



Blue Ribbon Committee to Reopen Portsmouth 2021
City of Portsmouth, New Hampshire
Remote meeting via Zoom – January 27, 2021 – 2:00 p.m.

CALL TO ORDER:

Co-Chair James Petersen called the meeting to order at 2:01 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 of MEMBERS:

Voting Members Present: Co-Chairs James Petersen and Mark Stebbins; Alan Gold, Ann Birner, Anne Weidman, Deborah Anthony, Jim Lee, John Akar, John Golumb, Karen Bouffard, Kathie Lynch, Sen. Martha Fuller Clark, Valerie Rochon, City Manager Karen Conard, City Health Officer Kim McNamara.

Non-voting Member Present: Councilor Petra Huda.

Voting Members Absent: Bianca Monteiro, Jeff Goss.

Other City Staff Present: Jessica Griffin, Marian Steimke, Nancy Carmer, Stephanie Seacord.

Others Present: Andrew Bagley, Ben VanCamp, Councilor Esther Kennedy, Gerald Duffy, Rich DiPentima, Wm. North Sturtevant.

WELCOME AND APPROVAL OF 1/20/2021 MEETING MINUTES:

Jim Lee moved to approve the minutes of the 1/20/2021 meeting, seconded by Alan Gold. On a roll call vote of 13 in favor with 2 abstentions, the motion passed.

Co-Chair Petersen said the emphasis is on Streets for that day's meeting. The Co-Chairs both believe the BRC will have the most impact via deep dives verses broad brushes due to lack of resources. The BRC will gather and distribute information to reach as many organizations and businesses as possible. But for this week he said the BRC will emphasize how to improve the use of streets and get that kick started, since permitting is beginning the following week.

HEALTH UPDATE – Kathie Lynch

Kathie shared the COVID-19 1/25/21 dashboard screen. She discussed the difference between John Hopkins and NH data and said we are now going with the NH data. She is happy to see a plateauing in the number of cases, but that plateau is at a high level. As of Monday 1/25/2021, there was a 6.1% positivity rate with 6% of the population having been vaccinated. The revised FAQs are now current, posted and address both long and short term symptoms post COVID. She said the Health Committee discussed the vaccination process and she stressed continuing to mask after the second vaccination until it is certain that those vaccinated do not spread the virus.

Co-Chair Petersen asked about the high number of cases, if those weekly numbers were current active or new weekly cases, and if active, how long they remain so. Kathie answered total cases and said the NHDHHS keeps a case active until at least two weeks after a positive test. Getting off the active list involves time, but there are exceptions. Kim reminded all that the illness can last for weeks for someone that is sick. Those present discussed coming off the active list. Sen. Clark said the State followed her and her husband when they got sick until their temperatures were normal for two weeks. Kathie said the State is not doing that any more. Rich said back when Sen. Clark got sick, the numbers were so low the State could do that – but not anymore. Kim added that outbreaks in businesses are still followed by the State.

STREETS – Mark Stebbins

Anne Weidman shared a Street Use screen, said the portal would be open Monday, and she would talk only about outdoor dining at that day's meeting. She expressed a sense of urgency with what we do with the streets. City Manager Conard confirmed the portal would be open on Monday but the waiving of license fees had not yet been settled. Anne displayed the 2020 goals: make it safe, fast and affordable. For this year, Anne identified five topics she would discuss:

(1) COVID 19 design standards – Social distancing strategies.

She received input and help from Bob White and TPI Engineering. Anne talked about social distancing and showed example photos of Andover, Massachusetts where they pushed tables away from the curb to stay away from pedestrians. In Portsmouth, we might be able to get a bit of extra space, she said and showed photos of Market Street. She said last year they did not take into account the width of Jersey barriers, which are two feet and cut into the dining space. She believes the City requires 12 feet of functional street passage, so there is no room to push those barriers.

Anne displayed a photo of another option – a parklet (a bump out) which would provide space that spills onto the sidewalk. She offered these concepts as suggestions and added that the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) has done a lot of work on safety of parklets, and the NACTO website is full of information on how to make them safe.

(2) Accessibility – Ramps, platforms, parklets.

Anne said last year they did pretty well with accessible dining choices. She has access to a team of public fact checkers to ensure the spaces are done right. She said outdoor accessibility is dependent on existing curbing and topography. The 2021 goal is to make modifications to improve access for people impacted by disabilities. Criteria include: getting to a table; adequate travel path between tables and getting to the restroom.

Anne discussed restroom details at Worth Lot and the solution to lack of travel paths to a restroom. She showed how curbs hinder accessibility and sometimes solutions are as simple as requesting an obstacle be moved. The approach to helping restaurants with a curb depends on curb height, with solutions being railings, ramps or platforms. She mentioned tripping hazards. Anne showed photos of different curbs and solutions from various towns and locations in Portsmouth. Anne said the New England ADA Center reminds all that accessibility is the law.

(3) Aesthetics / Functionality – Parklets, planters, custom/other.

Anne said some restaurants did a nice job. Last year she did walkabouts downtown to collect information from businesses on how things were going. She observed how nice the spaces looked from the sidewalk, but realized those spaces resembled a concrete jungle from the drivers' vantage point. She raised the questions of Jersey versus other barriers and if Portsmouth could have spaces with barriers that didn't go the length. She'd like to rethink how this works, saying Andover, MA had a local fabrication shop create attractive dining spaces using weighted planters, which she displayed photos of. She was grateful for the removal of the unattractive yellow barricades.

(4) Barriers – Graphics? Who. What. When?

In discussing what to do about jersey barriers, Anne introduced concepts for murals. Kittery put out a call to artists to paint. Portsmouth owns barriers and controls what goes on those. Restaurants that own theirs can decide those. While she said this was not the group to decide such, she advised that barriers not be forgotten.

Streets and sidewalks with permanent adaptations for outdoor expansions, Anne said, is a conversation for a different time and group. She pointed out that Market Square has never been static – it has always evolved.

(5) Future Thinking – Next steps

Anne said ideas would go to City Hall for site evaluation, and they are looking for input from the BRC. Anne asked for comments. Co-Chair Stebbins said for the next meeting he would like to ask Peter Rice to talk about barriers and asked Anne to send her slides to Peter. The Co-Chair said permits should require an accessibility plan, and suggested discussing at the next meeting. Anne said the small temporary ramp she displayed would work anywhere. The City Manager said they are trying to determine if the ramps would be eligible for CDBG Cares Act money. The City is also looking to use that money for 10 accessible picnic tables for use downtown. She indicated 2-3 in front of North Church; 2-3 along the Vaughan Mall; 1 in the Tuscan Market/former Rí Rá stretch; 1 or 2 in front of the new Toscana Chop House.

Co-Chair Stebbins likes the idea of artists decorating barriers, and Anne suggested the Arts committee deciding what goes on them. Valerie will send an email to the restaurant community to let them know who can assist with design work. The restaurant group thinks each barrier having a different artist might be too much – maybe some branding along a theme would work instead. They want to make them all prettier, understand barriers are owned by the City but want to incorporate the artist community.

Sen. Clark agreed and suggested achieving unity and within that, distinctive treatment of some barriers by using a uniform background color that connects them visually.

John Akar loves all the ideas Anne presented, but said to get these things done we must dedicate more time as a group, and he suggested designating significant extra time at the next meeting to discuss. He takes social distancing seriously, but questioned whether masked patrons walking past outdoor tables had to maintain a 6 foot distance. He brought up an example of Commercial Alley where a 6 foot distance would make the walking area too narrow. He said if the outdoor safe number was 4 feet away from tables for passers-by, based on the science, we should not be focusing our time on that, because it could hurt some businesses.

John Golumb agreed with John Akar and Anne. He suggested using the set-up (shown in the Savannah pictures) in Portsmouth, since the platform goes right up to the curb, allowing wheelchair access.

The Co-Chair and those present thanked Anne for her presentation and said it was great and succinct.

EDC COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES – Alan Gold / Nancy Carmer

Alan said he and Nancy spoke to the chair of the EDC about how to get information from as many Portsmouth businesses as possible. The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) will launch a survey on COVID-related issues on February 1st. We plan to push that out to businesses and to Chamber members to reach as many businesses as possible, with the goal being to remind people to respond. Survey response rates are always challenging, but with a broad stroke and a 2.5 week survey span, there should be good data. The second component to that is to continue marketing to the local businesses with a “we are open” message. Next we can plan for advocating at the legislative level. He discussed a continuation of good efforts already in place – weighing in on business assistance issues, consolidating information and getting it out to the businesses.

Nancy Carmer said while the SBDC survey is statewide, her office contracted with the SBDC to cull the Seacoast and Portsmouth data out of it. What is happening in Portsmouth businesses is matching what is happening in the state. The survey will be continued in July so we will view the trends. The EDC is holding its retreat on February 5th, and we’ll talk about an ongoing business visitation program. She discussed the visitation program background and goals. Her last two points: First, in terms of cost the SBA PPP loan rates have changed a little, and they’ve opened the criteria you can spend the 40% on (over the 60% on payroll). The 40% can now include spending on modifications, so that might be another source of funding. Another thing, she said we don’t want Bob White to be inundated with requests for free design services. There is an engineer in town that has offered his services: Nick Baird has offered his services.

PUBLIC COMMENT – 60 seconds:

Wm N. Sturtevant is happy the BRC Arts Committee is almost formed. There is a lot of work to do with site selection, budgeting, fundraising, construction, water, sewer and power. He said they PopUp NH had to destroy the prior year’s constructs as there was no place to store them.

Andrew Bagley said there was no Christmas parking this year, and he asked the BRC to discuss a free parking event for the spring. He asked if 15 minute parking was really the best for retail, as retailers said it is not long enough and many think the 15 minutes is only for the restaurants.

Jim Lee moved to adjourn, seconded by Valerie Rochon. On a roll call vote 14-0, the motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted – by Marian Steimke