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Strafford Regional Planning Commission "Innovative Local Economy Adaptations in Response to COVID-19" Webinar in lieu of the Annual Meeting

Zoom Webinar

June 25, 2020, 4:00 –5:30 p.m.

Meeting Notes

SRPC Staff Present: Jackson Rand, Kyle Pimental, Stefanie Casella, Stephen Geis, Jack Aponas, Alaina Rogers, Colin Lentz, James Burdin, Shayna Sylvia, Jen Czysz

SRPC Members Present: Lindsey Williams (Dover); Wes Merritt (Durham); Barbara Holstein (Rochester); Donald Hamann (Rochester); Herbert T Ueda Jr (Rollinsford); Michael Bobinsky (Somersworth); Joe Boudreau (Rochester); David Landry (Dover); Evan McDougall (Wakefield) Leslie Schwartz (Durham)

Guests Present: Lisa McGunnigle, Stephen Meno, Michele Cota, Judd Newcomb, Tim Metivier, George Reagan, Ted Seely, Leslie Craigen, Stacey Purslow, Christopher Parker, Christian Matthews, Lisa Wise, Julian Long, Mary Friedman, Sarah Wrightsman, Daniel Barufaldi, Todd Horner, Michael Scala, David Watters, Denise Roy-Palmer, Celeste Gingras

1. Welcome/Introductions

Chair Victoria Parmele welcomed everyone to the meeting at 4:00 p.m. She introduced the meeting topic and presenters, and explained the circumstances regarding moving the meeting to a webinar format. She explained that the business items normally covered at the annual meeting were voted on at a joint Commission/Policy meeting on Jun. 19.

V. Parmele introduced Shayna Sylvia.

2. Presentation - Innovative Local Economy Adaptations in Response to COVID-19

S. Sylvia shared the meeting topic, Innovative Local Economy Adaptations in Response to COVID-19. She added that the presenters would be discussing the impacts of COVID-19 on

the local economy, and how businesses, communities and other organizations have creatively adapted.

S. Sylvia introduced the presenters and shared their backgrounds.

Emmett Soldati was born and raised in Somersworth, New Hampshire and is an entrepreneur, filmmaker, and local provocateur. He owns a café, Teatotaller in Somersworth, that has blossomed into a hub of LGBTQ+ activity and community.

Shawn Menard is the program director for Seacoast Eat Local. He joined the organization in May 2019. As Program Director for Seacoast Eat Local, Shawn oversees the operational success of Seacoast Eat Local's core programs and the publication of the Seacoast Harvest local food guide. His role is also to coordinate fundraising, development, marketing efforts. In his work with Seacoast Eat Local.

Jenn Marsh is the Economic Development Specialist for the City of Rochester. In her position she is charged with all facets of economic development including cultivating prospects, identifying available sites, business retention and expansion and community engagement.

3. Presentations

E. Soldati began the presentation sharing his experience owning and operating the Teatotaller Café and adapting their business model in response to the COVID-19 shutdown. He described Teatotaller as a community gathering and event space in addition to serving drinks, pastries and food from an 100% scratch kitchen. He explained his decision to close the café's physical location through 2020, but shared how Teatotaller is keeping local economic and community engagement alive, in addition to paying rent and supporting staff. This has included re-packaging products and finding there was a regional desire for products as people are eager to support local businesses through the shutdown. Teatotaller also explored other innovative approaches to business in a pandemic including selling DIY pastry kits and holding live instructional events via social media to teach people how to bake. E. Soldati emphasized the importance of switching from a model of proprietary "intellectual property", to sharing recipes to maintain contact with customers and maintain enthusiasm about products.

E. Soldati explained the importance Teatotaller places on community engagement and making new connections. He shared that Teatotaller created a special event for St. Patrick's day where they delivered their signature bubble tea, providing door-to-door delivery. This started with that holiday event within a 15-mile radius, which was so successful it became a regular service and allowed him to hire back all staff part time. He elaborated sharing how

due to people being stuck at home, Teatotaller was able to compete with models like grub-hub.

E. Soldati explained that the online and resilient community was critical for successful adaption of local business, and how he wanted to share that success with other local businesses. In order to do this, he partnered with SRPC data analyst Rachel Dewey to develop "Mighty Small", a directory style website created to host information about local businesses in the Seacoast so residents can look up what businesses are available and how to find their products.

The presentation transitioned to J. Marsh. She shared what the City of Rochester has been doing to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and assist local businesses. She explained that this had included changes at the City level to allow outdoor dining for restaurants and other tools for businesses. She added that municipal staff were forward thinking and assembled a team dedicated to developing an approach to keeping restaurants open during the quarantine.

J. Marsh shared the importance of talking to businesses, and shared that the City's considerations included ADA compatible temporary outdoor dining adaptations. To help the businesses the City waived all fees for outdoor dining, and allocated parking spaced that were to be temporarily used for outdoor dining to comply with proper physical distances between tables. J. Marsh and other municipal staff developed a temporary ordinance outlining these rules, including modifications for insurance. She added that the ordinance has been extended beyond June 30, and that the City will be coordinating with the liquor commission. Looking forward, and past the pandemic, the City plans to make changes to make outdoor dining easier in the future. The parking spaces designated for dining were public property. She addressed private properties, sharing that the City worked with businesses with private property to ensure safe opening of outdoor dining and keeping take-out orders running.

J. Marsh explained that in another effort to help businesses, the City started a micro loan program adapted from an existing program. This was supported by Waste Management fees. There was \$50,000 available in the first micro loan fund, and 13 applicants applied. All were funded. J. Marsh explained the importance of meeting with each business to hear their personal stories. A second round was also successful after being approved by City Council in the amount of \$60,000. These loans are 0% interest loans. She shared an anecdote of how a local candy shop, Sweet Peach's, was able to restock shelves and keep one family member working during shutdown.

The City also made changes to allow for food trucks to operate more widely during the quarantine. The City worked with local health inspectors to allow food trucks in spaces that were not currently permitted in local zoning. There was a restriction to this in that only trucks already permitted in Rochester were able to operate at the three new locations determined. The community support was huge for this, and other local businesses "donated" empty parking lots to make up for spaces taken up in public lots for dining. J. Marsh stated that community pride and resilience were key, as well as the support of City staff and councilors. They were flexible to adapting.

S. Menard, the third panelist began his presentation by talking about Seacoast Eat Local's (SEL) food access online guide with interactive map and SEL's signature Winter Farmer's market program. He then discussed SNAP benefits and EBT programming and how this has been integrated at SEL farmer's markets. This is made possible through a matching funding program for SNAP.

S. Menard talked about the Seacoast Area Mobile Market (SAMM), a food truck style farmer's market that drives to low-income areas for access to fresh produce. He added that the SAMM is also available for special events like employers hosting it for their employees. He reiterated that the Winter Farmer Markets are a popular program of SEL's but that this year they made the decision to cancel the last few markets. SEL then pivoted to helping farmers find alternate venue to sell produce. SEL was also able to partner with a few local farm stands to pilot them accepting SNAP/EBT benefits. SEL is now working with the USDA to continue this programming with those and other farms.

S. Menard shared how the SAMM van is being used to connect farmers with senior housing and food pantries. He added how the SAMM adapted its practices to deliver farm produce to places in need and farm stands. As the summer begin, SEL is also helping with adaptation of local summer farmer's markets to address logistics and physical distancing. They are also planning for the winter farmer's market to increase space between vendors etc.

S. Menard explained how SEL changed its Seacoast Harvest Guide and mailers to promote local farm stands rather than the indoor markets. They are also focusing more on sharing this in an online format this year, and re-sharing stories from local farms. SEL is working towards creating more community between farmers and customers.

S. Sylvia thanked the presenters and opened the meeting to questions which had been submitted via Zoom's chat feature.

4. Q & A

An attendee opined that there are many great steps to localize and downscale supply chains and reconnect residents with local food and other small businesses. They added the positive implications have social, economic, and environmental benefits. The attendee asked the panelists how these positive changes and adaptations may be maintained, and what is needed from consumers and local and state decision makers to ensure this.

S. Menard responded that people could adapt and find new ways to get local produce. He explained that for many year farmers have wanted to find more ways to deliver their products. He added that so far during the COVID-19 pandemic farmers are moving double or triple their volume compared to normal circumstances. Many are looking to start increased delivery service soon.

E. Soldati responded to the question in explaining that Teatotaller is not planning to revert to pre-COVID operating policies. He added that if one staff contracts the virus, the whole café would need to close as his company is not able to offer paid sick leave. He expressed the importance for advocating with legislators about continuing to adapt current regulations to encourage positive changes that have come out of COVID.

An attendee asked E. Soldati if Teatotaller would be continuing its door-to-door delivery. He responded that it would and that the café has been making about double daily revenue with remote delivery service.

An attendee asked J. Marsh if the City of Rochester will continue to allow outdoor dining and food trucks. She responded that the City is using this period as a pilot; they would like to keep building an outdoor environment and the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for this. J. Marsh added that the City wants to adapt its ordinance to allow food trucks in more/new locations.

An attendee asked J. Marsh to comment on what part of the Rochester economy has been the most resilient to COVID. J. Marsh replied that Rochester has several unique shops. She added that restaurants, including those offering to-go food, has been the fastest to adapt. It was important for the restaurants to get PPE.

An attendee asked S. Menard if SEL has programming geared towards people growing their own food. He shared that SEL does not currently have this programming in place, but that UNH Cooperative Extension has released gardening classes. SEL is interested in becoming more involved with sharing nutritional information and workshops/classes. This would be something along the lines of helping people learn how to grow and store food they grow. SEL is also working to grow its network of farms accepting SNAP benefits.

An attendee asked J. Marsh if Rochester's outdoor dining is going to continue and how the City will deal with bathrooms and pedestrian space. J. Marsh shared that the City would need to address sidewalk access. She explained that restaurants are currently only operating at 50% capacity but that if restaurants expand beyond that then the City is going to have to adapt to that expansion.

An attendee asked E. Soldati to comment on how online-only service affects Teatotaler's focus on community in its dine-in space. He responded that online-only would make it more difficult to engage the community, but that Teatotaler has adapted its events and marketing to utilize online platforms and tools. He explained that customers and businesses are looking to connect, so working to help local businesses connect with customers as a network is important. He talked about the importance of using Pride Month to connect people with local businesses and get customers/fans to connect with each other through social media. He added that Teatotaler held a recent event where a portion of bubble tea revenues were donated to SOS Recovery in Rochester. Teatotaler is looking to expand the purpose of its events to create community and resilience.

S. Sylvia thanked the panelists and attendees.

5. Adjournment

The meeting ended at 5:30 p.m.