

METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE MINUTES

January 24, 2017

7:00 P.M.

In attendance: Eric Berger, Anthony Campisi, Bobbie Theivakumaran, Chris Flynn, Diana Callinan, Dottie Winhold, Grace Shackney, Jay Muldoon, Leon Schwartz, Margaret Inglese. Not present: Gary Tilbor, Joe Bernheimer. Staff: Isaac D. Kremer, Executive Director. Guests: Allison Inserro, Angela Piniero, Angela Sielski, Beatrice Moskowitz, Becky Cuthbert, Brendan Flynn, Colleen Hanson, Courtney McKnight, Dan Cea, Danielle Fekete, Denice C. Quinn, Donna Ann Harris, Donna Campisi, Donna Hills, Dorothy Heyden, Dorothy Rasmussen, Edward van Eckert, Eileen D. Millett, Elaine Edgcomb, Ronald Hecksch, Fred Hall, Greg Trowbridge, Gregory Kubinak, Hector Hernandez, Jacquie Zuvich, Jan Margolis, Jennifer Maier, JoAnn Sabatino-Falkenstein, Joe Costa, Johanna Gelber, John Arthur, Judy Weinberg, Justin Hopkins, Lawrence McCullough, Linda Vonderschmidt-LaStella, Lois Anne Cataldo, Lorraine Mulligan, Mark Awadalla, Mark Harris, Melissa Karlovitch, Michael Ciesielka, Michelle Alleyne Schutz, Nancy L. Zerbe, Nelson Li, Pete Cammarano, Peter Klein, Robert Diken, Robert F. Russo, Robyn Trimboli-Russo, Roman Stefaniw, Sharon Taylor, Sherri Schwartz, Tanya Roper, Thomas Rockafeller, Tyreen Reuter.

Meeting started at 7:00pm

Isaac Kremer, MDA Executive Director, opened the meeting to a full house at Cai's Café. He welcomed the business owners, property owners, volunteers and residents to the meeting. He identified the various appointed and elected officials in the room, including Mayor Peter Cammarano.

Isaac introduced Eric Berger, MDA Board Chair. Eric introduced the Board members in attendance and then introduced the proposed Executive Board slate: Eric Berger – Chair, Chris Flynn – Vice Chair, Peg Inglese – Treasurer, and Jay Muldoon – Secretary. A motion was made and the Board members approved the Officers. Board member, Dottie Winhold, announced there is a vacancy on the Board and that the Board is accepting applications from business owners interested in filling the vacancy.

Isaac Kremer then presented his Executive Director report highlighting MDA's activities, accomplishments and plans for the coming year. He thanked all the members, volunteers and residents for their contributions and involvement. He then introduced Donna Harris who shared the Executive Summary of the recent Shopper Survey conducted as part of the MDA Strategic Plan. 426 responses were received which makes the results statistically valid.

Donna shared the following findings:

- The MDA, working through its Board and Teams, should take the lead on the following top priority projects.
- Reduce the number of vacancies in the downtown.
- Help existing downtown businesses to increase their revenue and profitability.
- Get more destination businesses to locate here.
- Plan new events to bring people to the downtown to shop or dine.
- Encourage shop owners to coordinate one night on which they are all open past 6 p.m.
- Half of the top ten projects must be addressed jointly by the Borough of Metuchen, the Parking Authority, and the MDA in a spirit of a true public private partnership that is encouraged by the Main Street Four Point Approach.™
- Light up the dark locations in downtown.
- Fix the broken sidewalks throughout downtown.

- Create an incentive program to encourage property owners to restore storefronts, place better looking signs and awnings.
- Create a free parking lot for Saturday shoppers.
- Improve pedestrian safety downtown.

Why shoppers did not visit downtown more often, the top five comments were:

- Too few stores or shops that interest me,
- Selection or quality of the merchandise in stores does not interest me
- No anchor store, destination business, or performing arts venue downtown
- Too much traffic congestion along Main Street
- On-street parking is always full when I come to downtown.

The restaurants that local shoppers most want to see in downtown are:

- Ethnic Restaurants; Indian and Mexican were top responses
- Traditional Restaurants; Burgers, Seafood, Steakhouse
- Chain/Franchise/Specified Restaurants; Chipotle and Starbucks
- Healthy and/or Light Eating Restaurants
- Casual and/or Convenience Restaurants
- Retail businesses that survey participants wanted to see most in downtown were:
- Clothing, Shoes, and Accessories, general clothing store, shoe store
- Home, Durable Goods, and Hardware; hardware store, home goods
- Name Brand / Retail Chains, Trader Joes
- Food Products / Grocery

The top rated special and retail events were:

- Farmers Market
- JuneBug
- Country Fair
- Restaurant Week
- Small Business Saturday

Average spending at food & beverage locations - \$50

Average spending at retail establishments - \$20

Donna recommended that the MDA make progress on the following activities in the next two years.

1. The MDA must continue to work closely with both the borough and Parking Authority to address survey participant's requests for improvement to pedestrian lighting and safety, cracked sidewalks, parking lot management, parking enforcement, and traffic congestion.
2. MDA Economic Vitality team should work with property owners to reduce the number of vacancies and connect business owners with technical assistance providers to increase downtown businesses' revenue and profitability.
3. The new Retail Market Analysis information should be used by the Economic Vitality Team to change the business mix in the downtown, recruit more destination or anchor businesses, and use the suggestions for new retail, restaurants, and entertainment options discussed in this report.
4. New retail events that "ring cash registers that day" should be the focus of the Promotion Team rather than creating new special events, as there seem to be enough already.

5. The Organization Team should continue its work to recruit volunteers, grow the email list, secure sponsorships for organization-wide activities, and communicate about the MDA's work using the most effective traditional and new media tools identified in this report.
6. The Promotion Team can help all downtown stakeholders by creating and promoting a unified special event calendar.
7. Shop owners should be encouraged to coordinate one night each week when they are all open past 6 p.m. to meet the needs of customers.
8. To encourage quality façade improvements and better signs and awnings, the Design Team should work with the borough to create a matching storefront improvement grant program. The Design Team will need to create Design Guidelines in advance of implementing such a program.
9. The Design Team should focus on placemaking activities to beautify downtown by adding flowers, benches, and trees along with holiday lighting and other amenities over the next few years.
10. The borough should continue current downtown cleanliness and safety efforts, as they are highly effective.

Donna and Isaac then took questions from the audience:

Q: Peter Klein asked how the MDA can identify and attract new customers/people who don't come to or know about Metuchen.

A: Donna replied that first the MDA needs to work on improving the retail mix; adding desired stores then can do advertising and customer acquisition activities

Q: Sharon Taylor asked how the MDA will decide what stores to attract, and shared how she did not like any Metuchen businesses, and in fact had a recent terrible experience at a restaurant to which she and her friends would never return.

A: Donna and Isaac stated that the Market Assessment, being done by Kennedy Smith, will provide direction regarding the stores to attract. Eric Berger also stated that work is underway to identify and define the "type" of downtown Metuchen needs to become. That will also influence the business recruitment strategy. Isaac asked that rather than posting critical reviews on Facebook that unsatisfied patrons speak to the owner of the business so that the owner has the opportunity to make things right, and if that does not provide satisfaction, that the dissatisfied patron speak to Isaac so that he can work to resolve the issue.

Q: Angela Sielski stated that she thought the survey should have included a map showing the boundaries of the downtown district.

A: Donna and Isaac stated that they didn't think a map was needed or would have been beneficial since most people are familiar with Main St. and the businesses located in the district.

The final part of the meeting was awards and recognition presented by Isaac Kremer. The awards and recipients were:

- Robert Diken – Design Innovation Award
- Elaine Edgcomb – Economic Vitality Award
- Fred Hall, DPW Director – Public Service Award
- Cai's Café – Business Champion Award
- Bobbie Theivakumaran - Volunteer of the Year

Meeting was then adjourned at 8:00 p.m. and a reception followed.