

Minutes of the April 14, 2021 Meeting of the Sudbury Democratic Town Committee

The April 14, 2021 meeting of the Democratic Town Committee was called to order on Zoom at 7:05 pm by Tania Vitvitsky, Chair. Other members attending were Carmine Gentile, Vice-Chair, Nuha Muntasser, Affirmative Action and Outreach Coordinator, Peg Espinola, Secretary, Jeanne Maloney, Jen Roberts, Andrew Bettinelli, John Riordan, Tina Riordan, Linda Hench-Gentile, Hank Sorett, Eva Fridman, Aruna Pundit, Lisa Kouchakdjian, Carl Offner, Colin Warwick, Henry Noer, Marilyn Unger-Reipe, and Gary Bean. Sue Rushfirth, Treasurer, had a conflict and could not attend. Also attending were Dhruba Sen and Christopher Lorant.

The minutes of the March 10 meeting were unanimously accepted.

Correspondence and related issues:

State Senator Jamie Eldridge has asked permission to make a presentation on The Case for Progressive Revenue to Meet the Needs of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Tania invited Jamie to speak at our next meeting on May 19.

It was agreed that Tania should contact our other State Senator, Mike Barrett, and invite him to speak to us at another meeting--perhaps on the implementation of his climate bill that was recently passed by the Legislature. State Committee member Kate Donoghue is another likely guest at a future meeting--she has put together a video presentation on the subject of the substance use disorder epidemic in MA and the need for more effective treatment.

Co-Chairs of the Wayland Democratic Committee communicated that they support a bill for all-resident (including non-citizen) voting in municipal elections. Few towns nationwide have this provision.

Legislative updates by Carmine Gentile and Andrew Bettinelli: Carmine updated us on the status of the budget for the next fiscal year. The House Ways and Means Committee submitted their budget to the House today, which has until Friday to file amendments. After the House votes, the Senate will undertake a similar process, and then a House/Senate Conference Committee will craft the final budget (probably in late June or July). Revenues are up, such that no money has yet had to be taken from the \$1.7 billion they appropriated from the Rainy Day Fund. Money to cities and towns under Chapter 70 will increase, though the formula for allocations has changed somewhat.

A bond bill will be considered tomorrow to cover the cost of rebuilding the Holyoke Soldiers Home, which has a new superintendent. Sixty-five per cent of the \$400 million cost would be reimbursed by the Federal government, leaving only \$140 million to come from Massachusetts funds.

Next year a progressive revenue bill will come up again, which would raise taxes by four percent on income over and above \$1 ½ -\$2 million. This additional revenue would be channeled to transportation and/or education. It would require an amendment (called the Fair Share Amendment) to the State constitution, which will go on the ballot in 2022. Carmine said that "we want to see that win at the ballot box." Speaker Ron Mariano and State Senate President Karen Spilka are in agreement that they do not wish to raise taxes this session.

Andrew Bettinelli added to the legislative update by reporting on the issue of redistricting: He works for Senator Brownsberger, Senate chair of the Redistricting Committee. He said that it is not expected that Massachusetts will lose a seat, but districts may see changes. John Riordan wondered whether consideration could be given to making Sudbury a unified Senate district, instead of being part of two districts as we are now. Should our committee broach the subject? Andrew commented that several other communities are in the same predicament.

Report by Select Board member and Vice-Chair Jen Roberts on the state of Town government:

Town Meeting: Town Meeting, scheduled for May 22 in the athletic fields at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, will have a later start time than last September: 12:30 pm. There are fewer big-ticket items and more going onto the consent calendar, so organizers are still hoping for a one-day meeting.

The major financial issue for this Town Meeting is the plan for an enhanced fire station on Route 20.

The Town of Sudbury recently undertook an American with Disabilities Act study and survey of Town-owned properties. The Select Board will be holding a meeting on April 27th with the consultant, Town Manager, and Commission on Disability to discuss the issues that have arisen during the comments period, which ends tonight.

Hank Sorett commented that "there is an unwieldy process for finding out how many people are in a department and what they do." He said one used to be able to see this clearly in the budget. He would like more detail in the warrant, so that one could bring it up at Town Meeting and critique it if one wished. Jen will report this feedback to the Select Board.

Bruce Freeman Rail Trail: Funding for construction is still planned for FY 22 according to the MPO plan (Metropolitan Planning Organization). The Town is working hard to make sure we are meeting deadlines.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commission: The Select Board has completed interviews with fourteen people--"We are full now." SDTC members Sue Rushfirth and Nuha Muntasser are now members of the DEI Commission, which should become operational by the end of April. Jen Roberts and Bob Schineller are the liaisons from the Select Board.

Pandemic issues and plans for Town reopening: Jen said that Henry Hayes, the Town Manager, has been cautious regarding fully reopening Town departments in light of the possibility of another surge. He believes we are "almost there but not quite." He also believes the Town has been offering good service to the community despite the Pandemic. However, the State has been mandating various degrees of reopening, as time has gone on. There have been a few complaints that the library has only been reopened on a limited basis, and that the Transfer Station still does not allow bulk item drop-off, which involves cash transactions.

Schools are starting in-person classes although children and youth cannot yet be vaccinated. There is concern about possible long-term effects of even non-symptomatic COVID on those who get it, including youth.

Voting protocols: Gary Bean recommended that the town send voters a vote-by-mail ballot whenever they send out a notice of an election. Jen said that this was allowed earlier during the Pandemic [by the State] but not anymore. With regard to this issue, Carl suggested to Carmine that there be action in the Legislature to ensure continuation of no-excuse voting by mail. Carmine replied that there are at least two bills in the works. One bill under consideration in both House and Senate that has broad support would extend voting by mail without an excuse. The other bill includes no-excuse VBM but would also move the primary from September to June. That bill has little support.

Other: Lisa Kouchakdjian said that "I want to commend Jen as the Select Board liaison to the Disability Commission" (of which Lisa is a member). She also commented that the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commission is "really exciting" and she hopes it will also address people with disabilities as well as differently abled people. She added, "As the town is aging, we want to include everybody." Jen replied that "the scope of the Commission is very broad--it is beyond diversity and equity. Inclusion is also important."

Results of March 29 Town Election: There was acknowledgment that Janie Dretler had won re-election to the Select Board, while Lisa Kouchakdjian had not unseated the other incumbent. Tania and the Committee thanked Lisa for making the effort to run. Lisa replied that while disappointed, "it's not something that deters me--you move on!"

Update on SDTC members on Town committees: Peg is now the liaison from the Council on Aging to the Commission on Disability. Tania, as a member of the Housing Authority, is involved in exploration and assessment of a property on Nobscot Road as a possible site for additional affordable housing.

John Riordan pointed out that two boards are looking for new members: The Design Review Board (which generally seeks specialized expertise related to its mission), and the Sudbury Community Preservation Committee. This committee funds housing, recreation and historical preservation; it is looking for one additional member.

New business--Getting Ready for 2022: Tania referenced the joint meeting of the Executive Committee of the Sudbury DTC and the SDTC Political Action Subcommittee, formed at our last meeting. The membership of that committee includes Tania and Carmine from the Executive Committee, as well as Chair of the Subcommittee Jeanne Maloney, and members Carl Offner, Ann Barysh, and Colin Warwick. The Subcommittee, together with other Executive Committee members, had begun to put together a list of organizations which have strategies and purposes that might appeal to our members. These include Force Multiplier, Swing Left of Greater Boston, Vote Forward, and Movement Voter Project, as well as the Massachusetts Coalition Against Gun Violence. The State Democratic Party also has organizing meetings on Zoom every Saturday. The Subcommittee is working on a survey that SDTC members will be able to fill out to indicate their own favorite organizations. It is believed that this will help us to choose from among the many progressive organizations that deluge our inboxes daily.

This brought forth a strong counter-argument that the role of the SDTC, above all, should be to work to elect Democrats in local and state elections, rather than supporting candidates in far-off races who may not even represent our views on many subjects. Andrew Bettinelli suggested we simply give to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, "rather than trying to pick [likely] winners and losers" in races around the country.

Everyone who spoke agreed that we should be prepared to work for our own candidates in State elections, including first and foremost our State Representative Carmine Gentile who will be up for re-election in 2022, and whoever the Party selects as our Gubernatorial nominee. Many among us look forward to the possibility of in-person canvassing in 2022. The disagreement centered around whether the Committee as a whole should involve itself in out-of-state races in 2022, as opposed to simply supporting members' freedom to work with and donate to other organizations and candidates as individuals.

There was discussion of how to gain the Governor's office for the Democrats in light of Baker's popularity (as an "invisible" Republican, in one member's words) and the tendency of the electorate in MA to vote for Republican governors in order to balance out the overwhelmingly Democratic legislature.

After this discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 8:28 pm. Our next meeting is scheduled for May 19, at 7 pm, on Zoom.

Peg Espinola, Secretary