



Blue Ribbon Committee (BRC) to Reopen Portsmouth 2021
City of Portsmouth, New Hampshire
Remote meeting via Zoom
January 13, 2021 – 2:00 p.m.

CALL TO ORDER:

Co-Chair James Petersen called the meeting to order at 2:02 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-Chair James Petersen, Alan Gold, Ann Birner, Anne Weidman, Deborah Anthony, Jim Lee, John Akar, John Golumb, Karen Bouffard, Kathie Lynch, Valerie Rochon, City Manager Karen Conard, City Deputy Health Officer Kristin Shaw.

Non-voting Member Present: Councilor Petra Huda.

Voting Members Absent: Co-Chair Mark Stebbins, Bianca Monteiro, Jeff Goss and Sen. Martha Fuller Clark.

Others Present: Andrew Bagley, Ben VanCamp, Cliff Lazenby, Councilor Esther Kennedy, Josh Denton, Richard DiPentima, Stephanie Seacord, Wm. North Sturtevant, City Legal Secretary Marian Steimke.

WELCOME AND APPROVAL OF 1/6/2021 MEETING MINUTES:

Karen Bouffard moved to approve the minutes of the 1/6/2021 meeting, seconded by Jim Lee. On a roll call vote 13-0, the motion passed.

Chair Petersen introduced and thanked new BRC members Ann Weidman and John Akar, along with Rich DiPentima who joined the Health Committee. Departing are Sara LaChance, Joe Scarlotto and Russ Grazier, Jr., and the Chair thanked them as well.

Alan Gold moved to accept the resignations of Sara LaChance and Joe Scarlotto, and Kathie Lynch seconded. On a roll call 13-0 vote, the motion passed.

HEALTH UPDATE

Kathie Lynch shared the 1/11/21 COVID-19 dashboard and said positivity in both New Hampshire (NH) and Rockingham County were high, with a positivity level above 5% – recognized as the safe level for reopening. In NH approximately half of the doses received have been administered, and we remain in phase 1A, she said. The graphs for infections appear to be leveling off and she anticipates these will be dropping off. She stressed the importance of masking up and socially distancing – even if having been vaccinated. Chair Petersen asked about precautions after vaccination. Ms. Lynch discussed needing long term follow-up and responded to a question about timeframe of vaccination effectiveness and answered that a minimum of 14 days after the second vaccination is required to be considered safe, but this will vary among individuals.

CITY UPDATE

City Manager Conard shared the first of two updates. The City Council on Monday tabled the request by Mark McNabb to close a portion of Penhallow and encumber some of the street and sidewalks. It was tabled until the January 25th meeting to give more time for restaurants in area. She said she would share her second update during the Streets update.

RESTAURANTS & BUSINESS UPDATE

Valerie Rochon reported that many retail businesses are reducing hours and staff. She discussed tax implications for online sales and mailing out to different states, saying it is a risk management issue for the retailers. Many retailers had a good 4th quarter, but if there are no restaurants, there is no shopping, since it is a symbiotic relationship. Businesses are planning for Valentine's Day, and the Chamber is reaching out to restaurants to see what they are doing for that day. She mentioned the flying of Red Cross flags in honor of first responders. Businesses have had time to think about how to do things better this year. They talked about music, themed weekends and making Hit the Decks day an entire week in May, to show local support. The Chamber will start doing some promotional work both in NH and some outreach. She reiterated that for restaurants, retail and hotels, we need to be working symbiotically because one cannot succeed without the others.

The Chair asked about taxes and if there were more ideas in the works to help retailers develop their online skills. Ms. Rochon answered they all have different models – franchise vs small business – but they share and help each other online.

BASIC NEEDS NON-PROFIT UPDATE

Chair Petersen referenced the video that Deb Anthony shared and thanked her. Ms. Anthony said Martha Stone and someone from the addiction arena would be joining them. This week they are talking about food, and have decided to go mostly mobile. To prepare they upped the mobile markets, she said. Every Friday they do a mobile market at the Community Campus. She expressed concern about volunteers leaving, since they rely on over 150 volunteers a month to operate. They had a large on-boarding of new volunteers, which was very positive. It is very impressive what people are doing, she observed. They have taken on much more volunteer training and discussed having more volunteers doing shorter shifts and doing more outdoors.

She discussed the increase in the number of kids being served and number of pounds of food being served. They are seeing families they have never seen before. She discussed the impact COVID-19 has had on food insecurity. To address the increase, they had to build more infrastructure: more tents, more tables 6 feet apart and provide storage for it all. She said the community is behind them and thanked all who have donated. They buy healthy food locally. She indicated they will be over budget by about \$300K this year.

STREETS DESIGN UPDATE

Anne Weidman shared a slideshow “Winter into Spring and what are we looking for?” She reached out to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and spoke to Isla Tanaka who is the Winter City Planner. Edmonton wanted to develop into a four-season patio culture. Ms. Weidman shared pictures and information received from Ms. Tanaka.

Ms. Weidman discussed the skating rink, which has worked out really well. She showed pictures of the dog park and picnic table area. There is a thought that if you put something out, people might come, she observed. In Edmonton, they use small lightweight tables. When a storm comes, businesses carry them inside. Many businesses will have piles of pads for the metal chairs. She mentioned the “Parka Your Butt” campaign. In October it was suggested Portsmouth could be a ski village. Placing tables on a sunny Portsmouth street to see if people would come (ex: Pleasant Street) would be an option. She asked those present for their thoughts and suggested convening a committee to brainstorm to see what Portsmouth can do.

City Manager Conard shared feedback from City staff – including Police, Fire, Planning, Health, Economic Development and Public Works. They did a brain dump, with the goal being to activate space downtown to support the local economy and promote the idea that we are open for business. It would be available for businesses that don’t have outdoor space to take advantage of. She mentioned pros and cons, for example, staff for clean-up, concern with infection rates rising, and she expressed some concerns. They would need to make the areas look and feel inviting. She proposed the City invest in picnic tables and place them strategically through the downtown in accessible places, and she suggested a product. Ms. Weidman discussed picnic table configurations. The Committee asked the City Manager to investigate the cost of purchasing the picnic tables.

PUBLIC COMMENT “ELEVATOR SPEECH” (60 SEC. EACH)

Councilor Esther Kennedy was happy the Committee was looking at all business entities and suggested they also look at Lafayette Road businesses who don't feel as supported.

Josh Denton discussed ticket sales and said the biggest lessons from last year, were the sooner the better and saving money for things. He asked how the committee wanted PopUp NH to proceed with the City.

Andrew Bagley spoke with the Mayor about a new arts committee, said retailers are underserved and advocated for non-residents to be on this committee. He added that having picnic tables placed would help.

Wm North Sturtevant said they learned a lot with PopUp NH last year, and as a group, can bring a lot to the table, but the group does need help from entities to make this work. They do not want to be working at cross purposes with anyone. The sooner we can focus on this the better, he said.

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

Respectfully Submitted
By Marian Steimke