

METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE MINUTES

March 12, 2021

8:30 A.M. – held via teleconference

In attendance: Eric Berger, Bobbie Theivakumaran, Jay Muldoon, Stuart Schooler, Gary Tilbor, Diana Callinan, Jenny Lai, Lynne Mueller, Moshe Atzbi, Jace McColley, and Aron Mandel. Not present: Jacquie Zuvich, Linda Koskoski, and Mansi Khandelwal. Guest: Dan Cea. Staff: Isaac Kremer.

Eric Berger opened the meeting and welcomed Aron Mandel to the Board. Aaron replaces Gary Wade as the Metuchen Parking Authority's representative on the MDA Board. The minutes from the February meeting were reviewed. After correcting for one omission of Arts Council website, a motion was to approve the minutes. Motion passed.

Chairman's Report

Eric Berger reported:

- The MDA's \$17,467.50 PPP loan has been forgiven and converted to a grant. The money was used to cover MDA's payroll and rent expenses during the pandemic.
- Eric suggested that the MDA Board resume in person Board meetings as the weather improves, the number of COVID cases decline and vaccines increase. The meetings could be held outdoors in one of the tents on New St. After polling the members attending the meeting, it was agreed to hold the April meeting in person. A phone conference option will be available to anyone who chooses not to attend in person.

Treasurer's Report

No report.

Secretary's Report

No report.

Executive Director's Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- Discussed an opportunity to provide funding to MDA businesses through KIVA, which is crowd investing & funding platform that offers affordable micro loans to businesses. Recently Metuchen based Papillon received a \$5,000 KIVA loan that was funded by 108 people and institutions from around the world. As the loan is repaid, investors receive a return on their investment.
- Bobbie mentioned the default rate is much lower on KIVA loans than traditional banking loans. Isaac suggested that the MDA could structure an arrangement with KIVA and the proposed loan program with Manasquan Bank utilizing the \$150,000 SBA loan the MDA received in 2020 which could make more money available to MDA members and also provide a way to recirculate money as loans are repaid.

- A discussion was held regarding risk, default chances, repayment options, matching fund requirements, if Board member businesses would be eligible, and whether the MDA By-laws permit making loans.
- Isaac suggested the Board consider a pilot program with KIVA for 4 businesses to be funded by a Main Street America Resiliency Grant he is applying for.
- Eric suggested that we get clarification on some of the open questions including what the By-laws permit before moving forward. Updates will be shared with the Board via email before the next meeting.
- Isaac is pursuing grants from Lowe's Corporation and the Kaplan Brothers JMK Innovation Grant due April 20. He also expects that Main Street NJ to make \$1M in grants available in 2021.

Public Art Team Report

Eric Berger reported:

- Similar to the Adirondack Chair project held in 2019, the Public Art Team is planning a new project where artists will be selected to paint and decorate the three public pianos the MDA owns. The pianos will be placed around the downtown.
- Murals – a \$1500 grant was received from Middlesex County for the next phase of the mural in Imagination Alley. The team is also looking into a mural on the building where Angie's Café is.

Promotion Team Report

Bobbie Theivakumaran reported:

- Black History Month was celebrated with posters placed throughout downtown.
- Outdoor events with public gatherings are still on hold until restrictions are lifted.
- The "Just Ask" program in partnership with the Metuchen Environmental Commission, to urge restaurant patrons not to take plastic utensils, ketchup packets, soy sauce packets and the like will be launched soon.
- The team is also working on a promotion with local realtors, "You're Gonna Love It Here" with offers and specials for new homeowner and residents.

Parking Team Report

No report.

Communications Team Report

Dan Cea reported:

- Brandon produced two short videos for the MDA which are producing good results. Dan continues to provide direction for Brandon which has improved turn around time and the overall process. The arts video is close to being finished.
- The MDA's Google profile has been updated.

Innovation Team Report

No report.

Storefront Team Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- Projects are being done or under consideration for Metuchen Nail Spa, Torino 2, DiCosmo Italian Ice, Pastry Lu, Angie's Café, Law Office of Jace McColley, and Tribos Peri Peri's Chicken.
- Isaac is also investigating a potential historic preservation tax credit for the former Danford's Corner building at Main Street and Middlesex Ave across from Borough Hall.

Chamber Report

No report.

Arts Council Report

Lynne Mueller reported:

- The Window of Understanding Project continues with an upcoming virtual event on April 7 on Climate Change. Please visit the website for details and more information on the project at <https://www.windowsofunderstanding.org/>.
- The Arts Exchange virtual classes for adults and children are being scheduled. Information is available on the MAC's website.
- The Tiny X project will launch in April where 3D objects representing iconic Metuchen places created by artists will be placed at random, unusual places throughout town. Residents will be encouraged to find the objects.
- The Arts Council is ready to offer live music downtown as they did last year on New St. and seeks funding from the MDA to support the music series. They will work with the Borough and MDA regarding timing and location since the tents on New St have been configured differently from last summer.

Old Business

None to report.

New Business

- Lynne Mueller, member of the Metuchen Parade Committee, requested that the MDA function as the "fiscal agent" for the Committee's Memorial Day "rolling parade" event. The Committee needs to partner with a 501(c)(3) organization to receive donations and payments for the event.
- The Committee will be selling lawn signs to residents to place on their lawns which will honor those who served our nation, Sign cost \$10. Committee volunteers will handle distributing the signs and an automated ordering process using Square will be used. The MDA's role will be to handle the \$10 purchase.
- After discussing the request, and clarifying the MDA's role, the Board approved the request since it would not be placing a significant administrative burden on the MDA's limited resources.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:21 am.

The next Board meeting will be Friday, April 9, 2021 at 8:30am in the dining structure outside The Greek on Main and also virtually via Gotomeeting.

Submitted by Jay Muldoon

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THE METUCHEN METHOD

How the Middlesex County borough helped its downtown businesses survive COVID-19

BY MATT FAZELPOOR
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Jonathan Busch describes it as his most difficult moment as Metuchen's mayor. It was Sunday, March 15, 2020, and he had learned of CDC guidance suggesting that business closures were imminent. Busch called an impromptu outdoor meeting with several downtown business owners and local leaders, in front of Metuchen's Borough Hall, to share the harsh reality of the worsening pandemic.

"All of this became as real as ever to leaders throughout the community, and I think we had to really level with them," Busch explained. "We had a sense that things were cascading quickly. I had to look at these people in the eye, who didn't have the benefit of the data or information we were looking at and tell them, 'life as you know it is going to be changing drastically almost immediately.'"

The moment was also a sharp contrast from the excitement felt just weeks earlier when music legend Paul McCartney was spotted and photographed walking in downtown Metuchen.

Busch stressed the vitality of the downtown and how important it was to protect that asset against the existential threat that COVID-19 presented. "I think everyone agrees that our downtown is our biggest asset," Busch said. "Any person in the position of leadership in a community like ours has to take their biggest asset seriously."

Isaac Kremer, who has served as Executive Director of the Metuchen Downtown Alliance for the last four-plus years, recalled this defining moment in the Borough's fight against COVID-19. "We had about two hours of notice to pull the businesses together and we knew that the shutdown was going to be imminent," Kremer explained. "So it was all about what can the borough do? What can the Alliance do to help these businesses adapt, adjust and respond?"

And they got to work.

The following day, Gov. Phil Murphy signed an executive order closing numerous businesses, schools, imposing a curfew on non-essential retail stores, and limiting restaurants to just takeout and delivery service. While Metuchen's pandemic planning had begun well in advance of the shutdown, the fateful Sunday meeting resulted in several important steps. Among the programs that came out of that meeting were the Metuchen Delivers campaign, the designation of several downtown parking spots for curbside pickup to support local restaurants being forced to switch to all takeout and delivery, and Feeding the Front Lines, which raised money to buy food from local spots for frontline workers and area shelters.

Kremer also tapped into his experience as a FEMA contractor during Hurricane Katrina to assist his more than 350 Alliance members through this once-in-a-generation



- MATT FAZELPOOR

health and economic crisis. He set out to establish communications, identify partners and stakeholders and conduct outreach. His efforts, which included visiting 50 businesses and making more than 20 calls a day, ranged from sharing information, coordinating with borough officials, helping businesses create new promotions and ways to adapt and innovate and navigate the tricky CARES Act and NJEDA funding processes. The latter resulted in more than 130 businesses receiving nearly \$13 million in total funds.

"One of the most important things we do as an Alliance is to help knit together all the businesses in the community," Kremer said. "So that they realize ways that they're connected and they can benefit from being in this place, being close to one another."

FIGHTING ON

The Metuchen Downtown Alliance, which was created in 2016, is an all-volunteer effort that has received National Main Street accreditation. The Alliance has worked hand-in-glove with the borough to lay out and execute a vision of both short and long-term development in Metuchen's downtown.

While that relationship has resulted in a development boom that started before COVID-19, with more than 120 business starts since 2016, it has also paid dividends in combatting the pandemic. The planning, coordination, and communication allowed for swift decision-making and expedited action. "We began to anticipate it and I don't think anybody initially realized how serious this was going to be, but we knew enough to understand that this was going to impact the fabric of our small businesses," Busch said.

Kremer credits the mayor and other leaders for their efforts in protecting the borough's businesses. "In every way, the borough has stepped up and delivered, which makes it possible for our businesses to fight on," Kremer said.

An example of this coordination came in May 2020 when officials passed a resolution that eased restrictions, allowing businesses to expand outdoor dining and retail. The success of that program evolved into a full-time outdoor dining area, which remains to this day, called the "New Streetery." One lane of New Street is closed to traffic with outdoor tents, tables, chairs, light and heaters available to surrounding restaurants, provided by the MDA via grants from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. In October, Kremer and the MDA helped secure that \$655,000, which also provided direct funding assistance to numerous downtown businesses.

Alberto Buglione, owner of Mangia Toscano, is especially grateful for the expansion of outdoor dining, which he had been lobbying for in years past. He said that both the borough and the Alliance have helped and supported restaurants with anything they needed.

"I'm thankful to the borough because we call them, they respond to us," Buglione said. "We have some issues going on, they resolve it for us. I think they've been very helpful for our business, especially the Metuchen Downtown Alliance. They did a great job."

Busch and Kremer pointed out that their COVID-19 efforts would be meaningless without the businesses buying in and adapting, and most importantly, without the support of the Metuchen community. Early in the pandemic, the rallying cry of #OneMetuchen

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emerged to drive the point of everyone being in it together. Banners with the slogan still hang around the downtown.

"I am so proud of the versatility of this town, the strength of our community, and the perseverance of our people," Busch said.

Elie Honig, a CNN legal analyst and proud, long-time Metuchen resident, admits that he was concerned about the downtown's survival, especially early on in the pandemic when the usually bustling area had turned into a ghost town. "Oh my goodness," Honig said he thought. "Are we going to lose everyone? Or are we going to lose 50 percent of these businesses, 80 percent a year later?"

To date, 20 businesses have shut down since the pandemic began, but 14 new ones have opened. While there is never comfort in any business closures, people around Metuchen are pleased with where things are at a year after that Sunday all-hands meeting.

"I would never have thought it would be possible to come through the pandemic as well as the borough has," Busch said. "It was so daunting and so our only choice was to do everything we could to support the community, to support the different aspects of the borough."

Honig said Metuchen's story is an example of what a community can do when it



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comes together. "I think our local leaders, from the mayor on down, have shown the power of what good, local, effective governance can do in striking the perfect balance between safety coming first, but also supporting and protecting your local businesses," Honig said. "There's a real pride that people take in the town with the success of our businesses."

Kremer agreed. "The Borough of Metuchen is a model of a responsive government," he said. "There is nothing that we [the MDA] asked for that we did not receive, and they came to the table so many

times in so many different ways and were of great service to our businesses and the Alliance. And I'll always be grateful for that."

And while the daily COVID-19 battle continues as vaccinations ramp-up, with a hopeful return to some sort of 'normalcy' possibly later in 2021, Metuchen also remains committed to fulfilling its long-term development vision.

Mayor Busch said he is optimistic about how Metuchen will emerge from the pandemic and believes that the town was on the cusp of an attention explosion right before COVID-19 struck.

Kremer said Metuchen is raising the stakes for other communities in the region and throughout New Jersey by demonstrating how a connected, caring community can come together and emerge from this crisis stronger. "It is a great environment for people to open a business and I think we will continue to be defined by that next thing we do, the next thing we take on," Kremer said.

There are several major downtown projects on the horizon, including a rehabilitation of the famed Forum Theater, which is expected to be an anchor of the downtown. Another development project that has borough officials and residents excited is a planned pocket park and beer garden right in the middle of the downtown, through a collaboration with Manasquan Bank.

Honig believes Metuchen has managed to evolve and grow while keeping a small-town feel, and credits the mayor's leadership and vision. "I think he [Busch] has done a superb job of leading the town toward development and bringing in new businesses that have contributed to our economy and to our social fabric. But, at the same time, doing so in a careful and responsible way," Honig said.

In showcasing his pride for the Brainy Borough, Busch referenced one of its most infamous and native sons. "It was former resident, David Copperfield, who said that Metuchen is the best little town in the world. It's really a quaint yet bustling community."

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