



Franklin Regional Council of Governments

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Committee

Date:	March 25, 2020
Time:	2:00 p.m.
Location:	Virtual Meeting via Zoom due to COVID-19 state of emergency. (Meeting ID: 640 658 461)
Duration:	1 hour, 30 minutes
Facilitator:	J. Atwood

CEDS Committee Attendees:

- MJ Adams, City of Greenfield
- Teri Anderson, MassHire Franklin Hampshire Career Center
- Marie Breheny, Greenfield Community College
- Jenna Day, RCAP Solutions
- Gary Dillensneider, FCCDC Loan Review Committee
- Tom Hutcheson, Franklin Regional Planning Board
- Clare Higgins, Community Action Pioneer Valley
- Walter Ramsey, Town of Montague
- Diana Szynal, Franklin County Chamber of Commerce
- John Waite, Franklin County Community Development Corporation (joined)

Guests:

- Dan Hodge, Hodge Economic Consulting
- Judy Raper, Greenfield Community College

FRCOG Staff:

- Linda Dunlavy, Executive Director
- Jessica Atwood, Economic Development Program Manager
- Liz Jacobson-Carroll, Administrative Services Assistant

1 – Call the meeting to order: Jessica Atwood, FRCOG

J. Atwood called the meeting to order. The meeting was held via the online Zoom application, due to the COVID-19 state of emergency preventing in-person meetings.

2 – Vote to Approve Minutes from December 8, 2020: Jessica Atwood, FRCOG

T. Hutcheson moved to approve the December 8, 2020 meeting minutes; MJ Adams seconded the motion, and the motion was approved unanimously with one abstention (Breheny).

3 – Review of the Latest Economic Recovery Programs: Jessica Atwood, FRCOG

J. Atwood summarized newly available programs and opportunities:

- MA’s Local Rapid Recovery Planning Assistance funds will enable the six Franklin County grant recipient towns (of 100+ statewide) to hire consultants to help create a downtown/village center plans (by August ’21). These include Buckland/Shelburne (FRCOG), Greenfield

(Finepoint), Montague (Hodge Economic Consulting), Northfield (BETA Group), and Sunderland (OverUnder). Baseline data is being collected, and should provide for an interesting data set.

- Current business grant programs include the Shelburne Falls Area/West County Initiative, funded by the Community Foundation of Western MA, to support businesses, non-profit organizations, artists and farmers; the second round of US SBA's PPP loans; a regional micro-enterprise assistance program; and MA Development's Commonwealth Places program
- Upcoming programs from the American Rescue Plan of 2021 include: the US SBA's Shuttered Venue Operators Grant and Restaurant Revitalization Fund; more Economic Injury Disaster Loans to small businesses in targeted industries; the expansion of the PPP to non-profits and digital news services; and a round of US EDA project funding to address job losses, including in the travel, tourism, and outdoor recreation sectors.
- State funds already awarded to Franklin County businesses, organizations and communities include:
 - \$4.7 million to 39 farms, fisheries, food banks/pantries and municipalities through the MA Food Security Infrastructure Program, many of which are facilitated with bridge loans from the Franklin County CDC.
 - \$3.8 million to 96 small businesses through MGCC Small Business and Sector-Specific Relief Programs
- The State has launched a new application portal, Community One Stop for Growth, for municipalities and other eligible entities to apply for ten different programs from planning to development; those expressing interest will receive guidance regarding which program(s) to apply for, and feedback on draft applications.

4 – Report on Franklin County Economic Recovery and Resiliency Stakeholder Survey and Interviews: Dan Hodge, Hodge Economic Consulting

D. Hodge reported on work to support the development of a Franklin County Economic Recovery and Resiliency Plan. The development of the plan is funded by a supplemental planning grant from the EDA. The purpose of Hodge's work is to enable FRCOG staff, CEDS Committee members and others to better understand the economic injury caused by the pandemic and then create a framework for use by regional partners to facilitate recovery and better prepare for future economic shocks.

The findings of his survey of regional organizations, municipal leaders and key area businesses indicate:

- The greatest impacts were felt in the need for increasing communications with stakeholders, re-working business models, closing work premises, spending on safety protocols, and upgrading technology.
- Close to half of respondents have emergency response plans, and 63% would like more information on these and Continuing Of Operation Plans (COOPs).
- Challenges included the processing of too much information/updates/changes too frequently; the difficulty in some disciplines (education, workforce training, co-working) of transitioning to remote services; and for those able to make the transition, the cost of doing so rapidly.
- Almost all participants frequently refer to Commonwealth of MA/state agency websites for related information, more than half looked to the US CDC, and many consulted national news, local newspapers, the FRCOG, and municipal governments. Respondents preferred to receive information via email, websites, and interactive webinars, in that order.

The top immediate concerns identified include:

- re-opening -- the cost and implementation of safety protocols, the timing of a return to near normal activity, Main Street vacancy rates, and consumer confidence;
- workforce challenges pertaining to childcare and remote school, difficulty in training, and lack of funding;
- questions regarding how to resume community and eco-tourism events;
- inadequate financial support from government, and low tax revenues for state and local government; and
- the uncertain timing of vaccine distribution.

Respondents identified the most needed means to recovery as state and federal funding, followed by access to childcare and housing assistance. Many also noted support for dislocated workers, small business grants, ‘buy local’ campaigns, and broadband internet access. They pinpointed four areas of strategic action to improve economic resiliency: more support for local businesses; an enhanced safety net for workers; more clarity regarding emergency response leadership and communications; and an improved technology landscape (internet access, on-line platforms, digital/media literacy).

Many respondents expressed uncertainty regarding how to address diversity, equity and inclusion; others called for new regional dialogue and leadership responses, work towards a living wage/income-enhancement, and more support for housing and childcare. There was a suggestion for a single point of contact to identify needs, then receive and distribute funds, in order to provide fast and targeted relief.

While most private businesses said they were unable to partner with others to respond to future economic shocks and crises, a broader pool of organizations said yes – and offered ideas for initiatives consistent with their current programming.

Hodge described his findings from follow up in-depth interviews conducted with twelve regional and municipal leaders. They indicate that the most significant impacts and challenges relate to:

- the uncertainty regarding how/when near-normal operations can be resumed;
- transitioning to remote work/meetings for internal to organization staff, with boards and commissions, and with the public;
- the loss of jobs and childcare, and lack of transport for low-wage earners; and
- the increase in requests for help from small businesses, workers, and those in need of social services and in understanding and applying for available funding programs.

These leaders indicated that most organizations were able to make the transition to remote work and other revised business models, that regional communications and program delivery has been successfully enhanced through a close-knit set of organizations. The pandemic revealed economic opportunities remain in Franklin County for manufacturing and remote workers, and with eco-tourism and outdoor adventure opportunities, especially when linked with local food and drink offerings. Further, these leaders indicated that some government funding programs are beginning to help, including an \$800,000 EDA CARES Act grant to FCCDC to facilitate loans to small/independent businesses, and a state program providing capital for farmers to build food security infrastructure for enhanced distribution, refrigeration capacity, etc.

Hodge continued that challenges and areas for improvement cited included:

- a loss of tax revenue based funding due to fewer visitors

- limited or costly internet access in some towns
- an increased need for re-employment services
- the difficulty of finding funding support for small business re-opening, and for staffing to administer programs/grants/technical assistance
- the complexity of restarting community events safely and effectively
- encouraging local consumers to avoid using Amazon and driving long distances to shop
- a need to upgrade the online presence of local businesses via regional social media efforts

Interviewees suggested opportunities and priorities for economic recovery such as:

- promoting job opportunities, especially for individuals with ‘middle skills’, and encouraging regional employers to be more flexible in their hiring;
- emphasizing new GCC initiatives that link business and community, and that support start-ups, the creative economy, and downtown Greenfield;
- Grow eco-tourism/outdoor rec. and link farm-to-table movement and farmers markets, etc.; and
- Position downtown Greenfield and other town centers to re-open, work to fill empty spaces, welcome new residents

Hodge explained that, overall, the study revealed five themes and potential strategy areas:

1. Coordinating regional communications and information sharing through key leaders and designated organizations: FCC and FCCDC for small business support; FRCOG for public health; CAPV for social services, MassHire for workforce support and development, for example. To this point, L. Dunlavy spoke of the need for significant work before the next major emergency, and C. Higgins stressed the importance of establishing a hierarchy of needs.
2. Promoting the ‘buy local’ concept – supporting independent businesses to re-claim consumer spending from Amazon, and encouraging anchor institutions (UMass, BayState) to contract with nearby businesses.
3. Furthering access to child care, transit, and housing in the long and short terms, including promoting existing resources and advocating for more funding across the state.
4. Supporting near-term economic recovery by assisting small business in re-starting, and by helping dislocated workers into quality jobs.
5. Expanding broadband internet access (and cell service) and digital media literacy, as there is recognition of still-unserved pockets of residents, affordability issues, and an increasing attractiveness of the region to potential residents and businesses.

For next steps, Hodge recommended; sharing the survey and interview findings more broadly to leverage stakeholder interest in reviving and expanding the Franklin Regional Economic Development Initiative; determining which themes/strategy areas should be the focus of projects in the Resiliency and Recovery Plan; and with other MA regional planning agencies, determining which ideas warrant pursuit/advocacy across the state.

Higgins called for big picture thinking about what we have learned from a pandemic (which prevented close contact) that exposed cracks in the transportation and childcare systems, and in our response to homelessness and other social problems. She indicated that the large sums of money soon to be available could be used for transformational one-time expenditures. She suggested addressing the disconnect between salaries and the cost of housing in the area, as well as supporting family-run childcare programs as possible areas of focus, and said that a thorough scoping of the problems is a

necessary first step. MJ Adams agreed that a full-scale response that shifts systems toward collaboration is possible.

L. Dunlavy suggested that other RPAs may identify childcare issues in their own resiliency and recovery plans, and that there may, in fact, be a statewide childcare desert ripe for attention. Hodge noted that a similar conversation was taking place in Portland, OR, and inquired rhetorically about a childcare project in Franklin County. Higgins commented on the need to press state and federal legislators to fund the administration of regional programs. T. Anderson agreed that success of new initiatives will be dependent on baseline funding for infrastructure and staffing.

5 – Brief Updates on CEDS Action Plan Projects: Jessica Atwood, FRCOG

J. Atwood reported on several CEDS Action Plan projects. FRCOG staff are finalizing a Request For Proposals (RFP) to hire a consultant to conduct an assessment of wastewater and public water systems across the county, and assess the feasibility for new systems in select areas. She also reported that works continues related to outdoor recreation on the Deerfield River. The effort will proceed on two tracks: the first to build support to secure funding to conduct a long-term plan to enhance business opportunity, preserve the natural environment and address community needs; the second to address short term concerns in advance of the summer season which will likely experience a high number of users. She noted that GCC with partner LaunchSpace submitted a grant application for EDA CARES Act funding for the Rural Innovation Center project that was not funded. However, they may use the feedback received to re-submit a subsequent application. In addition, a related element of the project will be submitted to Congressman Rep. McGovern to be considered for a federal earmark. Atwood concluded that at the next CEDS Committee meeting on May 11th, the draft 2021 CEDS Annual Performance Report will be reviewed. The final version of the report will be brought to a vote at the Committee's meeting on June 8th.

6 – Other business not reasonably anticipated 48 hours in advance, and adjourn.

Atwood thanked T. Hutcheson, who is moving to a position in Berkshire County, for his many years of service to the CEDS Committee as the representative from the Franklin Regional Planning Board.

C. Higgins made a motion to adjourn, T. Hutcheson seconded the motion, and the meeting adjourned at 3:30 pm.

Respectfully submitted by:

Gary Dillensneider, Chair