

Presentation to Concord Business Partnership – September 4, 2024

Mimi Graney, Economic Vitality Manager, Town of Concord

Good morning, everyone. It's been 16 months since I joined the Concord community, and I continue to be inspired by the level of engagement from our residents and business owners. Concord is a town with a rich history, a vibrant present, and a future full of potential.

But to realize that potential, especially in terms of economic vitality, requires more than isolated efforts—it requires alignment of purpose. My role as a municipal staffer is to ensure that the perspectives of our business community are recognized across town departments and the needs of businesses are integrated into local policy conversations. Today, I'm going to walk you through what I've been working on, some of the successes we've seen, and where we're headed next. By the end, I hope you'll feel as confident as I do about the direction we're going.

My first priority coming into town was to listen and learn. Towards that end I've gotten to know business and property owners, participated in countless committee meetings, read reports and dug into spreadsheets. I've walked around every inch of the commercial parts of town.

One of my first tasks was to gather comprehensive baseline data to document and better understand the present state of Concord's business environment. My business inventory and analysis showed that despite the challenges of recent years, including the impact of COVID-19, Concord has maintained impressively low vacancy rates, even in sectors like office space that have struggled elsewhere. This resilience speaks volumes about our local economy's strength and our business community's engagement.

This year we're seeing positive trends in revitalizing long-vacant spaces. There's new businesses coming in like Bandoleros and redevelopment is underway at high-profile sites at the Papa Razzi site. Thanks to new, community-focused owners, long-time operators of beloved businesses like the Cheese Shop can retire, assured that the essence and character of their businesses will carry on.

My approach has been guided by Envision Concord. That comprehensive plan, adopted back in 2018, laid out my four goals.

- One: to renew and improve Concord's village centers as vital pedestrian-friendly, economic, and social hubs that enable community engagement on a wider scale.
- Two: to deepen understanding of the business environment in Concord.
- Three: to foster a business-friendly community
- Four: Build local civic and government capacity for economic development

To meet those goals, my strategy is asset-based and multi-dimensional, always asking: ‘Are we moving the needle?’

I’m taking an incremental approach – remembering the adage “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

I’m selecting initiatives that benefit both residents and visitors as those two bases contribute to the success of local businesses. Direct tourism spending accounts for 33% of Concord’s total annual sales of commodities, which translates into over \$36M a year.

This asset-based lens is clearest in three areas I’m currently focused on.

Arts and culture are powerful drivers of economic vitality. The sector in Massachusetts ranks a close second behind retail generating \$27.2 billion in the state each year. This dovetails with tourism spending that is another key sector for Concord with visitors generating \$24.2 billion in the state each year. The arts attract visitors, provide jobs, and enhance the quality of life for our residents. The arts contribute to a strong sense of place and local identity, offer mental and emotional well-being benefits, and beautify our public spaces. These multi-dimensional benefits go beyond what’s immediately visible and are integral to fostering a vibrant, welcoming, and economically resilient community.

Alongside the ongoing work of Beth Williams, Concord’s Tourism Manager, I’m building capacity within the town’s two Cultural Districts, entities tasked with boosting economic vitality through the arts. Over the past year I’ve bolstered organizational structures to better coordinate siloed efforts, created new procedures such as for Public Art and Food Trucks to activate public spaces, and supported members of town committees with administrative tools to effectively execute grant-funded, town-sponsored projects. The results are out on the streets, from the Poetry Phone and Signal Box paintings in West Concord completed this summer to the installation of Liz Helfer’s artist benches and series of events happening in Concord Center later this month.

The aged 65+ population in Concord is 22% and growing. 58% of consumer spending in Massachusetts is by households age 50+. Seniors are top travelers to Concord and are more likely to stay longer and spend more. At the same time, businesses in Concord’s historic properties can be challenged to make themselves more accessible to people with mobility challenges. The Age-Friendly Business Initiative aims to make our districts more accessible for older residents and visitors, supporting businesses and sharing best practices. Already this program is gaining some traction as the documented need for age-friendly seating secured a state grant to install new benches in and around Concord Center.

I’m also looking at Concord’s open space as a town asset and driver of local character. Out of Concord’s roughly 16,000 acres, more than 6,000 acres— roughly 40%—are designated as permanently protected open space. At first glance this might seem counter to my task of

advancing commercial activity. Fact is, just over 1500 acres, roughly 10% of the total land area of town, are dedicated to agricultural enterprises. I'm just wrapping up a 30-plus page report looking at Concord's farming sector to better understand the needs and opportunities for this sector. The town has a major role to play here when we recognize that Concord's farmers primarily lease or license the land they cultivate, with the Town of Concord as the primary holder of these agreements.

On a slower roll that has gained a boost with some recent ARPA funding, in partnership with the Health Division, over the coming months we'll be executing a food safety initiative. We're using the opportunity of events surrounding the 250th to boost capacity among mobile and seasonal food enterprises. The program includes training, food safety certifications and grants for equipment for restaurants operating outside their regular confines, farm stands, event spaces like social clubs and churches so that they've got the tools for 2025 and beyond.

Meanwhile, over this first year I've been building the tools I need to do this work too. I've launched a monthly email newsletter, which currently has 600 subscribers. If you're not yet receiving the newsletter please give me your business card so I can sign you up. Late last month the Economic Vitality section of the town website went live with lots of resources for businesses. The Concordma.Gov now has a button labeled "For Businesses."

This infrastructure kind of work was underway as I've assisted over 35 businesses one-on-one, helping them navigate regulations, find suitable locations, and understand Concord's business environment.

Let me share a quick story. When the construction on Commonwealth Avenue in West Concord was disrupting local businesses, I teamed up with the West Concord Business Group and Fowler Library to launch the 'Local Love' campaign. It helped boost sales during the construction mess. I made sure all the appropriate West Concord businesses had a spotlight on VisitConcord.org. Through the West Concord Junction Cultural District I played a key creating a high quality 'sizzle reel' video to promote the area. All these efforts helped boost the neighborhood during a tough time.

While we've made great strides, some challenges will require thoughtful policy changes. As a staff member, I can recommend and provide information, but real progress comes when our residents and business community step up and push for these changes.

Right now, I'm collaborating with the Economic Vitality Committee's policy team to refine proposals that tackle parking minimums, which are currently limiting the highest and best use of properties in Concord Center, Thoreau Depot, and West Concord. We're also considering some modest updates to the rules for industrial areas to better align them with the needs of today's tenants. But one of my top priorities has been addressing sewer improvement fees.

From day one, the Business Partnership identified sewer improvement fees as a critical issue. Over the past months, I've learned a lot about Concord's wastewater system, and the challenge here is clear: we're facing a capacity issue that's at a critical level—something that's been decades in the making. This limitation has meant the town has already turned away some water-intensive businesses, like a prospective brewery. Addressing Concord's sewer capacity is an urgent need to be lifted up. We risk a moratorium that could halt new sewer connections and impact our business districts.

But for most local businesses, which are relatively modest water users, the primary concern has been the sewer improvement fee when an existing property changes tenants. Here I've identified two sources of the pain. One has been getting a clear sense of anticipated costs in a timely manner. To that end I've been working to demystify the way sewer improvement fees are calculated, helping property and business owners do some quick estimates themselves. The other issue is fees out of scale for small food service operations. Regulations set a minimum allowance of 1,000 gallons per day for any food service use, even the tiniest of uses. This gallon allowance would be similarly assessed for a 28-seat full-service restaurant. There's room here for policy changes that could make a real difference for the vitality of our business districts.

I'm confident that by continuing to work together, Concord remains a place where businesses thrive, the community flourishes, and our rich heritage is preserved for generations to come. Thank you.