

Crosstown Coalition - Minutes of meeting of delegates - January 29, 2024

The meeting was held on Monday, January 29, 2024, beginning around 6:05 PM at the Northern Liberties Community Center, 700 N. 3rd Street.

Jeff Hornstein of Northern Liberties Neighbors Association welcomed delegates to the NLNA office..

Eugene Destayanik, President of Crosstown Coalition, and **David Haas**, Treasurer, thanked NLNA for the space and the dinner trays, welcomed new members and other attendees, and called the meeting to order.

Speakers from the City of Philadelphia's Department of Commerce discussed the Department's efforts to attract and retain businesses in the city, and fielded questions about the Department's activities. The first speaker, newly appointed **Commerce Director Alba Martinez**, described the Commerce Department in the context of the new mayoral administration. She stressed the intention to make the Department as accessible as possible to local businesses in need of City permits and licenses and other support. Citing the quality of the public school system in the City as a drag on competitiveness, she suggested that initiatives in "lifelong learning" would be forthcoming to help improve the workforce's skills and attract business. Several Crosstown members' questions took a very critical view of the customer-service performance of the Department, and asked Martinez to act to improve it. She vowed that such issues would be addressed, and advised delegates of the existence of a procedure for escalating complaints. Other questions related to whether the Department could do anything to help nonprofit organizations (as distinct from businesses), including some large, active civic associations belonging to Crosstown that perform some of the functions of a Business Improvement District. Martinez indicated that some Department programming was available for groups such as those. Several delegates advised Martinez and other Commerce speakers of what appeared to be a common issue in Crosstown members' neighborhoods, namely, the problem of vacant storefronts on the first floor of CMX-style buildings. Martinez referred to the need to "leverage the ecosystem" in a given neighborhood to attract businesses, a reference to Community Development Corporations and other localized business-development organizations with which the Department seeks to work. The Department, she said, could not neglect neighborhoods "other than the primary ones" in its efforts to attract business.

Denis Murphy, Martinez's deputy in the Commerce Department, saw local organizations such as CDCs and BIDs as the "best advocates" for business in neighborhoods. As for the Department, its role in business promotion was that of "matchmaker" between people who wanted to open businesses and neighborhoods with vacant spaces. Acknowledging that the city's permitting processes were often criticized for their difficulty and slowness, Murphy indicated that the new mayor had made dealing with these known issues a priority under the rubric of the banner of a slogan, PHL Open for Business.

Another Commerce Department speaker, **Sam Woods Thomas**, serves as Senior Advisor for Business Attraction, and discussed some Department programs designed to incentivize businesses to locate in the city. He discussed efforts to build a 24-hour economy and the travels of Night Time Economy Director Raheem Manning throughout the city during the past year to hear what residents in various neighborhoods wanted locally. He also engaged in discussion with some delegates who had pointed to

the sometimes conflicting needs of nighttime businesses, other businesses operating during different hours along the same commercial corridors, and local residents. Woods-Thomas presented the details of a program designed to offer tax incentives to businesses for hiring Philadelphia residents on terms that offered specific above-minimum wages. Along with Murphy, he also described the rollout of a commercial corridor street-cleaning program that he suggested that the mayor might wish to extend throughout the city.

The Commerce Department's **Michelle Price** referred to a problem also alluded to by other speakers, public safety, and described the Department's program to offer security cameras to local businesses. In certain parts of the city identified by the Department, it will reimburse a business for 100% of the cost of installing cameras. In other areas, it will reimburse 75% of the cost. Price noted that some other local entities such as CDCs operate programs in parallel with the Department's. One questioner asked about whether sophisticated types of cameras, such as those that could read license plates, would be available through the Department's program. Price did not rule it out, and indicated that there was a request for proposals in the offing for a contract for such cameras. Referring to the problem of first-floor CMX vacant spaces, another questioner asked if the Department receives much outreach from owners of such buildings about it. Price did not think so, but noted that the Department had resources that might help, and pointed to local alternatives such as CDCs and BIDs. Price agreed with another questioner about the need for the City to make payments for contracted work in a timely fashion, and noted that payment within 30 days is the goal. Several questioners wondered whether the Department was gathering or making use of data, particularly with respect to the commercial corridors it served. The point was made that such data, presented appropriately, could be useful to businesses in deciding where to locate and to RCOs in addressing zoning appeals where a promoter appears to be advancing a project with low chances of success. Price and the other Commerce speakers did not seem to think that data was being collected or used in the manner being suggested, but agreed it could be useful to do so, and pointed to other potential sources of such data like CDCs and BIDs.

The Commerce Department speakers concluded their presentation, and Eugene introduced **Cassie Tomkins** of Visit Philadelphia. Noting that Visit Philadelphia is the region's official tourist marketing agency, she distinguished it from other agencies like the Convention and Visitors Bureau. Tomkins described an important part of her work as pitching stories about the Philadelphia region and its tourist attractions to journalists to get them to produce favorable coverage. Lonely Planet, which produces tourist literature, recently gave the city such coverage by listing it as a top place to visit this year. Visit also Philadelphia produces advertisements to attract people in other markets to come to Philadelphia. Tomkins noted that "drive markets," i.e., those within a day's ride by vehicle, are a particular focus, and that her organization is currently focusing ads on the Washington, D.C., market. Tomkins took questions about Visit Philadelphia's role in getting tourists to visit neighborhoods of the city that they have typically bypassed, whether Visit Philadelphia might do something to get tourists to use public transit to reach those neighborhoods, changing Visit Philadelphia's website to provide maps that show the location of neighborhoods in the context of the city and region as a whole in order to give tourists a better idea of where they're going. She responded that Visit Philadelphia had programs in place to try to get people to venture out from the most heavily visited areas around Center City, including some a few specific neighborhood pilot programs. She thought getting them to use public transit was a good idea, but both she and the delegates expressed skepticism about the ease of a tourist's using Septa. Tomkins hesitated to

express unqualified support for changing maps because of sensitivity about Visit Philadelphia being seen to steer tourists to a particular place as opposed to others. A delegate suggested that Visit Philadelphia set up a central location for venues to post concert and theater events. Tompkins concluded with a discussion of 2026, when World Cup matches, the Major League Baseball All-Star Game, the first two rounds of the NCAA Men's Basketball tournament, and the Semiquincentennial of the United States.

Lance Haver, a longtime journalist in various Philadelphia media, spoke about his current work as Co-Founder and Reporter for Hall Monitor, a publication that reports on the activities of the City government. Haver explained that Hall Monitor is intended to fill a gap in reporting about the activities of the City government and its impact on City residents. "We'd love to tell your story," he said. Haver indicated that he is open to receiving tips from RCOs, noting that issues like SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) lawsuits, community benefits agreements gone wrong, misguided changes to Septa routes, and other similar stories were examples of possible issues Hall Monitor could explore. A large majority of delegates present took Haver's business cards.

After these guest speakers had concluded, Eugene introduced delegate **Steve Huntington**, chair of Crosstown Coalition's SLAPP Committee, who primarily discussed the status of anti-SLAPP legislation pending in the state legislature. Huntington expressed dissatisfaction with the city's State Senate delegation's response (or failure to respond) to a letter dated October 30, 2023, that he had authored that was cosigned by 30 or more RCOs urging the Senators to seek an amendment to the legislation to provide for compensatory damages for increased insurance premiums likely to be incurred by insured RCOs following the dismissal of a SLAPP suit against them. He noted that only Senator Saval's office ultimately responded to him, and only after being urged to do so by Democratic ward leaders in the First Senate District. Steve urged Crosstown delegates and members of their civics to exert what influence they could on ward leaders, who he characterized as better able to influence the actions of elected officials. He noted that he had a call scheduled the following week with Representative Ryan Bizarro, a legislator from outside the Philadelphia area who has led efforts in the House on behalf of anti-SLAPP legislation. If it isn't possible to persuade Bizarro to amend his legislation to include language about insurance premium-related compensatory damages, Steve hopes to find out from Bizarro what obstacles he believes exist to such an amendment. Steve also discussed the subject of conversations he and a few other delegates initiated with the Building Industry Association, a group representing developer interests, regarding changes to City laws and regulations governing RCOs. Steve mentioned but did not describe a document embodying different RCO rules that had been drawn up when Gary Jastrab headed the Planning Commission around 2015 as a possible example of the rules he would like to see adopted. Steve opined that RCO rules needed revision to impose stricter rules on RCOs, and further, that it would be appropriate and beneficial to work directly with the Building Industry Association on a project of urging the City to adopt such stricter rules. Steve noted that he had scheduled further conversations with representatives of the Building Industry Association about this subject. No specific proposal was discussed, and no vote was taken.

In relation to City-level legislation of interest to RCOs, **Eugene Desyatnik** mentioned briefly three city-level RCO bills, including one that may require RCOs to adjust their bylaws provisions governing who is eligible to serve on the RCO board that is effective immediately (240020). Another pending bill would allow Council to appeal ZBA decisions, likely with support from and at the request of RCO's. Eugene

planned for Crosstown to discuss and gather information regarding whether any civic has availed itself of provisions made in bills 230982 (for legal defense and indemnification funds for RCOs) or 220417 (ZBA appeal funds for RCO's).

Suzanne Ponsen asked delegates to follow the work of the Save the Train Coalition, which is advocating for funding for Septa to continue service on the Chestnut Hill West and other Septa lines.

The meeting adjourned around 8:10 PM.

Chris Bordelon, Somerton Civic Association
Secretary