



NEEDHAM PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION



Board of Health Meeting Minutes

Date: December 8, 2023

Location: Public Service Administration Building & via Zoom

Members: Tejal K. Gandhi, MD, MPH Chair; Kathleen Ward Brown, ScD, Member; Robert A. Partridge, MD, MPH, Member; Edward Cosgrove, PhD, Member

Staff Present: Timothy Muir McDonald, Director of Health, and Human Services; Tara Gurge, Assistant Director of Public Health; Tiffany (Zike) Benoit, Assistant Director of Public Health; Sainath Palani; Kristin Scoble; Michael Lethin; Natascha Nussbaum; Samantha Menard; Julie McCarthy; Taleb Abdelrahim; Ginnie Chacon-Lopez; Carol Read; Lydia Cunningham; Kerry Dunnell; Lynn Schoeff.

Welcome & Public Comment Period

Dr. Gandhi called the meeting to order at 9:00AM and initiated a roll call. Present were Dr. Gandhi – Y, Dr. Cosgrove – Y, Dr. Brown – Y, Dr. Partridge – Y.

According to Chapter 107 of the Acts of 2022, as an act relative to extending certain states of emergency accommodations, as passed by the General Court, and signed into law by Acting Governor Karyn Polito, on July 16 2022, revised Section 20 of Chapter 20, the Acts of 2021. In so doing, provided modifications to the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law, which allow for flexibility to hold remote only, and hybrid meetings, while preserving public access and, where appropriate, public participation. Currently, that additional flexibility will expire on March 31, 2025, unless additional legislative action occurs. As part of today's hybrid meeting, all votes will occur via a roll call.

In response to a question from Joe Andruzzi, Mr. McDonald stated that there is no plan by the Board to discuss 1688 Central Avenue at this time. Mr. Andruzzi stated that he would contact staff to see if this item could be placed on a future agenda.

The Board thanked Michael Lethin for his time with the Town, as he moves onto a new position.

Public Hearing: Biosafety Regulation Changes

The Board opened the public hearing at 9:10am.

Ms. McCarthy discussed areas of proposed change to Biosafety Regulation, based on feedback from the first Needham Biosafety Committee meeting, first review of a Biosafety Permit application, and the November 17th Board of Health meeting.

There was no public comment at this time.

Upon motion duly made by Dr. Cosgrove, and seconded by Dr. Partridge, it was voted to approve the Biosafety Regulation. Motion passed: Dr. Gandhi – Y, Dr. Cosgrove – Y, Dr. Brown – A, Dr. Partridge – Y.

Community Health Assessment

Julie McCarthy presented some data from the Community Health Assessment (CHA). The CHA, which is required for accreditation, identifies key health needs in Needham through comprehensive data collection and analysis. Ms. McCarthy highlighted some limitations to the CHA, including missing data on the 18-59 population. Ms. McCarthy explained that the data shows that 85% of housing in Needham is owner-occupied and renters are more cost-burdened than are owners. This is not unique to Needham. Data from the last Housing Authority Assessment showed that many residents were not familiar with some existing transportation options. Needham adults reported binge drinking at higher rates than Massachusetts and the United States. There is not much data on chronic conditions, but data shows that these do not vary by census tract. Staff have identified the following priority areas specific to Needham: access to transportation resources, cost of living burden, mental health and substance use, and physical health. These items will be addressed via the upcoming Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP).

In response to a question from Dr. Brown, Ms. McCarthy stated that she believes the data likely underrepresents the prevalence of heart disease.

Ms. McCarthy stated that there could be a potential future project to dig deeper into the causes of death.

Dr. Partridge asked if people are unfamiliar with transportation and food options in Needham simply because they do not have a need. Ms. McCarthy stated that this is unclear. It is likely that some of the people reporting could use these services and were previously unaware. Staff and the organizations are reconsidering how these sources could be promoted.

Dr. Gandhi asked about support resources for single mothers with children under the age of 18. Ms. Benoit stated that Public Health and Youth & Family Services assist residents with the application for SNAP benefits. Ms. Benoit also noted that many of the requests for fuel assistance that the Public Health Division receives are from single mothers, so we are able to assist them in that way.

Rice Barn Restaurant Request to Reopen

Ms. Gurge stated that the owner of the Rice Barn, Charles Intha, submitted a letter to the Public Health Division requesting the re-opening of his restaurant. Staff will review with the Board the latest updates on the food permit plan review for this food establishment, including the latest updates on the status of the outstanding items noted by the Building Department inspectors. One of the conditions of the food permit approval for reopening this establishment was that all items noted by the Building Department, specifically those items noted during the March 6, 2023,

inspection, needed to be fully addressed and signed off. A follow-up joint inspection was conducted by representatives of the Building Department and Health Division on Wednesday, November 29th.

Mr. Palani stated that the owner has yet to hire a plumber but has found an electrician, who has done considerable work on the property. All electrical concerns have been addressed.

Joe Prondak, Building Commissioner, stated that the primary concerns from the report seem to be electrical and plumbing. The electrical work has been completed and signed off on. The owner has not yet been able to reach agreement with a plumber regarding the necessary work.

Mr. Palani reviewed the plumbing items which need to be addressed.

Mr. Intha stated that his business has been closed for one year and seven months and has used that time to fix all items of concern. His savings are running low, and he is struggling to find funding to fix the plumbing issues. This area could benefit from his business reopening. He asked the Board for permission to reopen at this time.

Mr. McDonald stated that there are no provisions in the Health Code or Building Code that would allow the Board to waive these provisions. The Board would like the business to succeed, but the restaurant cannot be allowed to open prior to these items being fixed in order to make the money needed to fix the items. The owner likely needs to decide if the money is available to make the necessary items meet code, in order to apply for a permit. The Board cannot allow the business to open prior to meeting the requirements.

Mr. Intha requested leniency at this time. As cold weather is coming, without being to open at this time, the building may freeze. Mr. McDonald stated that Staff and the Board want to encourage and support small businesses, but there is no mechanism to allow for leniency in these requirements. Dr. Gandhi agreed that the Board must follow the Health Code and is not able to offer flexibility on these items.

Mr. Prondak noted that the list of issues has been available for quite some time. Once the owner has decided on a plumber, staff are willing to continue to work with him through the process. Mr. Intha stated that he has been at this location for ten years and has not received inspections for plumbing previously. He stated that he will try to fix the problem and thus deserves leniency. Mr. McDonald stated that compliance must come prior to opening. The Board cannot grant a permit to a building that does not meet the Health Code.

Dr. Brown explained that the restaurant had multiple food code violations which triggered years of work and effort by staff, causing the business to eventually close. This reset the regulatory process on the restaurant. It was noted that the plumbing items have been identified since March.

Mr. Palani said that he made it clear to the owner that the Department cannot grant variances for health concerns.

The Board agreed that there was no mechanism to grant leniency at this time.

Code of Conduct

The Board reviewed an updated draft of the Code of Conduct that has been adapted from the Needham Select Board Code of Conduct Policy.

Upon motion duly made by Dr. Cosgrove, and seconded by Dr. Brown, it was voted to approve the Code of Conduct. Motion passed: Dr. Gandhi – Y, Dr. Cosgrove – Y, Dr. Brown – Y, Dr. Partridge – Y.

Public Comment Policy

The Board reviewed the draft Public Comment Policy.

Upon motion duly made by Dr. Cosgrove, and seconded by Dr. Brown, it was voted to approve the Public Comment Policy as discussed and amended. Motion passed: Dr. Gandhi – Y, Dr. Cosgrove – Y, Dr. Brown – Y, Dr. Partridge – Y.

Budget Discussion

Mr. McDonald reviewed a number of positions that were previously funded using ARPA money. There are still many mental health related concerns that can be addressed using these positions. There was discussion regarding how to support these positions to the Finance Committee. The Board agreed to hold a pre-hearing meeting with members of the Finance Committee to have this discussion.

Staff Updates

Traveling Meals

Ms. Gurge stated that there were no 911 calls initiated this month. The five-year average was added to the report, as requested.

Environmental Health

Ms. Gurge explained that the pilot for the Food Safety Excellence Program started the week of November 1st. The scores for grading were added to the Food Code Pro food establishment inspection software and now show up on inspection reports. Staff has started to educate food establishment owners and managers on the grading system and review with them how the grading works at the conclusion of inspections. Fines will be added next. The intention is to gather feedback from food establishments throughout the six-month pilot program. These feedback reports will be shared with the Board once available.

Mr. Palani stated that the Board recently held a hearing with Speedway due to a recent Tobacco Compliance Check. At the hearing, the Board voted to suspend the Tobacco permit for seven consecutive days, and to issue a \$300.00 fine. The week-long suspension took place during the week of December 1-8.

Mr. McDonald noted that there have been some housing complaints regarding Housing Authority properties. The Housing Authority plans to move forward to try to get additional funding and bonding authority to renovate the property.

Substance Use Prevention MassCALL3 grant

Ms. Cunningham stated that the strategic plan has been completed and updates will be shared with the Board shortly.

Natascha Nussbaum, Youth Engagement Intern, presented information regarding the PhotoVoice project. It was noted that the project would be promoted via SALSA students as well.

Emergency Management

Mr. Lethin explained that the intention is that there will be a fully grant funded exercise sometime next spring or summer to reevaluate the Emergency Operations Center to determine how effective improvements have been. The exercise will be funded using both the Hazardous Materials Emergency Preparedness Grant, which has been approved by MEMA, and the Emergency Management Performance Grant, the application for which is still in process.

Emergency Preparedness

Mr. Abdelrahim explained that a comprehensive survey has commenced for the 2023 MRC training program to assess volunteer training experience, satisfaction levels, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement. Staff also continue to work toward accreditation goals.

Epidemiology

Ms. McCarthy highlighted vaccination data for COVID-19, flu, and RSV.

Substance Use Prevention

Ms. Shannon explained that a new SPAN Policy Action Team for policy work will be formed. The SPAN Positive Community Norms Campaign involved 12 SALSA students canvassing the Needham community to distribute 72 copies of a Positive Community Norms poster to schools and community organizations. The poster promotes the message that most Needham High School students do not use electronic vapor products. Also, On October 30th, the Needham Special Town Meeting approved the use of a portion of Needham 's Opioid Settlement Funds to fund a peer recovery coach in the Needham Public Health Division. Planning is underway for drafting procedures for providing recovery coach services to the Needham community.

Shared Services

Ms. Menard explained that Needham hosted regional training hub has a new name - North Central & Metro West Field Training Hub. This name reflects the geographic area of the 39 municipalities we serve. Field Training Hub staff led the creation of a monthly meeting for staff from all ten Massachusetts field training hubs. The first meeting was held on November 27, 2023. Second round interviews for the Regional Trainer position were held on December 4, 2023.

Accreditation Team

Ms. Schoeff explained that the Public Health Accreditation Board has recommended the Division submit an application by December 16, 2023. Once accepted, there will be 12 months to submit all documentation.

Nursing

Ms. Chacon-Lopez stated that they are almost out of the purchased COVID-19 vaccine stock. All flu vaccine stock has been administered.

Other Items

- **Public Health Strategic Plan Update**

Ms. Benoit stated that the final meeting for this will take place Tuesday to finalize the plan. This will be presented to the Board in February.

There was discussion regarding staffing.

Upcoming BOH Meetings

- **Friday, January 12th from 9:00 – 11:00 a.m.**

Adjournment

Upon motion duly made by Dr. Cosgrove, and seconded by Dr. Partridge, it was voted to adjourn the meeting Motion passed: Dr. Gandhi – Y, Dr. Cosgrove – Y, Dr. Brown – Y, Dr. Partridge – Y.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:48AM.

Attachment:

December 8, 2023 meeting packet