



Town of Pepperell Economic Development Advisory Committee

1 Main Street, Pepperell, Massachusetts 01463-1644

Minutes – February 17, 2022 Meeting

Committee Members Present:

Stephen Themelis, Chair
Joyce Morrow, Clerk
Chet Babineau

Committee Member(s) Absent:

Bruce Bonnevier
Kelli Ann Kinney
John Masiello
Chuck Walkovich

Additional Attendee(s):

Martin Cadek, IT – Town of Pepperell
Gerry Couper, Pepperell Community Media

Meeting Convened at 6:05 PM. Pledge of Allegiance took place. Meeting was recorded.

1. Minutes of December meeting

Minutes of the January 13, 2022 meeting were not accepted nor approved since a quorum was not present.

2. Discussion

Chair called the meeting to order, and welcomed the invited guests.

Chair began meeting by stating that EDAC was prepared to submit a letter of support for IT funding through ARPA to help Pepperell move forward through enhanced technology throughout the various Town departments. Despite not having a majority of EDAC members present, those in attendance learned about the history of technology in Pepperell.

It appears that the age of digital records, and hardware/software applications, have been connected as they appear today only for the past nine years. Currently, there are between 9-12 individual phone systems. The goal is to have one private cable (fiber optics) that would connect all departments, buildings, and systems. As of now, each building is

connected individually – internet and phone. Various departments located throughout the Town were not able to share files. It has been only since the past several years that IT was able to connect as many departments as it could be under the existing cable conditions. As a result, Town internet connectivity options are very limited. The entire Town, including Town Hall, is at the mercy of Spectrum or Spectrum Business. No other options exist in Pepperell. This results in inequitable upload and download speeds for data and files. Town departments need internet connection speeds that are equal in both directions (upload/download). With the current system, each Town building has its own server which is not ideal, and somewhat wasteful. In addition, the Town should have one phone system. Under the current setup, approximately nine to twelve phone systems exist. It's not because Town IT/Administration did not think ahead; it's because they had no other options. Over the past ten years, installation of private fiber was extremely expensive. Spectrum did not offer that feature until just recently; and to buy it from Spectrum, the cost would be prohibitive. While VM Ware exists, the present-day setup is cumbersome and worrisome since backup takes place independently within each facility structure. We were informed that grant applications to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts have been submitted in the past but, for various and undefined reasons, they have been denied.

Recently, Pepperell's IT personnel submitted a request to the Town Administrator for a one-time funding of approximately \$200-\$250K from the \$3.6M ARPA funding earmarked for Pepperell. It was hopeful that the funding would become available, so that the necessary connectivity work could be carried out to ensure that all existing departments are linked, backed up, and communicate to each other in a streamlined, state-of-the-art manner. With the much needed and current planning process underway for a safety complex which would house the regional dispatch equipment, having this connectivity in place is a desired outcome.

Separate from the above fiber optics project is the ePermitting software which is expensive. It is currently installed and used by the Building Department. The Planning Department is hopeful of getting it installed in the near term. It most definitely would help the permitting process not only for the Building and Planning Department, but for the residents and outside developers looking to develop housing projects in Pepperell. There may not be a lot of revenue to be found by linking various departments. Usually, it's better to keep departments separate (e.g., police, fire, accounting, etc.).

Hardware/software is a separate project/focus from the private fiber optics project mentioned earlier for which Martin submitted a request for ARPA funds. UNIS is a municipal software package that does it all, but it is very expensive.

Chair asked Martin if he has done research/has information on how other towns are set up IT wise as a comparison and which could to serve as a benchmark on what Pepperell should work towards, etc. Martin said that he gets newsletters and connects with his counterparts in other towns. The bottom line is that IT infrastructure, hardware, software, etc., really depends on funding and the willingness of each town to invest in something that may be considered unproven. This is the challenge.

Before Martin came to Pepperell, the Town departments did the best they could. In the past, Pepperell did not have the required/knowledgeable IT staff. There was no infrastructure, nor did Pepperell have the required funding. Pepperell is now at a point to take the next step which, unfortunately, is expensive. On the other hand, it would set Pepperell up for the next 50 years.

Gerry agreed with all of Martin's remarks. He is in a different space than Martin, and spoke about Pepperell Community Media's interactions with Charter/Spectrum; and discussions with Verizon regarding FIOS/fiber optic networks being installed in the area. Other internet providers have been invited to come to Pepperell but have declined. The one Gerry identified as being a possibility is Verizon FIOS. Fiber is becoming ubiquitous. It's commoditized now. We don't need to touch the fibers, but we can use them and modify them. PCM has learned a lot about fibers. We can use them to help move data and communications throughout the Town, and in being able to go live with presentations throughout the Town. Apparently, Verizon Fios installation stopped at Littleton/ Groton. Verizon Fios was coming our way. But something happened to its business model and Verizon FIOS decided to stop at that point. Verizon found that it was not economical for proceeding further into the local towns after Groton. Pepperell would have been the next town up; but Verizon stopped in Groton. Gerry's thought was that if Pepperell made the investment and installed the private fiber cable (he likened it to the trunk of a tree), then perhaps Verizon could justify installing FIOS not only for municipal use but for residential use as well. If that were to happen, then there would be competition between Verizon and Charter/Spectrum. In Gerry's opinion, if Pepperell were to tip the scales by making an investment in something that would have cost Verizon, perhaps Verizon's business model would then become viable. If that were to happen, he believes that internet availability and associated services for the general public would increase.

PCM is going through its contract agreement with Charter/Spectrum. According to FCC, PCM should have three channels, however, currently it has only two (Government and Cultural – Educational channel is missing). The current signal is smaller than what could be – like an old TV frame vs today's larger monitors. PCM is trying to negotiate with Charter/Spectrum for the third channel as well as the larger screen ratio format for all three channels. Charter/Spectrum is now charging PCM a huge price which comes out of the money for which they are funding PCM. PCM's goal is to have three channels with wide screen format. It was suggested that Gerry might contact NMCOG for information on what other communities have done. Gerry mentioned that PCM has a 10-year contract with Charter/Spectrum. PCM is coming upon ten years now, and are in the process of reviewing/renewing another ten-year contract.

Martin interjected that he has submitted grants to CCC (Community Compact Cabinet) for a number of years. Historically, Pepperell's grant submittals have been denied. He does not know why. He believes the grants are very competitive. Some towns get the grant funds. Pepperell, for whatever reason, has not been successful and has not received any support over the years.

Unrelated, Gerry mentioned that he is one of two co-Chairs for Friends of the Rail Trail which starts in Ayer and goes past the NH border. The trail is currently in a high stress situation right now because of age and usage. The trail is owned by DCR. Out of the 50 US states, Massachusetts is dead last on how we are treating our parks, forests, etc. We have been under-funded for a long time. The maintenance need is growing annually since DCR is not funding the need for maintenance. This becomes a safety problem. Friends of the Rail Trail have established a relationship with DCR to do some maintenance (e.g., tree/limb removal) and have extensive training through DCR (e.g., handling chain saws, etc.), so that some maintenance can be done, other than paving. Pepperell does not have a paving machine. The surface quality of the rail trail is a problem and is growing. There is an area near the Pepperell Braiding Company that poses a significant risk to trail users. If they went off the trail for some reason in a particular area, they could go into the water. Gerry wondered how this item got on the Town website list for ARPA funding requests.

Clerk suggested contacting Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce; Chair suggested reaching out to local legislators to promote rail trail safety in preparation for the expected heavier usage which may potentially come about from the tourism traffic visiting Groton Music Center the summer of 2022 into the future. Perhaps Nashoba CoC and local legislators could help in getting funding to DCR for this purpose.

Chair indicated that the ARPA funding decisions had to be in before the end of April. The EDAC letter of support will be sent to EDAC members to review and, hopefully, approve at the March meeting. Martin agreed to get some numbers to us for inclusion in the letter. Clerk agreed to further the letter along to the appropriate channels and suggested that Martin consider uploading the letter to the grant application site to show EDAC support for the grant funds.

Chair apologized for the limited number of EDAC members for this informative and important discussion; and thanked the attendees for their contributions and participation in the meeting.

Chair asked if there were any updates or comments. Clerk asked Mr. Babineau why he was not at the MUOD meeting the previous night. She understood that invitations went out to all of the RR Square property owners. She asked Mr. Babineau if he had received an invitation from Town Planner together with documents that he would find interesting.

Clerk mentioned that EDAC was notified by Town Clerk to provide an annual report for the 2021 Town Annual Report. Clerk was asking all EDAC members to submit a paragraph to her regarding what they had worked on during the 2021 term. She would then consolidate all into one report which was due to the Town Clerk by Friday, March 4th. Clerk mentioned that the report should include EDAC's MPIT involvement; participation by EDAC members on the One Stop For Growth/EoI application; the LRRP grant committee involvement, including Wayfinding and Branding; and BID meetings sponsored by the Commonwealth of Mass. In addition, Report will include EDAC's letter of support to FinCom for budget allocation for the Town Planner position; EDAC members' involvement in the CPA work; Chet's visit to the Worcester food hub for Agri Comm interest in food hub/commercial

kitchen at PFC/. Clerk asked if Mr. Babineau had any success in reaching out to his fellow RR Square property owners. He said that he did not. It's hard to reach landlords who are not in Town. In the past, they were not receptive to any changes. Unless you have something to present to them, it's useless call. We need tangible ideas to present. EDAC members need to be ambassadors to get the information out and help rally the business owners to participate in the discussion meetings. Chair stated that this would be on EDAC's Agenda for the next six months to discuss ongoing status.

Chair asked if there were any more items for discussion. There were none. Chair thanked outside attendees for participating in the meeting; and thanked Clerk for keeping things afloat.

Chair then asked for a Motion to Adjourn.

3. Adjournment

Motion was received and approved to adjourn at 7:45 p.m.

4. 2022 EDAC Meeting Schedule

March 17
April 21
May 19
June 16
July 21
August 18
September 15
October 20
November 17
December 15