

**MEETING MINUTES OF THE PORTSMOUTH  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION  
December 4, 2020**

**Members Present:** Bob Marchewka, Chairman; Philip Cohen, Vice Chairman; Assistant Mayor Jim Splaine, Sarah Lachance, Tom Watson, Alan Gold, City Councilor Cliff Lazenby; Ron Zolla Everett Eaton; Katelyn Kwoka,

**Excused:** Dana Levenson

**City Staff:** City Manager Karen Conard, Economic Development Program Manager Nancy Carmer

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**Zoom meeting statement**

Chairman Marchewka began the meeting by reading the following statement:

Per NH RSA 91-A:2, III (b) the Chair has declared 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 2020-18, 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.

**Minutes- Approval of draft meeting minutes of November 6, 2020**

Commissioner Watson moved, and Commissioner Lachance seconded a motion to approve the draft meeting minutes of November 6, 2020. Via roll call vote, the motion carried unanimously.

**Pandemic Economic Recovery Response**

- *COVID update* - Health Officer Kim McNamara updated the Commission on the current global, US and NH total cases and deaths (Globally: 66 million cases, 1.5 million deaths; Nationally: 14 million cases, 276,000 deaths; Statewide: 24,000 cases, 544 deaths) The case positivity rate is trending upward and the age group with the highest infection rate is now the 20-29 years old bracket. Whereas the state effectively dodged the recent surge in cases seen in other parts of the country, it is now firmly in a 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of infections with a case positivity rate of 7%. Unfortunately, the State has been overwhelmed with contract tracing caseloads so it has suspended most of the tracking.

Some promising news on the pandemic is the ~ 95% efficacy of vaccines in development and the news that it could be late December or early January when the first doses become available in the state. New Hampshire will follow the CDC guidelines for distribution of the vaccine targeting health care and frontline workers initially and then long term care facility workers and residents. Until herd immunity is reached, it is imperative to follow best practices of mask wearing and social distancing. Ms. McNamara favors extension of the citywide mask ordinance.

Assistant Mayor Splaine urged the EDC to send a message to the City Council "to preserve the economy and vote to extend the citywide mask mandate" and made a motion to that effect. Motion seconded by Commissioner Lachance. The Commission debated the motion with most members speaking in support of the motion. Commissioner Zolla dissented stating

that “we are not using data scientifically nor thinking through downstream policies that impose restrictions on people and businesses. He would like to see much more local data and acknowledgement of the improvements in disease treatments that have proven effective. Commissioner Eaton dissented stating that he does not see how the motion “hurts anyone.” On a roll call vote the motion passed 9-1 (with Commissioner Zolla in the negative).

- *Check –in with Chamber President Valerie Rochon*

The Seacoast Chamber Alliance has developed a window cling for businesses to display in their windows indicating the store has taken a pledge to follow CDC guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID 19. Hopefully this will instill confidence in shoppers/diners that the establishment is a safe place to do business. The response from businesses has been positive.

In reporting on a recent survey of retail businesses she indicated that “we fell off a cliff in October,” with a decrease in foot traffic and online sales. While the summer was relatively decent, the fall has brought staffing concerns, logistics issues and a fear of what will transpire after the holidays. Restaurants had a similar response. After seeing sales trend up in September, they have plummeted since the outdoor on-street dining ended. Many establishments are contemplating closing a few days a week or possibly for a few months if they can handle the rent. Tourism businesses have seen a similar downturn in business with revenues down 30% - 40% on weekends. Hotels have also seen a drop off in weekend occupancy with virtually no conference business or holiday or other functions scheduled in the near term.

All businesses fear upcoming mandatory restrictions if the surge continues. In short additional federal relief is critical to survival this winter; particularly for extended unemployment benefits for staff. In response to a question on programs to encourage local shopping, Ms. Rochon responded that there is a social media contest ongoing to build followers on Facebook and Instagram. This effort will assist exposure to businesses that are endeavoring to migrate sales online.

- *COVID19 Citizen Response Task Force on Business Reopening Update*

Commissioner Lachance reported that the City removed the outdoor dining jersey barriers for the season. Some sidewalk cafes may remain open. The health committee continues to report the health dashboard information and FAQ’s on the website. The CRTF endorsed extending sidewalk café permits through December 2020. The City Council will be voting on extending the task force beyond 2020 (as recommended in the EDC’s memo to the City Council) at an upcoming Council meeting.

### **Council Representative Report on Upcoming Business that Warrants EDC Attention or Action**

The McIntyre Subcommittee is mailing postcards to residents regarding the upcoming Portsmouth Listens sessions which will kickoff December 16<sup>th</sup> with two series of study circles. Chairman Marchewka spoke with Councilor Tabor about the study circles and he encouraged the EDC members to participate in the groups by signing up for a zoom study circle. Additionally, members can register to serve as facilitators. Councilor Lazenby’s impression of the study circles is to review where the City and Redgate/Kane are in the redevelopment process and to gather input on how best to conceptually redesign the space. He thinks there will be opportunities in the future for the EDC to

provide input as a Commission on how the project will impact the city economy, potential business relocation opportunities and tax ramifications of redevelopment.

Ms. Carmer noted that in the prior McIntyre redevelopment effort, the City had a set of guiding principles and the EDC weighed in so that economic development opportunities were included in the principles. She said it is unfortunate that Commissioner Levenson was unable to participate today because he has emphasized that the redevelopment is an important urban infill project and that we risk missing opportunities like the relocation of Hubspot to the site if the economic prospects are not raised in guiding principles for redevelopment. Coouncilor Lazenby agreed with this and suggested that, at the January meeting, the EDC discuss suggestions for presentation to the McIntyre Subcommittee. Chairman Marchewka agreed noting that the study circle input would be known by then and the EDC could respond as appropriate. The EDC could also attend one of the McIntyre subcommittee meetings. City Manager Conard will keep the EDC apprised of the McIntyre subcommittee meeting dates.

Commissioner Watson suggested that the facilitators and participants be encouraged to watch the Urban 3 presentation offered by Portsmouth Smart Growth this fall. Assistant Mayor Splaine added that there should be an opportunity for input from business owners that are not residents, but whose enterprises contribute to local economic vitality.

### **Other Business**

- EDC Retreat Planning - The retreat will be scheduled for February 5, 2021 and will be a virtual event.
- There will be a Boards and Commissions Diversity and Inclusion Training January 14, 2021. Links to the event have been sent to all members. City Manager Conard encouraged EDC members to participate in the engaging opportunity.
- 2021 EDC meeting dates have been distributed electronically. In some instances, such as a holiday weekend, the meeting was moved from the first to the second Friday of the month.
- Nominations for EDC Chair and Vice-Chair for 2020. The current slate of Bob Marchewka as Chair and Phil Cohen as Vice-Chair was nominated for election at the January 8, 2021 meeting. It was suggested that officer term limits should be a topic for the February retreat.
- Other Business
  - The manufacturing roundtable panel discussion on “Hiring Hurdles” will be December 9<sup>th</sup> from noon to 1 pm via zoom. EDC members are invited to attend..
  - Staff is following the state grant awards for Main Street 2.0 and will track which local businesses received grants.
  - Staff will follow and report on the next Federal pandemic relief package when approved.

**Public Comment** - There were no members of the public present to comment.

**Confirm Next Regular Meeting: January 8, 2021 7:30 AM**

### **Adjourn**

At 9:15 AM Councilor Lazenby moved and Commissioner Gold seconded a motion to adjourn. Via roll call vote, the motion carried unanimously.

### **Pandemic Economic Recovery Response**

#### *COVID19 Citizen Response Task Force (CRTF) report*

Commissioners Gold and Lachance summarized recent CRTF activity including the end of the Popup NH venue for the season and breakdown of the infrastructure at the Bridge Street lot in mid- November. Mr. Gold reported on metrics of activity generated by the venue including the financial support and sponsorship, revenues earned, job retention, and non-profit arts organizations participating. The Health Subcommittee continues its research and presentation of pandemic infection rates, research and support of face coverings, a primer on “How to Stay Safe,” and HVAC best practices for indoor air quality. At the last meeting, based on its research, the task force voted to recommend to City Council an extension of the face covering mandate beyond year end.

There will be a November 9<sup>th</sup> City Council work session to discuss continuation of the CRTF beyond 2020. The task force drafted a recommendation to the Council to continue the task force through the summer of 2021 at a minimum and to broaden the task force’s focus to encompass all business impacted by the virus.

In response to a question from Commissioner Zolla, Commissioners debated the impact of the face mask ordinance on local economic vitality. Most Commissioners thought that the public is now accustomed to mask requirements and are not deterred from conducting business locally while wearing a face covering. Greater Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce President Valerie Rochon added that the majority of public facing businesses she has communicated with favor and support a mask ordinance. Commissioner Zolla dissented noting that he predicts a significant economic downturn in the next year and feels that imposing too many restrictions on businesses is negative and a deterrent to customers. Requirements such as the construction of plexiglass barriers requires a capital expense at a time when revenues are threatened. He feels there are less onerous measures to ensure safety (temperature checks, etc.) that do not require capital outlay and are more welcoming to customers.

Respectfully submitted,  
Nancy Carmer  
Economic Development Program Manager