

**Community Board 12, Manhattan
Business Development Committee**

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, September 1, 2020

Attended:

Domingo Estevez, Chair
Tanya Bonner, Asst. Chair
Nobles Crawford
Mariela Graham
Juan Guzman
Francisco Lopez
Cindy Matos
Paradise Phoenix
Christina Richiez

Absent:

Miriam James
Ashley Fernandez

Public Member Attended:

Rafael Fernandez

Other Board Members Attended:

Jonathan Frometa
Isidro Medina

Elected Officials (or Representatives) in Attendance:

Chris Nickell, Senator Robert Jackson's Office

Invited Speakers in Attendance:

Susana Osorio, Owner, Mama Sushi

The meeting was called to order at 7:10 p.m. with quorum.

1. Chair Estevez opened the meeting with a welcome to new Committee members Paradise Phoenix, Juan Guzman, Mariela Graham, and Miriam James, whose appointments to the Committee by CB12M Board Chair Eleazar Bueno were officially announced on August 21, 2020.
2. Estevez opened the meeting with acknowledgement of a hectic summer, and recapping the work the Committee did before the start of the summer in regard to COVID-related webinars and other outreach for small businesses on accessing available resources. Due to his hectic/complicated summer, Estevez said he did not call any Committee meetings in July and August. He also announced that he was invited to a meeting about the Tower Hotel that is being built at 181st Street and Amsterdam Avenue. He feels it is important that the Committee understands the CBAs – especially with huge developments coming into the community – and the negotiations done with elected officials and with other Community Board committees. He asked Ebenezer to provide him with the CBA done on this project with the Land Use Committee in order to have an understanding of promises made to the community.
3. Bonner requested an addition to the Community Business portion of the meeting to discuss the type of businesses being brought in to speak on their experiences as small business owners in the community. This item was added to the "Collaborations" part of the agenda. A presentation

by Sisters Bookstore was removed from the agenda, as there was a miscommunication between Bonner and Estevez on which meeting they would attend.

4. Estevez requested a motion to approve the agenda. The motion was made by Cindy Matos, and seconded by Nobles Crawford.
5. Estevez moved up the “Committee Business” part of the agenda, as the invited speakers on the agenda were not yet on the call. Bonner was invited to discuss her thoughts on invited speakers from the business community. She stated she just wants to ensure that the businesses invited to speak before the Committee represent the full diversity of the small business community. She feels it is important to have represented a diversity of voices from businesses owners of different races and ethnicities. She stated she has spoken to a number of businesses about challenges they are facing in the community, and she asked that the Committee think about the wide diversity in the community when it considers what businesses are invited in to speak about their experience. Estevez emphasized that the entire Committee is responsible for contributing to diversity, and he said that it may have been that these were the only individuals who reached out this time around. He said he just wanted this meeting to be a temperature check, and, so, kept the agenda short. Crawford said he wasn’t completely sure of the process of putting businesses on the agenda, but he said he is 100 percent behind the Committee doing its own outreach if those who reach out to the community to present to the Committee are limited in terms of that diversity.

Mariela Graham asked about collaboration and encouraging collaboration amongst businesses, where businesses could be mentors and resources to others. She said business collaboration is one of her main interests in being on the Committee. Estevez talked about the pandemic preventing the planned procurement fair that would have contributed to this collaboration. He also noted the Committee was going to have summer youth do a canvassing event to put together a business database. The Committee also added a “partnerships” section to the regular agenda. He also emphasized that Matos and Rafael Fernandez both work in banks (TD and Apple banks, respectively). Estevez said the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to everything. But he feels now the Committee can begin to readjust and plan the vision and strategy for the future. Bonner mentioned the Committee was also going to honor 12 women small business owners in the community, and had already created the invitations. She said it was disappointing to not be able to do that, but hopes to revisit that in the future. Crawford noted that the Committee had two successful small business sessions related to COVID-19. Crawford appreciated the flexible nature of meeting the needs of the community versus coming in with a set agenda every time. Estevez stated that the Committee has at least 200 emails from previous COVID-related webinars hosted by the Committee that can be tapped into for future outreach. He also stated that the Committee may consider holding a town hall about the impact of winter on outdoor dining and business survival.

6. Susana Osorio, who owns several businesses on Dyckman Avenue in Inwood, joined the call. Estevez introduced her and stated that she reached out to him about individuals who have been harassing her and her business. Estevez invited her to speak about that issue. He also said the City has a mediation system between businesses and community members, and they were going to see how that process can help alleviate the situation.

Susana described the harassment she feels she has suffered from others – and not just the State Liquor Authority (SLA). Said her business has been following the rules and closing on time, but there are people who are not a part of the community who have complained about her businesses on social media, accusing her businesses of not following city rules. She said she closes on time, cleans the streets and collects the garbage daily. She said those harassing her have even tagged the Mayor and other city agencies on social media with complaints about the business. She said she wants the harassment to stop, as it is having an emotional impact and that she is scared for the survival of her business. She said she sends a video to Isidro Medina (who heads the WaHi BID) daily to show what time she closes and how they clean the streets.

Estevez noted that the rules are unclear for businesses, and that support and education for businesses around city regulations is lacking. He also said the Governor has a lot of pressure on him to crack down, which results in the SLA being more aggressive.

Bonner asked Susana if she can identify the parties harassing her and what has been the nature of the complaints. Susana explained that the harassment is coming from a Twitter page called “Inwood (keeping it for real)” (actual page name is: “InwoodKTH (keeping them honest).” Susana said she doesn’t have a Twitter page, but she has tried to reach out to the party on Twitter, including direct-messaging them on Twitter to see what they can do to resolve it. But she said the party has not been interested. She says the SLA comes to her establishments several times a day, and they have never been cited. Bonner asked if she feels she is paying the price for what others may be doing on Dyckman Avenue – guilt by association. Susana said she had a breakdown the previous week from the harassment. Says anything that happens nearby – including 207th and 10th Avenue - is blamed on Dyckman Avenue. She said an SLA inspector told her that Dyckman has a bad reputation, but that she is doing good. She feels that other people are not doing what they are supposed to be doing.

Medina says restaurants work really hard to make dreams come true, and it is ugly that the enforcement has not been proportionate. He stated he has seen the harassment that Susana has endured, including a video where a man goes around Dyckman kicking the fences and arguing with the clientele. He feels their agenda is to ensure people don’t patronize the businesses anymore, and he feels they don’t want the businesses to prosper. He also said that the businesses that are following the rules are the ones most targeted by the SLA. He said four businesses in Inwood had their licenses taken away for serious violation, but that others were doing even worse did not have the same fate. He wonders why those businesses haven’t had their licenses taken away as well. He also said businesses have issues due to noise levels not associated with the businesses. He gave an example of dirt bikes making noise that is reported to the police as a “shoot out” coming from the businesses. He said people end up calling 311, blaming the restaurants for noise not associated with them. He said people should be cognizant about these issues. He said there should be enforcement on the dirt bikes when it is requested. Estevez said this is why it is important for the Licensing and Business Development committees to work together, including on issues such as what he describes as the “weaponization of 311,” and the lack of guidance/support from city agencies for small businesses on compliance. He emphasized the need for a town hall on the future of small businesses/restaurants during COVID, saying this is life or death for some businesses that will not survive the winter.

Graham wanted more clarity on the grievances about the businesses, and what have been the repercussions of the tagging of the Mayor and city agencies on Twitter. Susana stated that

things others are doing are being blamed on her business. She said they complain about everything. But it is just harassment by a few people and not by a bunch of people. Estevez said there is a lot of bad urban planning, noting Spain that has street closures to accommodate restaurants. Susana said she is part of the economy of this country, and shutting her down will not accomplish anything and will only put many people out of work.

Crawford thanked Susana for her courage in telling her story. He noted he works in digital media, running marketing for Lysol, Airwick and others. He said people tagging her is harassment, but he advised her that the elected officials being tagged are probably not noticing those tweets, unless the Twitter account has a lot of followers. He also suggested she will be okay as long as she has her evidence of her doing the right thing, and responding with tweets showing video that she is doing the right thing. He asked Medina if there has been an issue of targeting of local businesses by enforcement agencies. Isidro said the NYPD has not been aggressive with enforcement, and he appreciates their giving local businesses a break. But he said this is very different with the SLA, which has been more aggressive with violations – including tens of thousands of dollars in fines for not wearing a mask, even as their own inspectors don't wear masks. Crawford wanted to know if they target specific places. Isidro said they go where complaints are being received, but they are also going based on previous issues at establishments. Medina said SLA emphasizes that most of it is random. Crawford said he thinks Susana is doing the right thing in how she is responding to the issue.

Richiez noted she has celebrated some key moments in her life at Susana's businesses. She asked if there was any other harassment happening other than the social media posts. Susana said when she covered her businesses with wood during the height of the pandemic, kids painted beautiful murals on them. She wanted to preserve them by putting them across the street at the park. But she said the Parks person she spoke to was "hysterical," saying she can't put the murals there. She said the attacks started from there. She said everyone knows the woman from the Parks Department that she spoke to. Susana said her harassers would put up flyers everywhere in the borough with accusations that if people get killed, they are to blame her and her business. Estevez said the Committee's role can be to help mediate and facilitate working together as a community to resolve the issues. Susana said whatever happens after 11 p.m. is for the NYPD to deal with and enforce, and it is not the fault of her business.

Bonner wanted to ask a follow-up question to Susana, and questioned going against Board procedure of taking attendee questions before Board member questions. Bonner also said that aside from Board member questions first being procedure, she thinks it is important that Board members are able to ask questions while the relevant parties are in still in attendance. Estevez made the decision to call on the attendee who had her hand raised first. When the attendee was called on, that attendee yielded her time to Bonner to ask her follow-up question. Bonner expressed that those making problems outside of businesses need to be addressed and more enforcement needs to be done around that, as it is unfair for businesses following the rules to suffer as a result of others' actions. Estevez asked her what her recommendation is to address it. Bonner said she had proposed a Task Force on noise pollution at the Community Board's Health and Environment Committee's Public Hearing on noise pollution. She said the Task Force would bring all the stakeholders together to address the issue and come up with solutions. She welcomed Susana to be a part of that Task Force. Estevez took issue with Bonner describing the people causing the business owner problems as "bad players" and "knuckleheads," feeling the language was dehumanizing to those people causing the issues for the businesses.

Estevez promised a continued partnership in helping Susana address the problems.

7. Medina spoke about the BID's community partnership efforts with the Committee. He stated the BID worked on distributing face coverings and other educational information. He wants the digital divide to be addressed. He said this has caused a lot of problems for the merchants. Though all of the information available can help many, Medina feels there needs to be feet on ground so information can be spread equally in the community to all the merchants. Medina also discussed an issue some merchants expressed about the Hispanic Federation's handling of \$10 million in COVID-related grants to Northern Manhattan businesses that was administered in partnership with New York Presbyterian. Business owners were concerned about the lack of transparency about who received the grant and how much, Medina said. Medina said he has been told they cannot distribute the list. From the BID perspective, he is concerned his merchants have not been properly awarded this grant. Estevez said since the hospital gave the grant and Rep. Adriano Espaillat (NY-13) just helped to promote it, the hospital should be addressed about the issue. Medina also stated that the Chamber of Commerce should have received more information, and the Community Board should have been involved in the grant effort.
8. Elisette Caballero, owner of Eyes Open Optical, was not able to attend the meeting to speak about the issue with the Hispanic Federation grant. Follow-up will be made with her.
9. Medina also discussed the BID's concerns about a proposed busway at 181st – similar to the one that runs along 14th Street. He said the BID wants to make sure if this will happen, that boots will be on the ground to see how this will impact Northern Manhattan – from loss of parking spots to safety concerns such as access for fire trucks. He said a meeting is taking place on busway the coming Thursday, and he feels the Committee should be invited to that meeting. There is a potential significant of the busway when coupled with nearby school traffic, the pending Tower Hotel and other numerous places that will be opening up in that area over the next year. He said DOT must make an assessment of this before the implementation of this busway. Estevez said he will get the meeting information from the Board Chair and email that to the other Committee members.
10. Bonner offered a new business item of addressing open restaurants once winter hit. She was also interested in the Committee analyzing how COVID has impacted the area's already high vacancy rate. How many businesses did the area lose and what will be the impact of that on the community? Bonner mentioned that CLOTH had done a pre-pandemic business vacancy, and the area then had a vacancy rate higher than all of Manhattan. Medina said the BID conducted its own survey. He said they have lost four businesses within the BID among the 250 businesses within the BID, including one restaurant that employed about 100 people. He also noted Broadway has a problem with vacancies throughout Manhattan. He said the vacancy rate within the BID was low (8.7%), and that Dyckman's vacancy rate pre-COVID was about 13 percent. He announced that the City announced further studies will be done on Dyckman Avenue in Inwood that will provide further information on vacancies in Inwood.
11. Estevez aims for a town hall in October. He feels that City should find ways to replace income loss if businesses can't be open during winter months. He also noted that the community is paying for resources that should be brought to the community.

12. Estevez asked for a motion to adjourn. Motion was made by Crawford and seconded by Matos.

13. The meeting adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

Minutes prepared by Tanya Bonner