

METUCHEN DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE MINUTES
February 11, 2022
8:30 A.M. – The Hangout and Parlor at Hailey's, 15 Station Place

In attendance: Eric Berger, Diana Callinan, Bobbie Theivakumaran, Stuart Schooler, Jace McColley, Jay Muldoon, Jenny Lai, Lynne Mueller, Jason Delia, Moshe Atzbi, Gary Tilbor. Not present: Jacquie Zuvich. Guest: Dan Cea. Staff: Isaac Kremer.

Eric Berger opened the meeting and welcomed new Board member Joanne Cruz. Minutes were reviewed and a motion was made to approve the January meeting minutes. Motion passed.

There were no additions to the agenda.

Chairman's Report

Eric Berger reported:

- Board needs to consider approval of a resolution in support of the MSNJ grant application prepared by Isaac which is due February 11, 2022.
- Isaac reviewed with the Board the grant application which is requesting \$75,000, the maximum possible grant.
- Motion was made by Lynne Mueller, seconded by Bobbie Theivakumaran. Motion passed.
- The Borough Council is considering an ordinance to permit up to two cannabis dispensary licenses and up to four warehouse licenses in the Borough.
- Jason Delia and Jay Muldoon provided information regarding areas in the Borough where operators would be permitted. A discussion regarding the Borough's process and rationale behind the ordinance took place.
- Jason said details on the criteria to be used to select applicants still needs to be determined. He referenced reviewing the ordinance recently adopted in Highland Park.
- Efforts to improve communications between the MDA and Borough officials are underway. Isaac and Bobbie will be meeting with Melissa Perilstein, Borough Administrator, on a regular basis to share information and plans for events.
- The Mayor has requested to be informed whenever the MDA learns of a new business lease being signed.

Treasurer's Report

No report.

Secretary's Report

No report.

Executive Director's Report

Isaac Kremer provided a written report to the Board in the meeting packet.

Borough Council Report

Jason Delia reported:

- An MDA-Borough team has been formed around applying for an AARP Livable Communities grant for 2022.

- The grant would focus on the following issues: food security, engagement with senior citizens and creating a seating area with landscaping near the Metuchen Senior Center on Center St.
- Plans would include accessibility elements.
- The MDA Public Art Team is interested in supporting the project.

Arts Council Report

Lynne Mueller reported:

- MAC Board Officers are Co-chairs: Grace Shackney and Judy Lee; Vice Chair: Mark Harris; Recording Secretary: Meg Loftus Suchan; Metuchen Borough Council Liaison: Joel Branch (replaces Sherri Rose Rubin). Three new Board members were added.
- "Windows of Understanding" Art Project: continues at Berkshire Hathaway on Middlesex Avenue across the street from See-more Appliance. See page 15 of *08840 Metuchen* magazine and www.windowsofunderstanding.org for more information.

Parking Authority Report

No report.

Team Reports

Organization Team

No report.

Grant Team

Gary Tilbor reported:

- Team met on February 7, 2022 to review pending grant applications.
- Have requests for \$53,250 of grants with funding of \$61,250 available.
- Approved grant requests for blade sign for Newmarket, storefront grants for improvements at New Pearl Cleaners/Dante Zeller Tuxedo, Angie's Cafe, and Greek on Main.
- Team would like to see more grant requests from businesses who have not already received funding in order to spread the funding wider among more businesses. Applications can be made at the MDA's website.
- Team members will be contacting applicants to review and assist them with the grant program.

Promotion Team

Bobbie Theivakumaran reported:

- Black History month promotion continues with posters in business windows with quotes from prominent black figures. Puzzle cards are available which can be submitted for a gift card prize.
- Find Your Love Downtown promotion continues - mailbox placed on the Plaza where love letters to your favorite businesses can be placed in a mailbox.. Put love letters in mailboxes.
- Lunar New Year celebration is Saturday, 2/12 on the Plaza with dragon dancers, cultural stations, and music. Several businesses are offering specials and promotions.
- Winter Restaurant Week is 2/21 - 2/27 and is generating tremendous participation by restaurants and interest from residents. Several restaurants requested a winter Restaurant week to help them through the slow months.
- Teddy from Greek on Main and Chef Dan Slobodien have been leading the effort to recruit restaurants. The MDA will be offering a frequent diners card as part of the promotion.

- The Metuchen Inn and Civile have joined MDA as affiliate members at \$250 each and will be part of Restaurant Week.
- Ghost Hawk Brewing Company will be a sponsor and will be the tap takeover at Hailey's during Winter Restaurant Week.

Communications Team

Dan Cea reported:

- Print ad will run in the Criterion Sentinel promoting Restaurant Week plus Ad Messenger campaign.
- Video released for Valentine's Day/Find Your Love Downtown promotion.
- "Day in the Life" business profile video featuring Priscilla Omoifo of Merle Norman Cosmetics on Middlesex Ave was released and is getting good feedback.
- Video to promote Restaurant Week will be shot next week.

Innovation Team

Jace McColley reported:

- Team met on January 31, 2022, three new volunteers participating
- Will develop FAQ and information to inform businesses of resources available and tools to help improve presence online, on Google, etc.
- MDA has \$10,000 of grant funding available for innovation projects
- Team will seek to recruit businesses from other towns to open in Metuchen. Jace is targeting businesses in Summit, Berkeley Heights, Westfield area.
- Jace continues to work on finding homes for the outdoor tents the MDA has. Berkeley Heights might be interested in one.

Public Art Team Report

Isaac Kremer reported:

- Met on January 13, 2022. Planning projects for 2022.
- Angie's Café project – mural to be installed this Spring.
- Looking at suggestion to place a mural on the New Pearl Cleaners building facing Pearl St.

Old Business

- Lynne Mueller asked if new tenants for the CVS and Jewel Shop buildings have been identified. Isaac stated that there have been several interested parties, but nothing more to report at this time.

New Business

- MDA has a contract with Yiftee for e-gift cards which can be used by, and at, any District business. The program will be called Downtown Metuchen Dollars.
- Eric stated that it is still financially better for businesses to offer their own gift cards directly since the Yiftee ultimately retains the money paid for gift cards that are never utilized (about 30% of gift cards are never redeemed).
- If a gift card is purchased directly from a business and is never redeemed, the business gets the money rather than Yiftee.
- Note: Yiftee policy is if the e-card is not used for a 12-month period, there will be an inactivity fee of \$3 per month. Additionally, funds can be returned to buyer with a 10% restocking fee.

- Diana asked about the recent NJEDA grant program. A suggestion was made to look at the "fine print" to make sure it fits the needs of your business. The program has several requirements including having to pay employees at least \$15/hr.
- Isaac will send information out to all members about the program.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:19 am. Motion by Lynne, second Jenny.

The next Board meeting will be Friday, March 11, 2022, at 8: 30 am at The Hangout and Parlor at Hailey's on Station Place.

Submitted by Jay Muldoon