



Town of Natick, Massachusetts
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James Freas, AICP
Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 18, 2021

To: Select Board

FROM: James Freas, Director of Community & Economic Development

RE: COVID 19 Pandemic – Economic Recovery Update

Meeting Date: February 24, 2021

CC: Terri Evans, Chair, Planning Board
Linda Wollschlager, Chair, Finance Committee
Scott Laughlin, Chair, Economic Development Committee
Athena Pandolf, Executive Director, Natick Center Associates
Randy Johnson, Chair, Natick Affordable Housing Trust
Daniel Shea, Executive Director, Natick Service Council

The COVID 19 pandemic brought many challenges, forcing everyone to adapt to a socially distanced and uncertain landscape. This environment was especially difficult for local businesses, many of which are dependent on close interactions with their customers and therefore experienced significantly diminished revenue. As it did in other areas, the pandemic exposed and accelerated underlying trends in the retail market while also forcing businesses of all types to adapt in order to stay viable. Natick's Community and Economic Development (CED) Department, working with our partner agencies at the local and state level as well as groups like Natick Center Associates and the Natick Service Council, took a number of actions to support economic recovery here in Natick. The intent of this memo is to update the Board on all of these activities and look ahead to action in 2021.

Support for Businesses

Outdoor Dining – In the spring of 2020, as the nature of the COVID 19 virus became apparent, social distancing became the norm and the Governor shut down restaurants. The possibility of Outdoor dining became a necessity such that, when Governor Baker issued an executive order on June 1 allowing municipalities to adopt alternative permitting processes for outdoor dining that effectively waived typical local zoning and licensing requirements, CED moved quickly to develop a temporary outdoor dining review process. The Select Board adopted this expedited review process on June 8, 2020. Through this process, the Town was able to issue a permit for outdoor dining in less than a week. Twenty different restaurants and organizations with food service took advantage of this program all across Town. This program remains in effect for the

duration of the Governor's COVID 19 Emergency Order with no further action required by the Board. Natick Police, Fire, Health, and Public Works departments, as well as the Building Commissioner, were essential to the success of this program. Any restaurant can still apply for an outdoor dining permit at any time.

Regional Business Micro-Enterprise Program – In June 2020, in partnership with 22 other municipalities in greater Boston, and MAPC, Natick applied for federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to support small businesses in Natick negatively impacted by the pandemic. Natick's portion of the award was \$250,000 with up to \$10,000 available to each eligible business (businesses must meet income eligibility requirements consistent with federal CDBG standards). To date, five Natick businesses have received awards. Each business has received the maximum amount allowed.

Other State Business Assistance – CED and other Natick partners have been helping to connect Natick businesses with the various Massachusetts business assistance programs. Thus far, Natick based businesses have received a total of \$3,735,000. These funds have gone to 70 different businesses across a range of business types from restaurants and retail to education, construction, or fitness centers.

Downtown Natick Recovery & Long-Term Vitality

Partnership with Natick Center Associates – CED were active participants with Natick Center Associates as they worked with downtown businesses to identify and implement strategies to support recovery and long-term vitality. Over 2020 Natick Center managed to host a number of events, place outdoor customer pick-up lockers for use by downtown businesses, complete more public art projects, and bring pop-up retailers to vacant storefronts. CED is working with Natick Center Associates on further grant applications and projects to bring more art, lights, and vitality downtown in 2021.

On-Street Outdoor Dining – Using the State's Shared Streets grant, CED contracted with Nelson Nygaard Associates, a transportation planning firm, to design locations for outdoor dining as well as pedestrian safety improvements (below). While five different potential outdoor dining locations on public land were identified, only two restaurants made use of the space. Natick Center Associates made use of grant funds secured by CED to decorate the barriers surrounding these spaces. DPW provided the materials and installation. Staff hopes to bring these outdoor dining areas back in the spring.

Temporary Pedestrian Safety – A critical part of downtown Natick's vitality and business success is pedestrian safety. Numerous transportation consultants over the years have identified the extra wide pedestrian crossings at Central and Main as an issue. Using State Shared Streets grant money, and with the assistance of Nelson Nygaard Associates, CED used temporary curb extensions to explore approaches to reducing the crossing distance at this intersection, as well as the Main Street crossing at Court Street, to improve pedestrian safety. DPW was again an essential partner on this project. Staff hopes to bring this installation back in the spring.

Wayfinding Design – CED is working with Natick Center Associates on a project to design a wayfinding system for downtown Natick. The project builds on the 2019 Natick Center Creative Placemaking plan and aims to create a system of signage and other features that reflect the unique attributes of Natick Center and serve to guide visitors to the downtown. Project funding is from a State technical assistance grant.

Zoning Amendments – An important component of economic recovery and long-term vitality in downtown Natick is ensuring that the zoning rules readily support the community’s objectives and allow businesses to easily occupy storefronts and thrive. The Select Board and Planning Board, with the support of CED, advanced a number of important amendments to the Downtown Mixed-Use (DM) zoning. These amendments support development of the former St Patrick’s school site, give flexibility on front setbacks, reduce or eliminate parking requirements, facilitate expansion of outdoor dining, and support continuous commercial frontage on the downtown’s retail streets.

Rental Assistance

Emergency Rental Assistance Program – The economic challenges of the pandemic have not only effected businesses, individual households have also been hard hit and many have struggled to make rent payments. The Natick Affordable Housing Trust has provided a total of \$60,000 to the Natick Service Council to provide emergency rental assistance beginning in July 2020. These funds have been used to assist 13 households so far with up to three months of rent payment. The latest round of funding from the Trust will allow this assistance to continue into 2021.

Looking Ahead to 2021

2021 promises to be a year of recovery, but also a year of new projects and new opportunities. The experiences of the COVID 19 pandemic have offered a number of lessons, which we can now apply in order to enhance recovery and create new vitality.

CED Permitting Program – In 2021 CED will be advancing two important initiatives that will serve to improve the Town’s overall permitting program. First, the new permitting software, funded by a \$300,000 CIP allocation along with a \$73,000 state grant, will significantly advance the permitting program by reducing staff time spent on data entry and permit administration, improving interdepartmental coordination of permit review, and allow for online permit application, among other benefits. This system will improve the resiliency and adaptability of the department and support businesses and new development in the Town.

The second initiative is the introduction of a development review planner to support the work of the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals. This staff position will give these boards the same level of professional support currently enjoyed by the Conservation Commission and will facilitate each board’s review process, allowing for a more streamlined process as board

members are provided with the information and analysis they need to efficiently reach decisions and applicants are given a clear roadmap of their permitting process.

Golden Triangle Economic Recovery and Development – The retail sector was particularly hard hit by the pandemic as an increased amount of sales activity moved online. A number of retail spaces have gone vacant. Many view these results as an acceleration of what has been a long-term trend and the expectation is that these trends will continue. In the office sector, companies that rely on office workers generally felt little financial impact from the pandemic as they moved their employees to remote work systems. As the pandemic ends though, there are many questions about what a return to the office will look like and how office real estate will perform. The challenges and uncertainty facing the retail and office sectors is a major issue for the Golden Triangle area, which is itself a significant component of Natick's commercial tax revenue.

In 2019 the Town, working with the City of Framingham, completed a study of the Golden Triangle area. Many of the recommendations of that work are largely consistent with the general consensus today on what places like the Golden Triangle need to do to promote economic recovery and new development in the post COVID 19 world. CED is proposing that the Town move forward with the recommendations of the Golden Triangle study, updated to current conditions. This project would be in the form of an economic recovery and new development strategy focusing primarily on creating new zoning for the area and identifying near-term achievable transportation and other infrastructure improvements.