

Economic Recovery Branch – Lee County Recovery Task Force

Meeting Minutes

3:00 PM – 4:30 PM | JUNE 15, 2023 | COLLABORATORY | 2031 JACKSON STREET, SUITE 100, FORT MYERS, FL 33901 | PUBLIC MEETING

Call to Order

At 3:00 PM on June 15, 2023, Chad Criswell and Dominic Cameratta, Branch Co-Leads, convened the Economic Recovery Branch meeting. The following members were present:

- Chad Criswell, Co-lead
- Dominic Cameratta
- Shane Spring
- Jim Magnus
- Rob Wells
- Bill Johnson, Jr.
- Jay Johnson
- John Lai
- Ben Spence
- Ben Seigel
- Steven Weathers

Facilitator and Branch Support:

- Jon Romine, Collaboratory
- Robbie Heere, Hagerty Consulting
- Ilani Fernandes, Hagerty Consulting

Introductions

Jon Romine provided a review of the work of the Recovery Task Force (RTF) and its Branches. Mr. Romine reviewed the timeline for the RTF, emphasizing the move into Phase Two of the Recovery and Resilience Plan (the Plan).

He noted the purpose of the meeting:

- Review workshop sessions and key outcomes;
- Review and validate potential Initiatives; and
- Discuss what Initiatives require a Technical Brief.

Recovery Task Force (RTF) Updates

Mr. Romine reviewed the work of the Recovery Task Force in the last meeting. He shared an update on discussions from the RTF on Community Master Plans, Community Engagement, and the Project Intake Form.

Workshop Feedback

Mr. Romine provided an overview of the Workshops and Initiatives that were identified in those sessions. He summarized the key solutions identified in the Workshops specific to economic recovery.

Initiatives Feedback

Mr. Romine provided an example of an Initiative, the Projects that support it, and the method to understand the documents prepared by the Branch.

Mr. Cameratta suggested that access to natural resources and having commercial use as well as public access for people to enjoy those areas is important in the future growth of the area. Mr. Romine empowered the Branch to make recommendations across Branches that support economic recovery or those Initiatives to validate the ideas.

Mr. Seigel stated that tourism is the bread and butter of the region and encouraged the Branch to consider ways to support the business community and its diversification. Mr. Romine asked the Branch for solutions to leverage the knowledge base that we have and the growth sectors for more opportunities that can keep people in Southwest Florida.

Mr. Seigel stated that it will require a pathway for economic growth and development with investment in their business community.

Mr. Wells stated that the goal is to recruit businesses as a supporting effort to the Visitor & Convention Bureau. If someone travels to the area and an executive decides to move to Lee County, businesses and tourism-based businesses could do some in-kind work to continue to grow the area and target high-level businesses to move locally. Mr. Wells suggested building a strategy to grow sectors by leveraging the tourism industry.

Mr. Johnson suggested a business incubator for small businesses and a space for businesses to share knowledge and grow that knowledge. Mr. Weathers stated that in other areas, there is a mechanism to connect capital entrepreneurs and technology ideas to get people together with the idea of starting businesses. There is a need for a way for entrepreneurs, ideas, and money to come together. Currently, there is no formal venture investment fund or a mechanism for that to happen.

Mr. Romine summarized this as an opportunity to formalize what already exists to support the entrepreneurial ecosystem. He suggested the Horizon Council serve as the leader for this initiative.

Mr. Magnus recommended the Infrastructure Branch look into hardening communication infrastructure, to ensure that businesses can survive and reopen within the critical five-day period. Members stated that having small businesses wait for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or Small Business Administration (SBA) loans puts a strain on businesses post-disaster. Therefore, it is key to get funds to flow into businesses, which can include having a streamlining process with the SBA. Mr. Weathers noted the submission of a project for a short-term disaster loan fund for small businesses.

Mr. Johnson supported the need for stabilization and suggested creating a position for a County-wide grant writer to help small businesses.

Mr. Criswell stated he was developing an incentive package to attract people and businesses to Lee County.

Mr. Weathers stated that San Diego had challenges getting people to move there and tried to get people to move historically by targeting individuals.

John Talmage, Director of Economic Development for Lee County, was recognized to provide information. Mr. Talmage stated that Lee County cannot keep up with our industrial space and there is a less than 1% vacancy space and not enough workers.

Mr. Romine stated that sectors for economic growth are being identified in the Education & Workforce Branch. The next step could be incentivization, but the workforce is the limiting factor. There could be a rethinking of the regional economic development strategy in the future.

Branch Technical Briefs

Mr. Romine explained the development of Technical Briefs, Branch Action Plans, and Initiatives in the development of the Plan.

Questions and Next Steps

The next Branch meeting is scheduled for July 13, 2023, from 3:00 PM to 4:30 PM.

Public Comment

John Talmage stated that growth in Lee County has been phenomenal, and the area is exponentially growing every day. The area has seen a substantial second and seasonal home residents; there are thousands of homes being purchased and people moving here each day. He stated that growth is coming, but there should be a focus on supporting the existing business community. The challenge is to keep up the workforce with the incentive challenge.

Betsy Haesemeyer reflected on the Workshops the previous week, specifically about the conversation on Resilience Hubs and stated that they should be linked. She stated that nonprofit agencies should be utilized and should be provided technical expertise so they can be linked together. A lot of services that nonprofits provide could be able to help businesses in need.

Jon Gustafson stated that he did not hear enough emphasis on recruiting companies to the region. Growing internet and communications are a foundation for companies to succeed. He stated that the business sector is seeing a lot of growth in industries, and there should be a way to rework the supply chain for those industries.

Jacquelyn McMiller noted the issue of transportation with the population growth in the area and asked the Branch to consider transportation for the workforce.

Concluding Remarks and Adjournment

Mr. Romine thanked the members for attending and then adjourned the meeting at 4:26 PM.