

City of Hudson Tourism Board
Minutes of Regular Meeting April 17, 2020

In attendance: Tamar Adlar, Hannah Black, Kristan Keck, Sidney Long, Chris McManus, Filiz Soyak, Kate Treacy

Absent: Alderman Calvin Lewis, chairman; Selya Graham

Guests: Mayor Kamal Johnson, City Attorney Cheryl Roberts, Common Council President Tom DePietro, Mayor's Aide Michael Chameides, Sam Merrett, Aldermen Eileen Halloran, Jane Trombley, Dominic Merante, Rebecca Wolff

Mr. DePietro opened the meeting, conducted via Zoom and offered live stream over radio station WGXC, at 5:04 p.m. He said discussion was limited to board members, but the public was invited to text or e-mail him. If a question was not entered, it would be entered into the record.

New Business

Disbursement and Use of City Funds

Ms. Roberts said there had been questions about whether Tourism Board funds could be used for grants or loans to small businesses in need due to COVID-19. She said it seemed to her and the New York Conference of Mayors (NYCOM) that this particular pot of money could not be used in that way. Additionally, the state Constitution prohibits municipalities from giving gifts. Taxpayer money can't be used to give without anything in return, she said. "There has to be a benefit, something tangible."

Ms. Adler asked if funds could be given to a foundation. Ms. Roberts said they could not. The city could set up its own mechanism and take in its own funds. Ms. Roberts said Columbia Economic Development Corporation (CEDC) Executive Director Mike Tucker might be able to take on that role. Ms. Wolff asked if Tourism Board funds could be transferred to the CEDC to administer, but Ms. Roberts said they could not.

Mr. DePietro said in summary: "Some think where there's a will there's a way. That's just not true."

Tourism in the Time of Pandemic and Beyond

Mr. McManus said he had heard very inspiring ideas from board members and residents and that there was a lot of passion about coming up with solutions. He said tourism was a priority and the board had to look at ways to help Hudson recover and at the types of tourists who visit. Before that, he said, there had to be a discussion about "the elephant in the room," which was tourism. He challenged board members to rethink their ideas of tourism.

In a PowerPoint presentation, he said Hudson could no longer afford to approach tourism for tourism's sake. "We need to target visitors that can help Hudson recover and grow long term." He suggested a focus on three types of tourists—overnight travelers/local day trippers, weekenders from Brooklyn and Boston, and Hudsonians (local tourists) themselves, who could be inspired to explore their city. He said the board could organize and align initiatives to the tourists Hudson sought to attract. For example, overnight weekenders could be catered to starting in the fall, local day trippers starting in July and Hudsonians now through the end of the year.

Mr. McManus said overnight weekenders might not return for awhile, which would put a new priority on activities for local tourists. He called it "intratourism." He said there had to be ways to get people who live on Worth Avenue to travel to lower Warren Street and off Warren. "How do we inspire out neighbors to come out?" he asked. Midweek business also favored day trippers and locals. "Understanding the type of visitors we attract will help us to prioritize activities to help the business segments and communities that need support the most."

Now was the time for a call to action. He said the board should put together a calendar of activities that would allow members to visualize who they were helping and attracting, and when.

Ms. Long shared a suggestion from Jane Ehrlich for an online version of Open Studio Hudson, which the latter coordinated last fall. The idea would provide a marketplace and forum for city artists and give them a virtual gallery.

Ms. Long also stressed the importance of collecting the feelings of residents during the pandemic, through videos and interviews. Inspired by the words of a song, "...in your Easter bonnet," she said people could make hats and share them online for the secular part of Easter. She also suggested that the original Shiloh Baptist Church on Columbia Street could be an anchor for the arts community and people interested in history. The church, which is being considered for landmark status by the Hudson Preservation Commission, is a large part of the city's history, Ms. Long said.

Ms. Adler also gave a presentation that somewhat dovetailed Mr. McManus'. She spent a lot of time reading tourism strategies. She distilled them, then tried to move past them. She referred to Destination Think, the firm that works on strategic branding for Copenhagen, which she called "a paragon of tourism." In her presentation, she said "places that lack substance are doomed to disappoint." She said Destination Think recommended working on the substance of a place, not the brand. In other words, the image and brand are only as good as the real thing. Advertising doesn't create enduring place appreciation. The best marketing is a place that provides experiences that are fun, accessible and real.

That raised the question of "what should we do?" The best strategy, she said, is to become a place where people want to be. She asked the board to consider approaches and ideas that would help Hudson become a place where visitors and residents want to be, not just eat, sleep and shop, but play, walk, run create, invest and thrive.

One way is to create a walkable city. She said 85 percent of money spent driving leaves a community. Investing in parks, trails, bike lanes and sidewalks would move money into the economy and improve life for all. Ms. Adler also touched on "tactical urbanism," which she said uses low cost, temporary changes to the built environment to improve local neighborhoods and city gathering places. "It doesn't require lots of investment and fosters dynamic spaces, experiences and ideas," she said.

Ms. Adler went on to say that low income communities were especially vulnerable to climate change. Ideas that focus on climate resiliency, such as green spaces, carbon sequestration and alternative energy, would help make the city become attractive to visitors and healthier for residents.

She suggested that Hudson become a child-centered city. The Raising Places project, which Hudson participated in two years ago, found that child-centered places were the healthiest and happiest. Places to play and access to them for all abilities, would make the city more attractive for daytime use by visitors and local families.

Mr. Merrett, who works for the Maritime Museum in Kingston, was invited to speak about a proposal he submitted. It would be a recurring event called "Waterfront Wednesday," which would be a collaborative effort to get people to or near the Hudson River for activities ranging from visits to the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse, outdoor movies using a sail as a screen and others. It would start in July. He said outdoors spaces were already seeing more activity during the pandemic and would see more during and after the recovery phase. Mr. McManus liked the idea and encouraged board members and others to weigh in. Ms. Adler agreed, saying it was better to be proactive and reactive at the same time. It was a way to create a structure for ideas on long- and short-term levels.

Mr. Chameides presented a possible short-term mechanism for distribution of funds. He thought that there could be two grant programs, one during the time of social distancing with no physical interaction and the other afterward. He suggested short-term grants be small amounts and decided on quickly, with the amounts decided by the Tourism Board. That method would not require as much due

diligence, he said. The board would have to develop criteria for grants, which would require Common Council approval. Larger grants could be offered when social distancing was not in play.

Mr. DePietro recommended a numerical rating system so the board would have a way to support why it selected one proposal over another. Ms. Adler said the criteria could include addressing climate resiliency, contributions to a child-centered environment and other values.

Members worried that they might lose out on an opportunity if they waited another month to make decisions about the grants. Mr. McManus, Ms. Adler, Ms. Soyak and Ms. Black agreed to draft a Request for Proposals (RFP) and criteria to judge proposals.

Ms. Long said the way the city handled the pandemic would be of great interest to a large audience. "This little rivertown, this is how we handled the pandemic. It's a very powerful story," she said.

Mr. DePietro asked Mr. Merrett if he could have his proposal ready for next month's meeting. Mr. Merrett said immediate short-term projects should be done first, but he could submit his plan for the May meeting.

Mr. McManus referred to the ideas generated at meetings of the CEDC's cultural task force. One was to have local businesses open their windows to artwork. He wondered if that might be a legal way to give money to local businesses. Mr. Adler also called on local businesses to be creative. Mr. DePietro liked the sense of urgency. "We have to think of how it's deliverable. It has to be tangible," he said of the funding process.

Ms. Keck commented that as more people began to participate in brainstorming, duplication would occur, but, she said, "a good idea, is a good idea." Ms. Trombley agreed "the more cross-fertilization the better."

Mayor Johnson said he was proud of the people serving on the Tourism Board and that the meeting was "super-inspiring." He urged members to reach out to him for support, as did Mr. DePietro.

Mr. DePietro adjourned the meeting at 6:17 p.m.