

Bi-Town Economic Development Committee
Meeting Minutes
via Zoom
Thursday, October 1, 2020

Members present: Gretchen Havreduk, Vicki Capitani, Eric Durocher, Heidi Taylor, Tom Fitzgerald, Adam Grinold

Also present: Shannon Wheeler, Scott Tucker, Lauren Harkawik, Christine Howe, Gig Zboray, Karen Hein, Mike Tuller, Meg Staloff

Meeting called to order at 8:03 am

- I. Additions or changes to the agenda:
 - a. Gretchen: Dr. Karen Hein is here as the Whitingham Economic Development committee representative. Gig Zboray is also here as the Town of Whitingham Selectboard Office Administrator. They are interested parties in knowing about the group and possibly rejoining this group.
- II. Approve minutes from the September 3rd meeting
 - a. Motion to approve by Vicki, seconded by Eric. All approve.
- III. Deerfield Valley resiliency team
 - a. Gretchen/Eric/Meg: Dover and Wilmington each received \$10,000 in restart grant money. They have combined this into a valley wide Stay and Play Package effort. The team will purchase gift certificates from local businesses and group them into \$100 packages to give to participating Inns. Inns will market to guests as a Vermont vacation in the bank - book a future stay and receive the gift certificates which can be used for at any time. So far 15 lodges have signed up. We're buying lower value gift certificates so additional spend will come into those businesses. Selling as a future use gift certificate means we can sell to all traveler areas, not just current green counties.
 - b. Heidi: do they have to be used by a certain date?
 - c. Eric: The gift certificates are all valid through 2021 so it gives everyone time.
 - d. Vicki: if someone comes up now during stick season and these outlets are closed; how are we dealing with that?
 - e. Eric: the focus of the program is to put the stays on the books now but for the actual stays to happen later on when everything is open. Some of our Inns are more family oriented so we're trying to line up the packages to include the businesses that fit together.
 - f. Meg: We are leaving the booking portion to the Inns, so that helps manage the flow of when guests are coming; so if booking a stay and play package with them they can help with what's open and work with them.
 - g. Gretchen: there's a lot of challenges with the funding coming down the pike. All of this (grant) funding needs to be spent by December 31st. That hasn't been opened up more yet. So some of these funds might have to go back. But I also hear in our Valley that our businesses are doing really well and we're not going to see the closures of businesses that we were originally anticipated. It's a lot harder to make a dollar; but they are doing it. They are putting the work and effort into it, which is great.
 - h. Eric: To echo that; all of these programs; the state gives them to us on a Thursday and say the application was due the Wednesday before. We have literally no time to apply for half of these things and in a couple of cases by the time we do apply in these super short deadlines; they turn around and say nevermind; we're going to do something completely different. So we're really trying to adapt to the way these things are presented to us. Hopefully at the Federal level

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and the State level we can play nice with each other so that more programs become available and there's a clearer picture of how we can be guiding these businesses through the remainder of this pandemic. It's frustrating at times but this type of program is a great thing. I think if we can capitalize on the opportunities when they do come through then that's what we're focused on.

IV. Our Growing Communities – Zoning

- a. Gretchen: Wilmington had a planning commission meeting Monday. We're having some good conversations, challenging ones about how we go about and what are the needs and I keep reiterating what the housing analysis does say regarding senior workforce housing is key. I feel like we might have a little bit of traction. It was a challenging meeting.
- b. Mike Tuller: A lot's related to the recent legislation talking about affordable housing which I think is still on the Senate floor and they are looking at opportunities to do something locally here. They are a little bit hung up I think on the sewer district and where to put these potential developments. But we are sharing some information with them. They seem to be more interested in a senior oriented housing program as opposed to a workforce housing program at this stage. But I'm trying to get them some more information. It does look like a lot of the programs in Vermont are more central on providing some affordable housing component, almost inclusionary zoning in nature. I'm not exactly sure if the planning commission is open to that option, but I am looking at programs like the stuff you see down South for ages 55 and older community doesn't seem applicable in Vermont but we're seeing what we could do and looking at housing for an aging community here.
- c. Gretchen: Or even mixed use housing; Brattleboro has some housing that is affordable and then they have the higher end right in the center of town. That's the key piece for the senior housing is you want to be where services are available readily to them.
- d. Meg: as far as making zoning changes; right now in the center of village, the Historic District, we already have unlimited density and zoning that is allowable for a very dense housing development but we also don't have a lot of space in that area. So what we're trying to look at are where are the zoning districts where making changes would be helpful. So it's really a matter of looking at density requirements. But then in Wilmington you pretty quickly get out into a larger residential zone. Making large changes to that in terms of density is difficult because it could really have a lot of ramifications. I think that's kind of what we're struggling with is targeting where exactly it would be best. So if you do tie it to being connected to available sewer and water districts that again kind of restricts the area. So I guess the question is do you add exemptions for affordable housing in other districts, things like that. There's a lot of pieces in a zoning document and you don't want to open things up in a way that could have an undesirable outcome. So that's kind of what we're wrestling with is looking at those issues of density and review where and how to do that best. That's what we're wrestling with and figuring out how to come up with something that works well. We're honing in on what districts we would look at. We also want to look at some precedents and what other communities have done as a good example. We don't want to make large changes without a lot of real thought. We know what the desired outcomes are. Some of it isn't a matter of zoning necessarily, it's been cost of development. You can change all the zoning you want but you can't make those projects cheaper.
- e. Gretchen: the other piece on this is preserving our farmlands. That has not been really approached to the planning commission and it needs to be well thought out before it is. Taking

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a look at what our zoning says and looking at specific properties like Wheeler Farm and Adams Farm which is up for sale and what can happen there and start imagining what those scenarios are. It's a good exercise to do but timing isn't everything. Things are happening quickly here.

- f. Eric: As far as Dover goes, we will see what's happening with our current planning commission members and that process with Jeannette. As of right now our planning commission is not functioning properly.

V. Housing Committee:

- a. Eric: I'm working on this with Gretchen and we'll get things rolling, she's working on agenda for the next meeting. I did share information from the state level with a lot of our property owners for a program that's providing dollars for the restoration and refurbishment of properties. So hopefully some of them will take advantage of that to get some of those rental properties back up to snuff so the housing we do have is acceptable.

VI. Marketing Committee:

- a. Gretchen: we have been meeting and put our and RFQ for video and videography and unfortunately have received only one back. Sadly we are losing one of our main members due to Vail layoffs. So we need to regroup and get more marketing experienced people in our group. We did not foresee this coming.
- b. Vicki: Randy handed me a note that the next round of layoffs at Vail happened yesterday, is this exactly what happened? What do we know about it? I know Tracy's not on.
- c. Gretchen: yes, the entire marketing team. Jamie Storrs, Tim Dolan, who was on our marketing committee and Meghan Wilcock. I guess that they have a temporary person coming, I don't know a lot about it.
- d. Eric: and we don't have the answers as to whether that's effective immediate or if there's a phase out. As we get more information we'll have some more answers. It's a massive blow. Tim is an active community member.
- e. Gretchen: it's just hard because these are the type of jobs we need because it attracts the younger people to our area. These are people that are involved in the community.
- f. Vicki: yes, and in our community. In our fire department; all these things we need people to do. Very upsetting.
- g. Gretchen: yes, I was hoping Tracy was going to be on today.
- h. Heidi: yes, she had a prior commitment
- i. Gretchen: so we are running advertising right now and there is a great new video.
- j. Eric: And just to reiterate we have selected a company called Charette to focus on our five year marketing plan. I've been in contact with them recently to set up a visit from their representatives to the valley here in the very near future. Prior to that and after we will be having our meetings with them to kind of lay out what it is that we want to be doing and what it is that they think we should be doing. I did reiterate to them that we are not necessarily looking to rebrand the entire valley because Gretchen and I have had this conversation and this work was done not all that long ago and to those of you that remember it happening it was not a pretty situation. So I don't want to see us get back into rebranding and new logos and everything for the entire valley because I feel like that work has already been done and we just need to figure out how to better utilize it. So we'll be focused on that with them. The advertising that's coming out of Trampoline we were able to use the graphic ads we had running last year which saved us some money and Gretchen's about to show us a video we'll be using. They

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focused on not crowd noise, it's peacefulness and tranquility of being in Vermont and enjoying these things. We'll send to everyone to watch.

VII. Adam – Chamber Funding for this winter

- a. Adam: We've just continued to convene Chambers from the bottom part of the state collectively and also independently. People are getting more trustworthy on sharing pretty intimate details of their financial status. It's dire. These institutions are at significant risk of not making it through to next July. Historically their business model works. It have taken a big punch after the insurance change but most steadied the ship and could pay their bills and complete their core functions. There were up and down years, singing for their supper sometimes but it was working. Personally I am hopeful we can find ways to help these organizations make it through to July. Very likely the businesses that are still open in July will continue to support them. That being said all of these institutions know well that they have to re-envision model. It's a bit outdated and ensure that they can bring value to their members. The good news is they're talking to each other. We had a meeting where we had representatives from the Saratoga region share info on what they're doing. Having an umbrella organization do a lot of the work and then the individual smaller chambers doing their niche. So the smaller chambers can hand off some functions to the umbrella and really focus on their core mission and membership interests. They just need some runway to get there. We're interested in finding ways to help that. The state is not going to be of assistance. We were able to help the Deerfield Valley chamber this past month and update their application and successfully submitted that. They're getting a good amount of money, between 10-20k to give them some longevity. There are some other fundraising efforts from Board members that will bring in some additional capital to make sure that they pay the bills and somewhat keep the lights on. So we're excited to be able to help there but I think for the purpose of the audience today, there's probably a mutual interest in finding a way to keep that organization afloat through July. I don't have the number, I wish I had a dollar amount goal for us to get to but I'm thinking it's 50-75k can go a long way in keeping that institution viable until they are able to build a business model that its supporters, members and its funders believe in and can hand off. This audience would be a great place to start that conversation and I'll stop there.
- b. Gretchen: My company is a member and I have paid my dues and they were very receptive when I handed them the check and reiterate to anyone that is a member or would like to join that this is the key time to do that, especially if you're going to be using a season pass. I think that is definitely going to happen. I'm confident that something will come through from Mount Snow for a chamber pass.
- c. Vicki: Maybe they ought to send out some notices. After the last meeting I said I haven't seen a bill from the Chamber for my membership; and they haven't.
- d. Gretchen: They're not going to. They don't have the capacity to do that.
- e. Vicki: That's a problem right there. If they can't get the message out that they need revenue to continue. That's a core problem.
- f. Gretchen: I have suggested the same thing.
- g. Eric: To interject, maybe that's something that outside of my Dover time I can be talking with a board member about to say here's how you make the invoice and send it out. It's a simple process. I was not aware that's not a capacity they had. If I need to get with Brendan or Rich or somebody to have those invoices sent out that's something I can do outside of my Dover time and just make sure that's something that's happening.

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- h. Scott: Yes, I was going to reiterate what Vicki said. I haven't seen a dues bill. The Town will pay as long as they send us a bill.
- i. Vicki: yes I think a lot of businesses will pay. But if you don't send them a bill, they're not going to pay.
- j. Adam: yes Eric, let's connect on this after because we directed them to the Revta program. Which is a technical assistance program that's happening. So as an applicant we could connect them to someone with Quickbooks who could do a few things for them under that program and that's a true leverage. Get \$3,000 of service to get all your dues out.
- k. Eric: They have a bookkeeper in house that runs the Quickbooks for them, at least they did, maybe using some of those funds to pay that person as technical assistance if she registered, then provide that service of showing them how that backend works.
- l. Meg: I just wanted to say as Wilmington Works I would be happy to pay my dues but I can't cut checks as an organization without a bill. I think the Town is the same way. I have to have something to show my board what we're paying for. We're in a position too where we paid \$500 for an ad in both guides and haven't received that service either. We need some sort of assurance that these will happen. We're on a very tight budget and have to have a bill for absolutely everything.
- m. Adam: It's sounds like there's good support for the notion of the Chamber in this group, maybe what's going to be needed going out is when they do start sending those bills is good old networking and encouragement of other businesses to follow the leadership of what everyone here is saying which is I paid my dues.
- n. Gretchen: is there something that we can do? An action item that can be done?
- o. Adam: Yes maybe it's just finding a way in which to publicly support the fact that the Chamber is sending out membership dues and encouraging businesses if they're able to help the institution make it through this tough time. Recognizing that everybody is in equally challenging times. If the Chamber is not going to be here in two or three years it should be because the membership chose that there was no value. It shouldn't be that the membership just let it fall apart because nobody was doing anything; the board didn't have the ability to pull people together. Let's make sure that we provide a bridge until everybody can say you know what, this isn't going to work here's an asset we have to get rid of, this model just is no longer viable. Instead of just letting it fall apart because of forces outside of everybody's control. I don't know if there's specific action for BiTown at this point, maybe it's individual letters, maybe it's encouraging someone to be a member and pay their dues. Using the voice that everybody here has independently or if the group decides in the future maybe as a BiTown vote of support.
- p. Gretchen: I'll stuff the envelopes.

VIII. VTrans Signs:

- a. Adam: have not seen the signs yet.

IX. Action items from Chris Company Presentation

- a. Gretchen: this is what we changed into our Growing Communities so no longer needs to be listed.

X. Other Business:

- a. Heidi: The welcome wagon you have spoken about: Someone said that Angel Balch has been doing welcome bags for new homeowners.
- b. Gretchen: yes, through the Rotary Club. We're aware of that.

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- c. Eric: Meg and I have been in touch with Angel. Their program focuses mainly on the initial welcome to the Valley with those bags. Thanks for joining our community. I think our portion of the Welcome Wagon is to continue that experience past that initial welcome so they have a peer or someone in the community to be working with for questions they have or just getting integrated. I think we're still working closely with Sarah and Casey as those applicants to that program come in, we'll get access to those and be able to reach out to them and linking them up to someone from our community.
- d. Vicki: We need to address the program at Walgreens. It is out of control. The pharmacy is not open on Sundays. Monday I was in the line, it was 12 people deep. They had all three cashiers running. I don't know what we do. We need competition, we need something. The service is at a dangerous point. I've watched four or five different parties where they say no, just not ready today, you need to come back tomorrow. When? Hopefully midday. It's the only game in town and I don't know what we can do but we need to put some pressure on. The Sunday closure has made Monday and even into Tuesday just a disaster and everybody is complaining about it.
- e. Gretchen: Yes, I've noticed on Facebook that I see someone complaining about Walgreens every time I'm on. I wish Rite Aid would come back. As the Economic Development Consultant for the Town of Wilmington I will reach out to the manager and have a conversation.
- f. Adam: it's too bad we don't have that functioning Chamber because this would be exactly an opportunity for the Chamber to step in and it's a function that's notably missing right now. As we all think more about the Chamber, they could be an institution that could help in this case. A lot of people I know are just sending it to the Brattleboro Walgreens.
- g. Vicki: but some people don't have the opportunity to travel. Someone's going to get sick and not get their medication and something bad is going to happen.
- h. Adam: Yes. I had to pound on the window and make a big, big scene to get medicine in my father's last days. It was brutal.

XI. Wilmington updates:

- a. Tom: just a few things about Walgreens. There's a lot of unused space. It's amazing how empty that place is. You're right. The service is terrible. It really is a lousy store. Vicki is absolutely right it is one of the worst things I've ever seen come to this town. Other than that the Police Chief is working on supposed dispatching fees that the State wants to levy to the town. They are fairly substantial, the figure is around \$78,000 a year. And this is something we don't pay for at all at this point. Negotiations continue and I'm not sure if it will make it through committee or not. Our new Town Clerk is working very hard on the upcoming Election and the bills for the reassessments. She is doing a stellar job so far and we're really happy with that. Our tax bills are almost ready. The water merger is moving forward and is all set for the November ballot. Starting on budget soon.
- b. Scott: And the public safety facility design is going to DRB on Monday. We should say congratulations to Vicki as the Chair of the Dover Selectboard.
- c. Gretchen: There is some commercial activity that has been happening. I met with a young couple with a toddler that will be purchasing a property. Yesterday I got another call that a person out of NYC is interested in running a high end restaurant. So there's activity in commercial; not just residential now.
- d. Vicki: And there's the new Southshire Meats that's operating out of the Adams Farm slaughterhouse. They are doing some advertising for help wanted. Everybody is looking for

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help it's crazy. People are not getting calls, we talk to them constantly about whether they want to continue to advertise and there's not a lot of people calling them.

- e. Heidi: What's the story with the Vintage? I see their moving sale sign.
- f. Gretchen: it has been sold and from my understanding it is going to be a residence

XII. Dover updates:

- a. Vicki: we did seat our new Selectboard member, Scott Salway and we are full. A nice young family, the kind of people you want to get engaged. We were excited to have had two outstanding applicants and it was a hard decision to make.
- b. Eric: the beginning iterations of our ED specific website has launched. There was a lot of information for us to be sharing. We're still updating the town website but eventually that will lead to the ED site as well. We have 8-10 businesses that have opened or will be opening soon. COVID slowdown or not, there's still people getting into business and spaces are getting filled and it's nice to see.

XIII. Mount Snow updates: *None in attendance*

XIV. Hermitage Club updates: *None in attendance*

XV. BDCC Updates:

- a. Adam: Monday we will be having a Zoom event in partnership with a CDL drivers school in Bellows Falls with the Moover and all the municipalities that participated in our CDL hiring demand study. We have published the demand study which shows there's significant demand for CDL licenses. We know that in hospitality there's significant continued unemployment. There's a very quick and easy path from the skillset in hospitality to a CDL licensure. Which is a starting wage of \$17-18 and benefits. It's stackable, it's portable. You can increase that with additional credentials and specialties to the point you could be making \$25 an hour. So this is a way in which people who in hospitality opened their door as a teenager and there was a job and they've just continued in that vein without the knowledge that right in the valley at the Moover, there's vacancies that can't be filled for these positions. Which are good positions. There's propane drivers, you name it, multiple ways these folks can get jobs in the valley or drive 20 minutes in either direction for employment in Bennington or Brattleboro area. So we're doing this in partnership with a lot of different state agencies, really trying to put a spotlight on this pathway for people from hospitality to CDL. This is just an example of CDL. There's also Commonwealth Dairy or Full Flex or any one of these large employers in Brattleboro with again starting wage of \$17 an hour quickly hitting \$19-\$20 with a very small micro credential. These jobs are out there. We do this with full insight into what was just shared of that even people locally, people can't find people to work within hospitality. The next thing is why is that? What is it going to take to get people off the sideline and back into employment? We're working with the Department of Labor to understand what is the current earnings for an unemployed hospitality worker and how do we make sure that either they get enough for the job that's being offered to come off the sidelines. Vermont is about to hit its 2nd of 3 triggers to fall off the extended unemployment so unemployment opportunities are going to be running out for people who started back in March. So we do anticipate a bigger surge in people having to find alternative income versus just the unemployment. We're excited for Monday, thank you for all the support for municipalities who participated. The Agency of Transportation will be there, hopefully the Department of Motor Vehicles will be there, they're really the roadblock to getting more licenses out there. Hopefully some of this will put pressure on them and help fix the market. We've got a supply and a demand yet it's not working.

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- b. Christine: I just got an email from VTTrans that DMV is going to reopen Bennington, Newport and Springfield by appointment only. So that's good news. It still takes a while to get it done but it's good news. We have had some people contact us from our local advertising is helping for drivers. It's slow going but it's slowly ticking up. We'll be mostly hiring non CDL drivers for the area and training them. It takes time. It's going to be an interesting winter but hopefully we can keep ourselves healthy. If we lose a couple of drivers to getting sick we will be struggling.
- c. Eric: Adam, I'm not sure you've had a chance to give information about Revta to this group since it was announced?
- d. Adam: It's almost fully subscribed but if there's anyone out there as a business or a nonprofit that can use technical assistance for some challenge in their operations that COVID brought to them, you apply and you'll get matched with a vendor who has applied and provides that technical assistance. The program pays the vendor for the services so the vendor gets paid and the business gets the benefit. They are around \$3,000 awards. We have already about 45 in our Windham region but not a lot from the Valley. Please do apply quickly because I think by tomorrow ours will be closed. The state is really impressed with this program because statewide we have about 250 applicants which will be receiving 1.2 million dollars. And as the other state programs fail to put out their dollars in time, there's going to be waterfall events where all those dollars go to different organizations to get them out because they all have to be spent by December 4th. We're hopeful that we will get more money so if you see something that we're full please tell people to still apply because they'll be in line for when that waterfall event happens. The funds have to be spent quickly, we hope this program will already have everybody matched up and ready to go when that money does come in.

- XVI.** Chamber updates: *None in attendance*
- XVII.** Next meeting November 5th.
- XVIII.** Motion to adjourn by Eric at 9:06 am, seconded by Gretchen.

Respectfully submitted,

Shannon Wheeler
Economic Development, Town of Dover