

Economic Recovery Branch – Lee County Recovery Task Force

Meeting Minutes

3:00 PM – 4:30 PM | SEPTEMBER 21, 2023 | COLLABORATORY | 2031 JACKSON STREET,
SUITE 100, FORT MYERS, FL 33901 | PUBLIC MEETING

Call to Order

At 3:00 PM on September 21, 2023, Chad Criswell, Branch Co-Lead, convened the Economic Recovery Branch meeting. The following members were present:

- Chad Criswell, Co-lead
- Dominic Cameratta, Co-lead
- Shane Spring
- Jim Magnus
- Jonathan Gabel
- Frank Bonafilia
- Bill Johnson, Jr.
- Ben Siegel
- Rob Wells
- Jay Johnson
- Steven Weathers
- Ben Spence
- Kevin Barbot

County Liaison:

- John Talmage
- Katie Welton
- Tatum Walker

Facilitator and Branch Support:

- Tessa LeSage, Collaboratory
- Robbie Heere, Hagerty Consulting

- Tracey Phillips, Hagerty Consulting
- Harrison Newton, Hagerty Consulting

Introductions

Ms. LeSage provided an update of the work of the Recovery Task Force and the Recovery and Resiliency Plan (Plan) development process.

Overview of Recent Recovery Task Force Efforts

Ms. Phillips reviewed the process for members and stakeholders to provide feedback on the Initiatives. Ms. LeSage provided a summary of the One-on-One meetings with the Recovery Task Force Members and their leadership teams. Mr. Johnson asked if the Recovery Task Force Members who represent unincorporated Lee County were involved as civic associations and questioned how their participation is represented in the Community Development Block Grant- Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) Action Plan. The Support Team explained that the Recovery and Resiliency Plan and the CDBG-DR Action Plan are two different efforts working concurrently.

Branch Initiative Feedback Summary

Ms. LeSage introduced the Initiative feedback summary. Mr. Heere introduced the Initiative, ER01: Affordable Insurance Rates. Mr. Newton described Lee County's (County) feedback. Mr. Talmage provided additional information on the Economic Development Office (EDO) program to assist 250 businesses with SBA loans and provide technical assistance. Mr. Talmage provided examples of how the EDO funded these grants to strengthen the business community. Members discussed the intent of the insurance Initiative focused on affordability. Members suggested lobbying for affordable insurance at the state and federal level to address the issue. Ms. Phillips provided information on the structure of the Plan and its potential implementation. Members discussed the difficulty for insurability and potential for areas to focus lobbying efforts, including mitigating risk and tort reform.

The ResilientLee Support Team (Support Team) introduced the Initiative ER02: Business Resiliency and the feedback summary. Mr. Newton described the County's feedback related to business resiliency and disaster preparedness. Mr. Talmage provided historical information on disasters and economic recovery for businesses. Ms. Phillips brought up resilience hubs and the connection between Initiative ER02 and another draft Initiative about establishing a resilient hub pilot program; she suggested these Initiatives address

both recovery and resilience. Mr. Spring suggested that businesses should be able to call the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to share information or needs. The EDO managed a small business helpline during COVID-19 but were unable to continue that service during Hurricane Ian due to lack of space at the 211 Center. To assist businesses during activation, The 211 Center would share messages with the EDO, who would then work with the municipalities to distribute. During the spring, the EDO will be providing tours of the EOC for businesses and for community members to understand the function of the EOC and resilience efforts.

The Support Team introduced the Initiative, ER03: Mixed-Use Zoning & Facilities. Mr. Newton described the County's feedback on mixed-use approaches. Mr. Talmage provided context and described the difficulty of historical challenges to developing vertical mixed-use. Mr. Talmage stated that there are opportunities for horizontal and other mixed uses in Cape Coral, Midtown, Downtown, Gateway, and Skyway. He said that there may not be mixed-use opportunities on Sanibel or in low density communities like Fort Myers. Members agreed that the topic is more closely related to the Planning & Capacity Branch when considered with the lens of housing and economic benefits.

The Support Team introduced the Initiative ER04: Technological Advancements and the feedback summary. Mr. Newton provided information on additional conversations with the County feedback. Ms. Phillips discussed issues related to power and connectivity that affect businesses during a disaster.

The Support Team introduced the Initiative ER05: Improved Transportation Systems and the feedback summary. Mr. Siegel stated that the airport is currently updating its master plan. Mr. Talmage stated that the EDO is beginning to talk with companies about future transportation solutions in the region. Mr. Seigel stated that the expansion of the airport will occur in the 2040s and should be considered in the Plan. Ms. LeSage described that economic recovery is often intertwined with other Branch initiatives and the Plan will describe themes across different topics. Members agreed that mention of rail and taxi transportation options should be incorporated in this Initiative.

The Support Team introduced the Initiative, ER06: Disaster Focus Loan Funding and the feedback summary. Mr. Newton reviewed the County's feedback. Mr. Talmage stated that the Federal Reserve and Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) are interested in piloting a program for banks to spend down capital reserve to expedite equity loans during a disaster. Members discussed challenges to business preparedness in the times of a disaster. Mr. Talmage stated that EDO has multiple grant programs. Members discussed barriers to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) loan process. Mr. Barbot stated that big businesses on the island are waiting to reopen as there are very few tourists

currently on the island. Members discussed the challenges to reopen as there are complex issues across insurance, tourism, and economic recovery.

The Support Team introduced the Initiative ER07: Diversifying the Economy and the feedback summary. Mr. Talmage described that healthcare and advanced manufacturing are two growing sectors in the County, but that challenges of workforce, education, and housing remain. Members discussed the growth of the area's economy and the rise in salaries. Members agreed that this Initiative remains an economic recovery topic to address the workforce and economic challenges, but that education topics would be co-sponsored by the Education & Workforce Branch.

The Support Team introduced the Initiative ER08: Increase Public Access to Natural Resources. Members discussed issues related to access to natural resources and the economic importance of sustainable access. Mr. Spring suggested that the Plan consider funding for infrastructure and housing to help solve related issues. The natural resource access challenges require additional infrastructure to be built to meet the demand as the area grows. Mr. Talmage stated that there are opportunities to protect natural resources and co-develop. Members suggested that this perspective should be included throughout the Initiative to emphasize that value can be created through access to natural areas and conservation.

The Support Team introduced the Initiative ER09: Education & Workforce Pipeline and feedback summary. Mr. Newton described the County feedback. Members discussed the connection between job needs and education programs in the County.

Initiative Consolidation

Ms. LeSage introduced the Initiative consolidation recommendations for the Economic Recovery Branch.

Questions and Next Steps

Members reviewed next steps including that they will be notified of the next Branch meeting schedule. Members reflected on the process to take action to recover from Hurricane Ian as the community approaches the one-year post-disaster anniversary. The Support Team provided context of long-term recovery planning and emphasized the importance of not missing opportunities during recovery and rebuilding.

Public Comment

Jacquelyn McMiller commented that there was nothing mentioned about car insurance and that directly after the hurricane, both housing costs and transportation costs increased. She stated that businesses need to recover but questioned how businesses will keep going if workers' transportation issues are not addressed. In addition to the increase in car insurance rates, the impacts on housing including for rentals also negatively impact employees being able to make it to work.

Amy Turner, with the Sally J. Pimentel Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center, stated that these Initiatives for broadband and communications should address challenges for the deaf community. Ms. Turner said that The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center is the only center providing services for the deaf community between here and Tampa. She commented that interpreters should be considered in when communicating information during a disaster. For individuals who are deaf, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center was providing sign language interpretation and communication for that community. She commented that there are deaf individuals who need to receive information about disaster events. She suggested that deaf individuals could receive outreach for emergency notices and requested that the County consider providing resources to this community.

Jessica Turner, with the Regional Housing Coalition, stated that they are doing a regional housing study for surrounding counties to predict where people will be living and doing business in the future.

Chase Pizaris Henderson stated that the Economic Recovery Center offered help and thanked Branch members for their efforts to promote growth in this area after a disaster.

Kristin Stubbs supported the number of technological advances and companies that have moved to Southwest Florida. She stated that beaches cannot be the only thing that defines the area and attracts businesses to the area. She supported using technology as a way to attract businesses and diversify the economy.

Concluding Remarks and Adjournment

Ms. LeSage thanked the members for attending and then adjourned the meeting at 4:41 PM.