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## Lenox chamber seeks \$25,000 more as COVID persists, dues drop

By Clarence Fanto, Eagle correspondent  
Feb 16, 2021



Diners sit in the outdoor space at Alta in Lenox in July. The town suspended some pre-coronavirus pandemic regulations to jump-start the expansion of al fresco dining options.

EAGLE FILE PHOTO

**LENOX** — To support its array of services, from events planning to economic development to marketing, the town's Chamber of Commerce is seeking another \$25,000 in town money in the coming fiscal year.

But, while several members of the Select Board voiced support during last week's remote meeting, others were taken aback by the request, and are seeking more information.

The town's proposed budget for the 2021-22 fiscal year that begins July 1 includes \$134,000 for economic development and advertising by the chamber to attract more visitors and potential homeowners. The goal is to sample the array of restaurants, shops and special events organized by the business group, especially during the "shoulder seasons" outside the summer. The current allocation is \$109,000.

In their own words ...

Additional comments during last Wednesday's Select Board meeting on the Chamber of Commerce's efforts to promote the town:

"The town of Lenox gives an awful lot to the chamber, instead of just writing a check. We do an awful lot for tourism, for getting people into town. We tried to make the town as nice as we could make it so people would come here, we partnered with the chamber, and you have to do your job now. I think we ought to work together at it."

— Selectman Edward Lane

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“Building a beautiful and welcoming town is the core of it, but it has to also be marketed; you have to let people know what’s here to come and to understand what we have in town, to have people see this not just as a vacation spot, but as a potential spot to move to and set roots here. That’s what brings in the money so we can continue to keep the town looking beautiful.”

– Jennifer Nacht, Lenox Chamber of Commerce executive director

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“Since we have such a great school system and such a beautiful town, we want to be the one people choose to live in. Some of this misses the point of selling the town as the place to live in the Berkshires.”

– Neal Maxymillian, Select Board chairman

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“There is a real community-building aspect to the work the chamber does that’s valuable not only to residents, but the town as a whole.”

– Kristine Cass, resident and Finance Committee member

Source: Town of Lenox Select Board meeting of Feb. 10, via [ctsbtv.org](http://ctsbtv.org)

At the meeting, Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jennifer Nacht listed the organization’s achievements during 2020 – a year dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic – in collaboration with Town Hall, the Department of Public Works, the Lenox Community Center and the Lenox Cultural District.

A key accomplishment was the creation by the town of “COVID-safe” outdoor dining areas, terraces and pavilions spread through the historic downtown business center. The town suspended some pre-pandemic regulations to jump-start the expansion of al fresco

dining options.

“We were all able to pull off some great programming that we were pretty proud of,” Nacht said. “We created a story to tell,” resulting in widespread favorable publicity for the town. The chamber uses Bullfrog + Baum, a New York City marketing agency, to help spread the word.

The business group revived a weekly farmers market on Fridays, helping to attract residents and visitors to restaurants and retailers, and staged the first in a series of Art Walks last fall, when the pandemic prevented the annual Lenox Apple Squeeze.

The organization also presented Lenox Winterland, highlighted by a holiday walk focusing on 30 small, lit trees installed around town.

“If nothing else positive could come from a pandemic, it allowed us to feature Lenox and its natural attributes – hiking, biking and taking advantage of all the outdoor attractions besides Tanglewood and the other cultural entities,” Nacht asserted. “We’ll have repeat visitors, including a lot of people from Boston and the eastern part of the state who had never been here.”

For the year ahead, an expanded spring Art Walk, featuring at least 60 artists, is planned on the first weekend of June. Nacht, who owns an ice cream shop, The Scoop, has been the chamber’s part-time, 20-hour-a-week executive director for the past 18 months.

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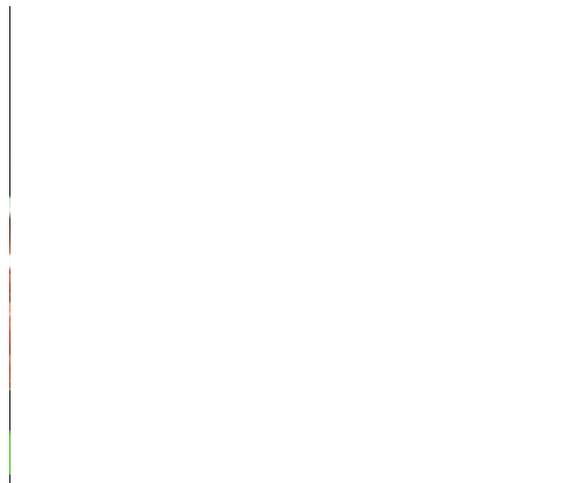
“I think the events you’ve had have been quite successful, given what we’ve been dealing with for nearly a year,” Select Board Chairman Neal Maxymillian told her. He described her future plans as positive ideas.

Board member Marybeth Mitts stated that “our chamber is the envy of the county.”

Other business groups have sought tips on how to replicate the success, she added, while emphasizing the vital work of the town’s DPW, as well as the town’s police and the Berkshire County Sheriff’s Office.

“It was a real team effort, but I give you a lot of credit for putting together a great program,” Mitts told Nacht in support of the funding-increase proposal. “I don’t think they’re asking for the moon, they’ve justified their request very well. Things are happening at a higher level, more intensely than they have in the last several years.”

Explaining the proposed \$25,000 increase in the town’s contribution to the chamber, Nacht cited the need for support staff in connection with the new spring Art Walk, a four-week expansion of the farmers market beginning in early May for a 22-week run, a reprise of the fall Art Walk on Sept. 18-19, and the Lenox Winterland, augmented by a Main Street lighting installation inspired by The Mount’s “Nightwood Sound and Light Experience” and “Winterlights at Naumkeag” in Stockbridge.



Because of the pandemic’s economic impact on local businesses, Nacht predicted a 20 percent loss in annual dues-paying members, with the current renewal level at only half of last year’s total by mid-February.

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“They just don’t have the cash flow now, so, I may see them come in later,” she pointed out, noting that several local hotel owners have delayed or canceled marketing commitments.

Nacht also noted that the chamber was \$70,000 in debt when she was appointed. That amount, stemming from actions of previous leadership, has been whittled to \$14,000, she said.

“It took awhile to gain back the trust that was lost in prior years,” she said. “But, I really feel we have momentum, I want to keep riding on that, and things are going to be better this year.”

But, Selectman Edward Lane asked for more data, details and specific plans to justify the 20 to 25 percent increase in the town’s contribution to the chamber’s budget.

“My head is spinning right now,” he said.

And Selectman David Roche said he would have appreciated more advance notice about the requested increase.

The recently created Lenox Cultural District owes much of its success to the chamber’s active efforts, said Land Use Director and Town Planner Gwen Miller. “They do so much, and every single project that the Cultural District has done, it’s really been the chamber and its staff helping to drive that.”

According to hospitality tax revenues reported by the state Department of Revenue, the town’s tourism-based economy appears to be less drastically impacted by the pandemic than expected.

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During a briefing for the Select Board last month, Chief Administrative Officer Christopher Ketchen reported a “quite remarkable” lodging tax total of \$539,000 for the October-to-December 2020 period. Combined with a previous half-million-dollar payment for July through September, that means \$1,060,000 in lodging taxes are in the Town Hall till for the first six months of the current fiscal year, more than double the total Ketchen had forecast out of an abundance of caution.

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