

METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE MINUTES

June 11, 2021

8:30 A.M. – Station Place Parking Lot, and GotoMeeting

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

Eric Berger opened the meeting. Minutes were reviewed and a motion was made to approve the May meeting minutes. Motion passed.

Chairman's Report

No report.

Treasurer's Report

No report.

Secretary's Report

No report.

Executive Director's Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- MDA Budget for 2021 was approved on May 24, 2021 by the Borough Council. Second payment of \$56,250 received from the Borough. The audit is underway.
- We received our certification from Main Street NJ and Main Street America for another year.
- A group of 15 Peace Corps volunteers will be volunteering with us as they were called back to U.S. due to Covid-19 pandemic. They were working at Edison Convention Center Covid-19 Mega Site, but that center is closing July 17, 2021.
- Funding opportunities over next year includes the A Community Thrives contest through the Gannett Foundation which is combination of Crowdfunding, Challenge Grants and Operating Grants. Total of \$2,000,000 available. Funding will to help give minority and woman-owned businesses a boost.
- SBA announced \$100M Community Navigators program to support initiatives benefiting socially and economically disadvantaged business owners. We can get up to \$500,000 as a hub and we can have "spokes" out to other groups for an additional \$100,000 per spoke over two years. We need to identify businesses and training materials for the spokes to connect businesses with services. Application is due July 23rd.
- T-Mobile Hometown Grant program – up to \$50,000. We need to see if we have a need that will qualify for this grant.
- Organization Team needs to focus on grants. Bobbie stated that we will need help from board members as this gets going.

Public Art Team Report

Eric Berger reported:

- Piano project – three painted pianos to be unveiled downtown on 6/25 at 7pm.
- Angie's Café mural project – working with a group of art students and professor from Rutgers this fall on the mural to be painted in 2022.
- Ed Wetzel continues to work on the mural at Imagination Alley.

Promotion Team Report

Bobbie Theivakumaran reported:

- Juneteenth event is June 19 at 7pm at various location downtown and include step dancers from Rahway.
- A Break-Dancing competition on June 12 from 5-7pm on the Plaza.
- The return of Downtown Rumble wrestling event is scheduled for September 18 on the Plaza.

Parking Team Report

Aaron Mandel reported:

- Metuchen Parking Authority is having a presentation from IPS on a parking kiosk for the New Street lot which would replace the old meters in the lot.
- Parking Authority is working with the MDA to get new meter bags to replace the current ones to better identify the 15-minute free parking for pick up and drop off.
- Looking into possibly increasing rates and other options to increase revenue.

Communications Team Report

Dan Cea reported:

- The Pre-Prom video which highlighted Prom related businesses did not perform as well as other promo videos but did build awareness for many businesses.
- Ad Messenger platform produced 2114 click throughs for the Spring Bazaar.
- New video to be released this week to promote our vibrant downtown scene. Dan shot footage on a recent Saturday when downtown was filled with people and activities. Goal is to show downtown as a destination for dining and much more.
- Discussion about buying a half page ad in Edible NJ possibly with some other Metuchen organizations. The ad is expensive. Members suggested looking into buying space in the Sentinel- Crit which is more affordable and seems to be paying more attention to Metuchen lately. Their distribution is 38,000 households in the area.

Innovation Team Report

No report.

Storefront Team Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- Blade sign project is progressing, led by Bernie Hetzel. Site visits at 4 or 5 businesses to be scheduled in the next 2 weeks: Nauti Cajun Crab, 7 New St; Metuchen Liquor & Wine, 431 Main St; Pastry Lu, 397 Main St; What's the Scoop, 457 Main St.
- New awning is installed at DiCosmos. Sign permit for Angie's Café is approved.
- Working with Torino 2, Tribos Peri Peri, Biggby Coffee, Metuchen Diner and Kebab Factory.

Chamber Report

Jacquie Zuvich provided a written report in the meeting package.

Arts Council Report

Lynne Mueller reported:

- June 13: Jazz Education Series: This Sunday, June 13 at 3 PM Jazz Education Series Launches. Live stream event via New Jersey Jazz Society Youtube, Facebook and website. Ricky Riccardi, the world's expert on Trumpeter/ Vocalist Louis Armstrong presents Armstrong 101. Metuchen Arts Council partners with New Jersey Jazz Society for this series. Series continues once a month on a Sunday afternoon at 3 PM. for 5 more months. Some of the other topics include Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, Gerry Mulligan among others.
- June 25: Piano Project – MDA public art project – 3 competition winners painted 3 pianos which will be unveiled on Friday, June 25 at 7 PM. Placed at 3 different locations: Station Place behind Hailey's, New Street between Lotsa Balls and Sushi Suzuki and on Main Street by Antonio's Brick Oven Pizza. Pianos will be played by 3 different pianists throughout the evening. Plan is to move the pianos to various locations and have them played by professional pianists. During the month of July on Saturday evenings, a pianist will perform two 35-minute sets. Each musician is being offered \$100. Metuchen Arts Council (Grace Shackney) is organizing the musicians. Schedule to be announced.
- June 26: Art and Music Festival from 3 to 8 PM on Station Place. Art Sale with 10 artists/vendors with music by the band Jivestock on Hailey's Outdoor Stage. Food/drink by Hailey's.
- Mid July - MHS Student Art Exhibit – Art Work created by graduating seniors who will be studying art in college will have their works on display in the Rotunda Gallery at Borough Hall as well as at local businesses. Meet and greet with students and between local professional artists as well as town folk is planned. Info at metuchenartscouncil.com.

Old Business

- Need to see how newer businesses like Evnia on New St. that were not eligible for PPP and other pandemic relief grants and aid could be helped. It was suggested that money from future grants the MDA receives be allocated in part for these businesses.

New Business

- The Metuchen HS jazz band will be performing on the Plaza on 6/16 at 6pm.

- Several board members want to become more actively involved in MDA. The MDA website lists all of the teams/committees and their objectives. The Organization Team will address these concerns, as well as looking to increase board training.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 am.

The next Board meeting will be Friday, July 9, 2021 at 8:30am in the Station Place lot.

Submitted by Jay Muldoon

Metuchen Downtown Alliance top-tier rated by Main Street America

June 30, 2021

By Gloria Stravelli

Correspondent

METUCHEN – Soon after he joined the Metuchen Downtown Alliance (MDA), Isaac Kremer set off around the downtown on a mission.

“One of the first things I did was walk the streets with a razor blade and took all the stickers and posters off the store windows. That right away increased the visibility. You could actually see in and it gave the chance for people to see many of these businesses for the first time,” said Kremer, who joined the MDA as executive director in 2016.

The MDA is a volunteer-based nonprofit dedicated to the management and revitalization of the Metuchen downtown business district along with partners that include stakeholders, residents and the municipal government, according to its website, www.downtownmetuchen.org

Since its founding in 2016, more than 126 business have been established in the district and more than \$150 million has been invested, according to the website.

The MDA announced via its Facebook page that it has been recognized as a 2021 Accredited Program, a top-tier rating by the Main Street New Jersey and Main Street America programs for “demonstrating a commitment to comprehensive community revitalization.”

“We’re really pleased and honored to be recognized by the Main Street New Jersey program and Main Street America,” Kremer said. “It’s just a sign that as an organization we’ve made many good choices and we’re on the right path to achieving our goal of revitalizing the downtown.”

In a post on the MDA Facebook page, he added, “After the year we all have been through, this accomplishment is particularly sweet. Even during a pandemic our downtown was able to achieve new levels of vibrancy. Thank you to everyone who contributed, volunteered and helped to make that success possible.”

“I think if you look back five years ago to how the concept of having a special improvement district was in its infancy and we look back on that now and boy are we glad that the borough went for it,” Mayor Jonathan Busch said. “Because without that we would never have come through the pandemic, for example, as well as we have.

“The special improvement district of our downtown has become a real success story and while there are always growing pains in the process of creating new organizations, entities, those small obstacles pale in comparison to the leaps that our borough has been able to make as a result of its creation.”

Main Street New Jersey is an economic development program focused on historical commercial districts under the N.J. Department of Community Affairs (DCA). The program provides training and technical assistance and is one of 38 coordinating programs of Main Street America, a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, which is a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Evaluation criteria focus on communities building meaningful and sustainable revitalization programs and include standards such as fostering strong public-private partnerships, documenting programmatic progress and actively preserving historic buildings.

According to the Main Street America website, accredited status is the top tier of recognition.

“This designation signifies a demonstrated commitment to comprehensive community revitalization and a proven track record of successfully applying the Main Street Approach,” it states.

Kremer said he had some concerns when he applied for the executive director post due to controversy about the prospect of a Main Street program.

“It was a new program and there had been some disagreement in the community about whether it was desirable to set up a Main Street program,” he said. “There wasn’t unanimous support for a downtown alliance. The big concern was that it would be a bureaucratic entity that would hurt the businesses more than help them.

“Well, fast-forward five years later, with 126 business starts and over \$150 million invested, I’m pretty sure that we’ve helped businesses a lot. We even have about a 90% retention rate among all the businesses that opened since 2016.”

In contrast, Kramer said there previously was a high rate of turnover in the downtown.

“Metuchen was very much a revolving door; there was a 20% vacancy rate before a lot of the apartments were built, and frankly, people just weren’t coming downtown or patronizing the businesses at a level that was needed to make those businesses viable,” he said.

“But come to Metuchen any Saturday night now, anytime over the last few years, and we’re booming. We have 30 restaurants that are downtown. And it gets to the point that the alliance has – working with partners and other stakeholders – been able to be a helping hand to the businesses of Metuchen and give them a chance to be successful and profitable.

“I think one of the signs of our success is that 70% of our customers are coming from outside Metuchen. And our fastest growing demographic is young single people. So we really see the pressure to create an experience, a place with businesses that is appealing, that people want to come to.

“So over the last five years we’ve had a very deliberate approach to our storefront improvement consultations and grants, of which we’ve done about \$150,000.

“That’s leveraged over \$700,000 of private money to fix up close to 40 storefronts now,” he said.

Kremer said if there were a motto for everything MDA does as an organization, it would be to “Help make cash registers ring.”

“We want to drive those sales and get these businesses where they’re profitable, where they’re seeing a return for all their hard work and investment,” he said.

Other changes he cited include construction of the Woodmont Metro apartments at Metuchen Station and a new parking deck.

“The moment I came in September 2016, those deals were done. It was anticipated that the new development was coming, ground was being broken. They literally dedicated the parking garage the month I arrived,” he said.

“My job was to incorporate the new and the old, Main Street with all the new development. And that required just pounding the pavement.

“You know, one of the signs of success for a Main Street manager is how many pairs of shoes you wear out each month. They place a high value on getting out and being among the businesses, understanding their needs and then, over time, connecting with resources,” he said.

While development was imminent, the downtown was struggling, Kremer said.

“Development was coming, that’s for sure. But really the traditional Main Street, the walkable place – Main Street and downtown, it’s two blocks between the train station and Middlesex Avenue – that was struggling. It was outdated and needed help.”

A corps of more than 100 active volunteers supports the MDA’s mission and outreach.

“When I started there was a big push that we should hire staff, but the real essence of the Main Street approach is to be volunteer-led,” Kremer said. “Typically there’s only a staff of one. For us, it’s only been me.

“What that means is every dollar we’re not paying for payroll goes into programs. So we’re very light on operating expenses and every year I try to cut another \$10,000 or \$20,000 so that we can put it all into programming. In fact, this year was the highest proportion of our budget that went to programming.

“The hardest thing was there wasn’t a clear focus about what our priorities needed to be to achieve revitalization. There were a lot of ideas floating in the air, but when it came down to defining our mission, our vision and our goals, it required the greater part of that first year and the strategic planning process we did and the market analysis we did and asking a ton of people – over 400 people provided input for our strategic plan.

“Through that process we were able to develop an understanding of what the needs were. At that time Metuchen was having about 17 big special events a year that drew people downtown. It sounds impressive but when you looked at the condition of the district and how the businesses were doing, they weren’t doing well.

“So one of the first and earliest lessons was less special events, more retail promo,” he said. “And retail promos by design make cash registers ring. So we did 39 unique retail promos, some were repeated so there were 78 total in our first four years.

And those generated millions of dollars of revenue for our businesses, which allowed them to succeed.

“But I think the critical thing is the strategic plan and the market analysis in that first year, building consensus on doing the right things – not just doing things well, but actually doing the right things. That was the real key for all of our future success.”

Kremer pivoted and dialed up Jay Muldoon, former council member and current director of special projects, who he credits with the founding vision for the MDA.

“I was on the Borough Council when we started the process five or six years ago,” Muldoon said. “I had seen the ups and downs [of the downtown] and believed something needed to be done. So with another council member, Allison Inserro, we started researching, looking into other districts and the Main Street America program and we realized that was probably the answer for us.

“A steering committee did all the research and groundwork to create the MDA. Then we formed a board and we were approved by the borough council and had a search process,” he said. “Main Street [America] is a great achievement for us.”

Kremer credits his first job out of grad school with preparing him for a proactive response to the pandemic that benefitted the district's businesses.

"In 2005-06 I was a FEMA consultant after Hurricane Katrina. What I learned was about the whole crisis response. The lessons were very different from the practice ... But the lessons stuck with me," he said.

"One of the first things we did in March (2020), when the stay-at-home order was imminent and we knew that our businesses were about to take a major hit, was I went door-to-door to about 75 businesses and I asked them a really simple three-question survey: Do you have access to a line of credit? Are you keeping your staff or laying them off? Are you worried you will not be able to pay your utility bills?

"From those basic questions, immediately we were able to get the businesses to focus on the needs ahead so they could begin to do the scenario planning that was needed and it also established this ongoing back and forth between me and the businesses, our stakeholders and the borough, and our volunteers where we were constantly talking with the businesses.

"I think the big take-away is our ability to catch information, package it and then pitch it out quickly to our businesses when they needed it was the key to success.

"There were a ton of programs rolled out for the businesses, but mass confusion in each one of them. It really required taking the time and over 134 of our businesses, out of 335 downtown, received PPP [loans]. And the total state and federal funding we brought in through December of last year exceeded \$13 million and that lifeline was crucial to their support.

"If you look at the media coverage for those programs it was that a lot of businesses missed out. Not so in Metuchen. Metuchen was very much a leader in helping our businesses take advantage of every program that became available. We are so proactive when an opportunity came about in the third quarter to apply for the 2020 Main Street NJ Recovery Grant, because we had been doing the work, we were ready.

"And it ends up additional funds became available so we asked for more and that's how we ended up getting the \$655,628 that in the last two months of the year we were able to fully push out and support our businesses with 65 infrared heaters put up for dining structures on New Street."

Kremer acknowledged that his background with FEMA was a good fit for the downtown recovery.

"In a way it was, but you always have to fall back on the strengths of the team and give credit to the partners," he said, "so every step of the way the mayor, council, borough administrator, special projects manager, they were hand-in-glove working with us.

As for the future, "What I tell people is it's the next project we undertake that defines us," Kremer said.

"The Forum Theatre is very much a focal point right now. They've already secured about \$3.5 million for the borough to acquire it and it's going to be a big project to revitalize. Obviously, once that's done, that's an anchor. It's going to bring people from far and wide to Metuchen.

"There's a proposal for a beer garden ... we also have three residential developments in the works that are going to bring another 47 apartments to downtown. Every new household added in Metuchen generates over \$14,000 of annual spending.

"That's really the secret for all the businesses ... This new spending we're attracting is what's making this such a great place for businesses to locate. And you can't have one without the other. You can't have a retail strategy without also developing housing. One feeds the other.

"On a typical Friday or Saturday night now, it's a different town. It's come alive, it's vibrant. People want to be here," Kremer said.