legal term. He discussed past practice, saying it is the Mayor's committee, for the Mayor to appoint and issue charge. The caveat is the BRC does not have authority to act – they report to the Mayor. With that understanding, it means the Mayor could make the appointment. Councilor Huda then asked about process and timing.

Valerie Rochon expressed concern that people that pay the most taxes – business owners – will be excluded if they are not residents. These are the people most affected.

Co-Chair Petersen said the BRC welcomes all to these meetings – there is an official membership, but the BRC welcomes guests. In response, Co-Chair Stebbins suggested inviting folks via email to ask for input on agenda ideas.

Co-Chair Petersen wanted to clarify the ability to make decisions. He said in the BRC's work they have been collaborating and making recommendations. They don't need to be called decisions. Co-Chair Stebbins said the City Manager still has the public domain rights from the Council, and City Manager Conard confirmed that.

Stephanie Seacord asked if the Mayor was still accepting applications, and the City Manager said to leave on the website for now.

Co-Chair Stebbins said the Mayor will make an announcement regarding the Arts community for those that are not Portsmouth residents.

NEW CHARGE:

Co-Chair Petersen said he took a walk with the Mayor and Co-Chair Stebbins the past Sunday. Co-Chair Petersen read words the BRC can use as reference as it conducts its business:

He read: “To enhance collaboration with existing resources such as the EDC, (Economic Development Committee), Pro-Portsmouth, The Chamber, as we have been and other groups to

- 1) Gather and distribute information re: the economic impact of COVID;
- 2) Promote Portsmouth;
- 3) Reach out and help more organizations and Businesses and identify new needs; and
- 4) Improve kick start use of streets.”

Co-Chair Petersen hopes this would provide better clarity and a basis for continuing the BRC's work.

Co-Chair Stebbins said the Mayor is very appreciative for all the hard work this year and has some great thoughts and plans coming on what the BRC can do with the limited time and resources.

BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE ON HEALTH REPORT:

Kathie Lynch said Ann Birner has passed the baton as Chair of the Health Committee. Ms. Lynch then shared and discussed a screen of the 1/4/2021 COVID-19 dashboard. She pointed to the positivity and rising rates in Rockingham County and Portsmouth as the biggest concerns. She emphasized masking and distancing and discussed highlights of the vaccination map. Ms. Lynch next shared a screen entitled “New Hampshire COVID-19 Vaccination Allocation Plan Summary, January 5, 2021” to help residents know what to expect. Ms. Lynch stressed the importance of businesses being able to maximize profits in case the pandemic lasted beyond this year. She expressed concern about the UK variant.

Health Officer McNamara clarified hospital census data and said those figures are a barometer of where we are at. She added we are not responsible for surge capacity. That would be the extent of any surge capacity that we would be involved in.

STREET USE 2021

City Manager Conard gave a detailed recap of the 12/30 meeting and listed the following highlights and discussions: internal lessons learned; meeting with City department heads; viewed the outdoor approvals; different ways of using the outside; street closures impact, and willingness to talk about partial street closures; fast-tracking the pre-approval process; integrating examples of what worked in other places; activity of the design alliance; and use of sidewalk obstruction license review.

The City Manager said Planning Director Juliet Walker is developing a dashboard element where all requests would be funneled and processed. City Manager Conard talked about making more space available and considering more permanent outdoor dining spaces for next winter. In providing guidance to restaurants, going onsite is better than written communications. She reminded those present that any changes to policy would need to be approved by Council. She said this could be implemented by early February. She discussed social zones and the positive and negative of those. There is the question of who maintains and cleans. She talked about wishes of the restaurant community. DPW wants to ensure barricades are up by April 1st; sidewalks could possibly start sooner. She mentioned the approval process and being as prepared as possible with a clear and easy path to open as quickly as possible. There’s been a lot of internal communication to make this process seamless. Regarding parking spaces, DPW will put up more uniform signs to deal with snow plows, she said.

Co-Chair Stebbins asked when to encourage people to apply for permits. City Manager said they will communicate through the Chamber and other mechanisms, shooting for middle February.

John Golumb asked if he has to reapply if he has the permit from last year, and the City Manager said he will be fast tracked, with a much expedited process. Re-submitting the same from last year is acceptable if there are no changes, she added.

Co-Chair Stebbins suggested communicating directly with restaurants that got permits last year to say the site was estimated to be open by mid-February and of what the expectations are. City Manager Conard said she and Planning Director Walker will work on that.

Ms. Rochon thanked City Manager Conard. She asked where this BRC could be of assistance to the City and how the BRC can help and be of value going forward. City Manager Conard said great question, and she will take that back to the group.

Councilor Huda offered a phased process outline to move forward and asked for feedback from the group. She stated the Mayor's directive was to incorporate and collaborate with all businesses. She read her proposed process outline:

Phase 1. Brainstorming and collaboration session. This would include all businesses, and she discussed determining how many focus sessions would be needed to incorporate everyone.

Phase 2. Bring back in the staff. This would be done to evaluate from staff's perspective once there is a plan in place for opening.

Councilor Huda suggested separating the two BRC's so Streets Committee could focus on that specifically. She suggested the Health Committee can give a brief update but they need to get this Committee flying. She asked for feedback on this proposal.

Co-Chair Petersen stressed the importance of staying updated in terms of health on a weekly basis because that informs the BRC's decisions as we move along. With respect to brainstorming, he said we work best when we continuously brainstorm, since things are different on a weekly basis

Health Officer McNamara said the vaccine roll-out will be several months. Outside is safer than inside. She said this group has been very creative. It is important that health and business mesh to some degree, she said and added that most likely next winter things may still be off.

City Manager Conard said a public comment period is needed during the meeting time. Attorney Sullivan said you could determine any ground rule for that you wanted to have. The Co-Chairs prefer to have as open a meeting as possible.

Co-Chair Stebbins agreed with Councilor Huda to not have a long discussion on health but acknowledged it was needed. He agreed with the brainstorming and expressed frustration with parliamentary rules. City Attorney Sullivan said the RBC is a public body and as such is subject to the RTK law.

Ms. Rochon moved adjourn, seconded by Alan Gold. On a roll call vote 12-0, the motion passed and meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted
By Marian Steimke