

METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE MINUTES

April 10, 2020

8:30 A.M.

Board meeting was held via teleconference due to ongoing CIVID 19 State of Emergency.

In attendance via teleconference: Eric Berger, Jay Muldoon, Bobbie Theivakumaran, Leon Schwartz, Mark Harris, Gary Tilbor, Diana Callinan, Linda Koskoski, Sue Fitzgerald, Jenny Lai, Gary Wade, Moshe Atzbi. Not present: Stuart Schooler. Guest: Sheri-Rose Rubin. Staff: Isaac Kremer.

Eric Berger opened the meeting. Motion was made to approve the March, 2020 board meeting minutes with addition of setting forth that there was an extensive discussion at that meeting of how to respond to the COVID crisis. Motion passed.

Chairman's Report

Eric Berger reported:

- There is still a vacant District Owner seat on the Board, but in light of the ongoing pandemic crisis and impact we can delay finding someone to fill the seat.

Secretary's Report

- No report.

Treasurer's Report

- No report.

Executive Director's Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- Isaac provided a written report of the MDA's response to COVID 19 and his coordination & communication efforts to MDA members.
- Many MDA businesses are being severely impacted by the numerous Executive Orders with non- essential businesses forced to close. Cash flow/lost revenue is #1 issue for businesses.
- MDA's limited resources are hampering outreach to businesses efforts and volunteers are needed to get information on loans, grants, and other relief programs to members.

Public Art Team Report

Eric Berger reported:

- The team is still planning for the sculpture project in the Plaza now for the fall.

Storefront Team Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- Two businesses, Hair Loft and Runners High, requested storefront consultations prior to the COVID 19 crisis. He told them to provide proposals on what they would like to do.

Tech Team Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- No report.

Promotion Team Report

Bobbie Theivakumaran reported:

- Events planned for April and May are cancelled.
- The team will be working to phase in events as we get the OK for public gatherings.
- Isaac suggested that we may need to plan for smaller events depending on the guidance we get regarding public gatherings.

Parking Team Report

Eric Berger reported:

- Parking study is on hold until parking levels return to normal.
- Demand for parking in the downtown is extremely low now.
- Some meters have been bagged to be used for curbside pickup program.
- Moshe stated that tickets have been issued for parking violations recently. Linda Koskoski mentioned that minimal parking enforcement is being done now. Mo said an employee got a ticket for parking in the Station Place lot without a sticker. Eric Berger mentioned that the Station PI lot is pretty empty now and suggested that downtown employees could use it for parking while at work. Linda and Jay Muldoon will take the request and talk with Borough and Parking Authority officials.

Communications Team Report

Bobbie Theivakumaran reported:

- The team is meeting following the Board meeting to work on the PSA to highlight the businesses that are open and those who are “pivoting” their operation to get through the crisis.
- Also looking at a possible “game” idea to promote the open businesses.

Chamber Report

Leon Schwartz reported:

- No report provided.
- Isaac expressed his thanks to Patricia Lucas-Schnarre and Jacquie Zuvich from the Metuchen Chamber of Commerce for working in collaboration with the MDA on relief

efforts for businesses. They helped contact many businesses who applied for and received Emergency Grants from the NJEDA.

Arts Council Report

Mark Harris reported:

- All upcoming Art Council events and programs have been cancelled or will be re-scheduled once public gathering are permitted.
- The Arts Council is running an on-line event called Art from Home with submissions displayed on their Instagram and Facebook sites.
- The Tiny X project is being planned for the Fall.

Nominating Team

- No report.

Old Business

None to report.

New Business

Eric provided a summary of the grant and loan programs available through the Federal and State relief programs for small businesses. Gary Tilbor stated that the enhanced unemployment of \$600/week competed with the employee retention program since some people will make more money on unemployment. No one who had applied to the Payroll grant program had received funding yet. Checks should be going out next week. Due to the overwhelming demand, application processing has been slow. Bobbie talked about the option of applying for small business loans through non-bank loan originators. She will email information to everyone following the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:10am.

The next Board meeting will be Friday, May 8, 2020, 8:30am via teleconference.

Submitted by Jay Muldoon

METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE

Executive Director Report

April 10, 2020

Since the disaster declaration on March 13, 2020, we've been in nearly continuous response mode - helping businesses pivot, respond to emerging challenges, and now access stimulus funds and other sources to provide a desperately needed life line.

Initial outreach was focused on helping businesses understand the various executive orders, and the impact they had on operating status. Over the series of the past two weeks more than 90% of businesses downtown have had to cease operations from their physical location. Since, Saturday, March 21, 2020 all non-essential retail businesses were closed.

Essential businesses including grocery stores, pharmacies, liquor stores, and gas stations have been allowed to continue operations. Only some of our restaurants have been providing pick-up and delivery services since March 22.

Our response as an organization has evolved to cover the following programmatic areas:

Communication

1. Business social media posts by category. Our social media channels have been more active now and doing posts on numerous sectors such as dry cleaning, fitness, food delivery etc.
2. There has been massive effort on social media on the aggregating and organizing the e-gift cards and updating the gift card post. This includes updating the post with comments to keep it relevant. <https://www.downtownmetuchen.org/egiftcards/>
3. Reviews: Collection of over 50 links to downtown businesses for people to leave reviews, and encouraging writing reviews via social media.
4. Roll out of all new initiatives including curbside pickups, delivery, party packages, DIY pizza packages, etc.
5. Pushing out a post about fitness businesses that have online classes, with links.
6. Rolling out videos including to Reddit, where it received positive comments and upvotes.
7. Social Media boosts and outreach to press gathering notice in NJ.com, Main Street America, Institute for Self Reliance, and others.
3/16, <https://centraljersey.com/2020/03/18/metuchen-downtown-alliance-is-working-with->

[borough-to-help-local-businesses-stay-afloat/](#)

3/18, <https://www.mainstreet.org/blogs/national-main-street-center/2020/03/18/new-coronavirus-covid-19-main-street-resources>

3/19, <https://ilsr.org/covid-19-pandemic-what-small-businesses-can-do/>

3/23, <https://www.nj.com/entertainment/2020/03/a-state-on-edge-my-son-told-me-dont-go-near-anyone-a-once-vibrant-downtown-is-now-silent.html>

8. Partnering with online retail platform Beyond Main to help businesses establish online stores. <http://beyondmain.com>

9. Finally, conversation with property owners and the Borough was coordinated to encourage everyone to "give something" to help businesses be successful. We continue to advise businesses and owners to work together to get through this, because no owner wants a vacant property they have to fill.

Finance

1. Made sure payments to MDA from Borough were processed in a timely manner to give a fund balance to continue operations.

2. Continuing to make payments to one paid staff member so that organization operations can continue.

3. Executive Board discussed the need for a stringency budget and reallocating budget lines for 2020 to maximize direct services to businesses.

4. Evaluate stimulus programs that non-profits are eligible to apply for, such as EIDL and the Payroll Protection Program - to maximize additional resources coming in. This will allow MDA to do more to serve our members.

5. Feeding the Front Line program in partnership with Borough has raised \$10,240.42 from over 100 local donors to buy meals and products from local businesses, and get meals and products in the hands of first responders including Police, EMS, hospital staff, and others.

Public Spaces

1. Removed furniture from the Town Plaza and Imagination Alley to limit the possibility of transmission.

2. Refreshed 20 planters on Town Plaza and eight others on street corners in main intersections with spring flowers.

3. Bagged 20 meters and put up signage to establish curbside delivery locations.

Developed marketing campaign to encourage curbside delivery.

Technical Assistance

1. Helped a number of businesses quickly "pivot" by introducing new product lines or services. Several restaurants, for instance, went from standard menu to selling trays of family-style meals. Of those who have successfully pivoted, some have actually seen an increase in sales.

2. Participated in over 30 webinars and calls held by the International Downtown Association, National Main Street Center, Downtown New Jersey, Small Business Majority, and others to understand emerging landscape of programs.

3. Connected with service providers including SBA, SBDC, SCORE, Together North Jersey, and Metuchen Chamber on scaling up capacity to serve businesses.

4. Providing timely summaries of all programs to all members encouraging them to apply. Sending weekly e-blast to all members and volunteers simplifying information and giving quick actionable items.

[Advice - Federal Grants and Loans](#)

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1niTR2X-SxMERMiWtZIR6OuYhuEKWWd_0V2LGrei8DBU

[Advice - Federal Grants and Loans, and NJ](#)

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1DsjaenNMT8aJ5WtHALZ04xllf9aza-Ug9I_c0bDDhGg

[Advice - Cash for Businesses](#)

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1zG6rUJr4O4jDduCSFKt5ay6fFvCn9vg5p7pcNdnopc>

[Advice – Small Business Pivots](#)

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1kNHXVOQp9vzHf7a2ITl8vqVlt2QynoT6CUHngUpwLyA>

5. Connecting with financial institutions with local presence to give briefing materials on emerging stimulus programs on Friday, March 26, 2020. Included Manasquan Bank in those communications.

6. Tracking emerging landscape of programs and developing a question rubric to guide businesses to better understand their needs, and connect them with resources.

7. Organizing outreach to our 365 members to maximize their participation in different programs.

Impact on Businesses

Since the crisis has started we've done business tracking to see the impact on individual businesses and sectors.

Sales were down the first week of the crisis by 41.8%. By the second week that number was closer to 81.25% and today it exceeds 90%. As of last week 1 in 3 had to lay off workers. That number is probably closer to 1 in 2 now. Only 20% of businesses were considering applying for the Disaster Loan and 28% said they would apply for a line of credit from their bank. This numbers have since gone up significantly, with every business we contact applying for both EIDL and PPP.

The most pressing need is to get cash to businesses now, both by helping them to pivot and to maximize the benefit from all of the different stimulus and grant programs available.

Impact on MDA

Our organization is in full response mode. As Executive Director I've taken the lead on coordinating response across the organization. A unified message has been developed and pushed out through communication channels. We have regular communications among Executive Director, Executive Board, and teams about strategic objectives. A high value has been placed on direct communications with our members, speaking with approximately 30 of them each week. This is one area we hope to expand out by engaging more people in the outreach to better understand needs, direct people to resources, and coordinate the long-term recovery that will be needed for the District.

Under ordinary circumstances, having one staff-line pushed resources to the limit. With the extraordinary needs we face now - with every business needing assistance at the same time - the need to scale up our capacity rapidly is greater than ever before.

From a financial perspective our organization is stable. Tax assessments continue to be collected and the Borough contribution is expected to continue. Where we have lost the most revenue, potentially is around sponsorship of events not being held, grants we had considered applying for but no longer have the capacity to administer, and local contributions lost. These represent approximately 15% of our total budget.

In order to scale to respond to growing need, however, we are going to need to diversify and bring in additional public, private, and philanthropic dollars.

Isaac D. Kremer
Executive Director