



Arlington Economic Development Recovery Task Force Minutes

Date: Tuesday March 22, 2022
Time: 2:00-3:00 PM

Join Zoom Meeting
<https://town-arlington-ma-us.zoom.us/j/96211802074>

Meeting ID: 962 1180 2074
Passcode: 776846

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Present: Jennifer Raitt, Dept. of Planning and Community Development; Marisa Lau, Dept. of Planning and Community Development; Leland Stein, Regent Theater; Bob Bowes, Gibson Sotheby's International Realty; Rachel Zsembery, Arlington Redevelopment Authority; Erik Kondo, Broadway Athletics; Alyssa Clossey, Support Arlington Center; Steve Poltorzycki, Arlington Commission for Arts and Culture; Kathleen Darcy, Cambridge Savings Bank; Tom Formicola, Arlington Center for the Arts; Bootsy Mullan, Town Tavern; Emily Shea, Kickstand Café; Tim Haley, Ellenhorn; Sarah Morgan-Wu, The Object of Stories; John Hurd, Select Board.

Guest: Len Diggins

1. Approval of one set of minutes. Motion made by Bob Bowes, seconded by Emily Shea to approve the February 2022 minutes. Approved unanimously.
2. Public health update

Jenny Raitt asked for an update regarding the lifting of the indoor mask mandate. Members shared examples of ongoing COVID safety measures for their businesses and organizations. Emily Shea (Kickstand Café) described polling her employees to gauge their level of comfort and offering flexible ordering options. Tom Formicola (Arlington Center for the Arts) stated masks will become optional starting with the next term in April and described how that policy was communicated. The requirement for full vaccination in order to participate in indoor activities had not changed. Leland Stein (Regent Theater) described the

transitional period for the lifting of the mask mandate and vaccination requirement that took into account ticket buyers' expectations at the time of purchase. In cases where the theater was rented for an event, the organizers were able to choose to set masking and/or vaccination requirements.

3. ARPA Small Business and Nonprofit Working Capital Program Update

Marisa Lau gave a program update. 133 eligible applications had been reviewed and almost 2/3 received a grant, the maximum grant being \$10,000. The majority of the requests were fully funded. She described the notification process at the end of February and stated the office had recently finished collecting required documentation from grant recipients. Checks will be mailed to recipients in April.

Jenny Raitt briefly touched on the next phase of business grants, which will be about sustainability for businesses and nonprofits. She discussed timing for the program related to Town Meeting and Ali Carter's return from leave this spring.

4. Business Updates

Jenny asked for additional business updates. Bob Bowes described the active real estate market in Arlington as fueled by long term value and interest in property here. He responded to questions from the group. He stated that the main cause of overbidding was a property's desirability rather than what that property was priced at. He also stated that there was a 19% increase in the number of sales of homes in Arlington in 2021, with most of those being re-sales. He described the average amount of time a house is on the market in Arlington (six days). He also commented on the commercial market, which he described as having many vacancies. Six months is the average amount of time to find a new tenant. There are generally few commercial properties for sale in Arlington, and that hasn't changed during the pandemic. Commercial rents are relatively stagnant as well. Other discussion focused on challenges related to approving new tenants and incentivizing owners to make updates to their properties. Rachel Zsembery stated the Town should identify policy options to address underinvestment in commercial properties and long-term vacancies, as other towns and cities are doing. She gave an example of how Chicago is strengthening its business districts. Jenny stated this could be a topic for an upcoming meeting.

Alyssa Clossey asked if the Town was aware of discussions about bike lanes in Porter Square, as North Cambridge is adjacent to East Arlington. She expressed concern for how small businesses would be affected by the removal of parking in Cambridge, and drew parallels to Mass Ave in Arlington. Jenny thanked her for bringing up the topic and stated the Town was aware of what's been happening in Cambridge and has coordinated with their staff. There are no related proposals in East Arlington and public discussion would occur for any proposal.

Leland Stein described the Regent Theater's operations as returning to normal, in terms of the event schedule and attendance numbers. He indicated that businesses throughout the region are likely experiencing the same shift and starting to see a difference as people return.

Jenny observed that indoor dining also seemed to be rebounding and suggested the group may want to talk more about the industry outlook sometime. Emily Shea discussed challenges to altering the café's business model to provide indoor seating again and described outdoor space operations during the winter.

5. Next Steps for Recovery Task Force

Per the suggestion made earlier in the meeting, Jenny asked if the group wanted to start discussing additional ways to encourage landlords to rent out vacant properties. There has been sustained interest in this topic over the years. Steve Poltorzycki stated progress in this area would be significant for the Town and was important for this group to discuss. He suggested researching how other municipalities have dealt with the issue. Erik Kondo described market based incentives and agreed that learning what additional incentives could be used to discourage vacancies would be beneficial. Sarah Morgan-Wu added that the group may want to bring landlords into the discussion to help figure out what assistance was needed from their perspectives.

Members discussed additional questions and concerns related to new business openings, planters in Arlington Center, and litter cleanup in the business districts. Town staff was asked to look into maintenance on the south side of the Russell Common lot along the residences and the proposed schedule for spring plantings. Jessica Lane from the Chamber of Commerce was suggested as a contact for the latter. Lastly, members briefly shared updates on Town and community events.

Next meeting: April 19, 2022 at 2:00 p.m.