

Minutes of the June 9, 2021 Meeting of the Sudbury Democratic Town Committee

The June 9, 2021 meeting of the Sudbury Democratic Town Committee was called to order by Vice-Chair Carmine Gentile at 7:05 pm, on Zoom. (Chair Tania Vitvitsky was out of town.) Other members in attendance were Sue Rushfirth, Treasurer, Peg Espinola, Secretary, Lisa Kouchakdjian, Eva Fridman, Jennifer Roberts, Colin Warwick, John Riordan, Henry Noer, Carl Offner, Andrew Bettinelli, and Hank Sorett. Others present included invited guests State Democratic Committee member Kate Donoghue, and Melinda Walker, Lexington DTC member representing Raise Up Massachusetts. Also attending were Sudbury Select Board member Janie Dretler, Dhruva Sen of Framingham, and Christopher Lorant, of the State Committee.

The minutes of the May 19 meeting were accepted unanimously after minor corrections.

Sue Rushfirth gave the Treasurer's Report. The only expenditure this month was the bank fee of \$7.50. There is \$910.37 in the account. The report was accepted unanimously.

Announcements: Our next meeting is July 14, at 7 pm. We will have a picnic at the Wayside Inn Grist Mill, our first in-person meeting since the COVID 19 lockdown in the spring of 2020. Folding chairs and bug spray are suggested.

The State Committee is still mandating either hybrid or virtual caucuses. **Our caucus is scheduled for July 17, at 10 am.** Place and mode of the meeting (virtual, hybrid or in-person TBA (see reports by Carmine Gentile and Jennifer Roberts for factors involved in this decision).

Reaction to the 2020 SDTC Annual Report: Carmine shared that both the Weston and Wayland Democratic Town Committees have communicated their admiration for our committee's activities as depicted in the report. In the words of the Weston representative, we are "so active, vibrant and well-functioning, setting an example of what a Democratic town committee should be."

Kate Donoghue's Video Presentation, Ending the Stigma: Kate Donoghue then shared the moving video she has created following the death of her son Brian from a drug overdose in 2018, after many years of struggling both with major depression and a substance use disorder. Kate has created "lobby days" at the State House on the yearly anniversary of his death, so people can lobby for legislative changes that might have saved her son. These include the establishment of safe injection sites, easier access to Suboxone, a mandate for commercial insurance companies to cover treatment for substance use disorders, stopping the practice of the courts sending men with substance use disorders to facilities for criminals, and more. With regard to the enormous stigma attached to substance use disorders, Kate explained the important of the language that is used when discussing the issue. The goal is that the "personhood" of the people who are suffering from this disease will be recognized and respected, resulting in more appropriate and effective treatment by society in general, and health care providers in particular. She also spelled out the role of Big Pharma in creating and sustaining the problem, along with role of insurance companies in allowing for over-prescription of opioid drugs and then failing adequately to cover treatment.

Lisa Kouchakdjian thanked Kate for her presentation and agreed that "there are a lot of people who need to be held accountable." She mentioned her pride in having helped to elect Attorney General Maura Healey, who is trying to bring this accountability about. Carmine Gentile said that he is advocating for the House Committee on Higher Education to vote favorably on legislation to establish an institute at one of our state universities that would examine health deficits in Massachusetts and recommend legislation and/or other ways to close those deficits. He noted the crisis in the state around treatment of children and adolescents with mental health disorders who are stuck in emergency rooms for days and weeks because of a chronic lack of pediatric psychiatric beds.

Legislative Report by Carmine Gentile: The major events of the past month were passage of a supplemental budget of \$400million for a new Soldiers Home in Holyoke and passage of the so-called Fair Share Amendment by the Constitutional Convention of the House and Senate. This was the Amendment's second passage in consecutive legislative session Constitutional Conventions. The Amendment would add an additional 4% to the state tax of 5% on that portion of a taxpayer's annual income over one million dollars. It will now appear on the ballot in November

2022. Recognizing that opponents of the amendment will be fighting hard for its defeat, Carmine has already sent out a FAQ to constituents.

The Legislature also voted to make the 4.4 or 5 billion dollars in Federal funds from the American Rescue Plan coming to Massachusetts in a few months subject to appropriation by the Legislature, thus removing some of the control over these funds from the Governor and his administration. The funds are destined to go to cities, towns and regional school districts for education and other needs. Carmine is reaching out to municipal officials in his district for input on their pandemic-related and other project priorities to help inform his role in shaping these decisions.

Carmine stated that on June 10th, the day after our meeting, both the House and Senate would take up the issue of extending various emergency orders that had been in place to deal with the pandemic and are due to expire next Tuesday by the Governor's rescission of those orders. These include changes to the Open Meeting Law, which have allowed the SDTC and municipal boards, committees, and commissions to meet remotely/virtually over the internet for the past year.

John Riordan (who chairs the Zoning Board) stated that he would like that change to be permanent, for safety's sake among other reasons.

In the meantime the Town has put out a statement indicating that as of June 15 we must have in-person or hybrid meetings, rather than fully remote as we have been doing since the emergency provisions have not yet passed. Jennifer Roberts, who chairs the Select Board, stated that she was very hopeful that the Senate would vote Thursday to continue to allow virtual meetings so that the Board would be able to meet virtually at their next meeting, on June 15.

Hank Sorett pointed out that it is easier for the disabled to participate in meetings that are virtual. Jennifer added that women who have child care responsibilities at home, busy professionals, and people who live far from meeting sites have all benefited from the ability to attend meetings virtually. In general, the ability to attend meetings virtually might promote greater participation by the public

With regard to the safety aspect, there have been two breakthrough cases of COVID in vaccinated people reported by the Board of Health, and booster shots may be necessitated by the fall. Janie Dretler, who is a Select Board member, mentioned having been able to attend a state-wide hearing on June 2 despite being a fulltime working mother. Carmine expressed "guarded optimism" that the legislature would pass the extension of the emergency provisions on Friday, so that notices could get out in time to enable virtual meetings by June 15.

Report by Jennifer Roberts on Town affairs: Jennifer noted the success of the town in getting through the warrant for Town Meeting on an extremely hot May 22, and in a timely fashion. All the articles passed, including funds for the Rte. 20 fire station addition, upgrades to Feeley Field, and repair of the Marlboro Road culvert.

The Select Board continues to review its financial policies, incorporating input it has received from the Division of Local Services. They may also get feedback from FinCom.

The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commission was to have its second meeting the day after this meeting. They are looking at how to identify and raise awareness on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in Town and how Town policies can be enhanced to address them.

Lisa Kouchakdjian stated that members of town committees are experiencing anxiety about finding appropriate, safe places to have in-person or hybrid meetings, with adequate ventilation and wiring, given the short notice they received from the Town Manager regarding the decision to switch from fully remote to in-person or hybrid. She herself had been scrambling to find a place to hold an LS SEPAC meeting in person. Janie Dretler said that the Town Manager is charged with coordinating the committees, and suggested Lisa reach out to him.

Presentation by Melinda Walker of Raise Up Massachusetts: Raise Up Massachusetts is a coalition of labor, faith and community organizations working to improve economic and social justice in Massachusetts. In addition to her role in this organization, Ms. Walker is also a member of the Lexington Housing Authority, Lexington Town Meeting and a nonprofit, Metrowest Community Development. In that latter capacity she has worked with Sudbury's Liz Rust on the issue of affordable housing.

Ms. Walker explained that the Fair Share amendment won't be on the ballot until November 2022, but that meanwhile, many organizations are working together to see that the amendment is passed by the voters and becomes law. These organizations include DTCs from Lexington, Waltham, Arlington, Billerica, Bedford and Burlington. A recent poll showed that 72% of Massachusetts voters favor the amendment, which if passed will facilitate such goals

as making public colleges and universities affordable, repairing roads and bridges, and improving public transportation. The amount of the additional tax on income over one million dollars would be adjusted each year to reflect cost of living increases. She cited the increase in the wealth of the country's richest citizens during the Pandemic, while less fortunate groups struggled. She asked the SDTC to join these other supporters to endorse the work of Raise Up Massachusetts in bringing about passage of the Fair Share Amendment. Lisa Kouchakdjian made a motion that we endorse and support the Fair Share Amendment, which received a second. During the discussion Hank Sorett expressed his objection to the bill on the grounds that it would drive successful entrepreneurs and their businesses out of the state. Several other members of the committee, including Carmine Gentile, John Riordan and Carl Offner, presented statistics to counter this argument. The motion passed overwhelmingly.

New Business: Sue Rushfirth presented a first draft of an anti-Asian Hate Statement, which was based on a similar statement created by the Domestic Violence Task Force. She recognized that it needed editing to make the examples it cited more generally applicable to various Asian and Pacific Island communities and to both men and women in those communities. Carmine gave a brief argument in support, noting that anti-Asian bias goes very far back in American history, at least as far back as the nineteenth century and the building of the transcontinental railroads. Carl moved that "we accept the intent of this statement" with the expectation that it will be brought back with "tweaks." Hank suggested that it be submitted to members of the Asian-American community. Sue replied that her version had, in fact, been read by members of three separate Asian-American subgroups. The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:28 pm.

Peg Espinola, Secretary