

Economic Recovery Branch – Lee County Recovery Task Force

Meeting Minutes

3:00 – 4:30 PM | APRIL 13, 2023 | COLLABORATORY | 2031 JACKSON STREET, SUITE 100,
FORT MYERS, FL 33901 | PUBLIC MEETING

Call to Order

At 3:02 PM on April 13th, 2023, the Economic Recovery Branch meeting convened with the following members present:

- Chad Criswell, Co-Lead
- Shane Spring
- Jay Johnson
- Ben Spence
- John Lai
- Rob Wells
- Tim Abbott
- Robert Galloway

Facilitators and Branch Support:

- Terry Mazany, Collaboratory
- Tessa LeSage, Collaboratory
- Harrison Newton, Hagerty Consulting
- Robbie Heere, Hagerty Consulting

Introductions

Branch members introduced themselves. Tessa LeSage, the Branch facilitator, began the presentation.

Recovery Task Force (RTF) Updates and Problem-Solving Process

Ms. LeSage provided a review of the RTF and Branches in the recovery and resilience planning process and provided a review of the unmet needs committee and the separate group. Robert Heere provided a review of the work of the RTF since the last meeting, including the community engagement plan priorities and information regarding the Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program.

Ms. LeSage outlined the work of this meeting and provided a review of the problem-solving process in identifying solutions and recommendations for the Recovery & Resilience (R&R) planning process.

Research and Data Presentation and Discussion

Harrison Newton presented the key challenges and findings for the four Branch identified priorities regarding Economic Recovery and reviewed the experience to gain a shared understanding of solutions to explore in the process of creating recommendations.

Priority 1 Key Challenges and Key Findings

Mr. Newton presented the key challenges and findings of the first priority: Identify partnerships and incentives supporting the workforce, such as affordable housing near jobs.

The following was discussed by the Branch members:

- Incentive needs for landowners and developers were discussed.
 - Local incentives already exist.
- The recent legislative changes allowing developers to invest and for the workforce were discussed.
- Modeled a smart growth plan without reinventing the wheel. Examples included Tampa or large cities like Ocala.
- Research is needed on how to change building and zoning codes to change the housing need. Will need to look at codes, insurance, and affinity-building systems.
- There is a need for housing to be close to jobs. There is an interest in having planning and zoning rules to make recommendations for this. It would be helpful to understand underutilized spaces and where they are located.
 - Look at the Senate Bill 102 and the National Association of Realtors.
- A solution is needed for proximate transportation.
 - Transit deserts with large populations are an unlocked potential of the workforce.

- Public lands for Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) that could be used for housing with developers with restrictions on rent.
- Suggestion to identify areas where it is difficult to hire employees. Is transportation a factor?
 - Suggestion for a job density map.
- Suggestion for creative solutions to revamp transit.
 - First mile, last mile.
 - Hertz and Via are resources for this.
 - Building extra lanes for useful transit solutions.
 - Solving bus route issues.
 - Source independent contractors to drive vehicles for car-pooling of people.
 - Jersey City transit app.
 - Van pooling through Lee Tran.
 - People only pay for the gas and the lease to utilize these vans for pooling. The resort industry uses this to move workers out. Transportation system fixes would eliminate this service.
- Interest to know where the greatest number of open positions in the county are and what gaps exist.
 - Lee health is the answer.
- Branch members thought about how to keep millennials around in the county.
- Livability will affect these areas. Live, work, play environment.
- Branch members discussed what cultural resources would attract people and the younger generations to this area for growth.
- There is an interest in messaging that people that do not have the county to get credentialed or do not need to have a college degree to be successful.
 - Cape Coral has a lot of technical pathways to keep people here.
- Suggestion to have Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) from:
 - Live Local Act
 - FutureMakers Coalition
 - Representatives from municipalities to discuss zoning and codes

Priority 2 Key Challenges and Key Findings

Mr. Newton presented the key challenges and findings of the second priority: Identify short-term actions that support the rapid recovery of businesses, including access to financing and marketing the tourism-based economy. Mr. Newton discussed some poor economic conditions and key metrics for recovery.

The following was discussed by the Branch members:

- There have been issues with Small Business Administration (SBA) loan payments. People have had liens placed on their properties and then levels are being lowered. The US Chamber is writing a letter from Sanibel/ Captiva and Cape Coral on this issue.
- It is important to have legislators that understand the need for marketing in this area.
 - Further discussion was that even if Sanibel and Fort Myers Beach areas are marketed, what businesses will survive?
 - Visit Florida is in danger of losing funding.
- Difficulty with marketing for the entire area and figuring out the path forward with tourism.
 - There is a marketing plan through the Visitor and Convention Bureau (VCB) that is providing stages for where we are now in reopening tourism.
- County tax collection is down about 50%, but Estero and tour areas are doing well.
 - 30% of beds are down or offline.
- The permitting process is still going slowly and this needs to be sped up to start the tourism industry back up.

Priority 3 Key Findings and Challenges

Mr. Newton presented the key challenges and findings of the third priority: Rebuilding more public access to natural resources. Mr. Newton discussed the economic impact of tourism with closures from the storm.

The following was discussed by the Branch members:

- Suggest identifying the areas that the public could access now.
- Branch members discussed how to get the public access to resources. Potential to look at the 20/20 Conservation Plan for Lee County.
- Members noted that the riverfront and waterfront options are expanding.

Priority 4 Key Findings and Challenges

Mr. Newton presented the key challenges and findings of the fourth priority: Prioritize industry-sector growth to build a resilient economy. Mr. Newton discussed the priorities and research available.

The following was discussed by the Branch members:

- The status of economic development in Lee County.
- Suggestion to identify needs for the shrimping industry and fleet.
- Suggestion to expand the medical lab service in midtown.
- There is an interest to know more about the status of tourism in Fort Myers Beach.

- There is an interest to learn about the levels of homesteaded communities lowering in the panhandle.
 - Fort Myers Beach will change drastically.
- Branch members discussed how to keep tourism here and grow tourism, but not at all costs.
- Suggestion to having recreational fishing guides and ways to thrive in the economy.

Next Steps

The schedule of meetings was shared with the Branch members with the acknowledgment that meeting invites will be sent soon. The Branch members were also informed about the upcoming 16 Town Hall events.

Discussion and Questions

There was no further discussion or questions.

Public Comment

Jonathan Gabel commented on how to incentive developers to want to put them into the community. He spoke about a 5-story attainable housing option that was an assisted living facility for those tenants. He also commented on incentives for the attainable housing concept and the potential to get developers to build properties in the dense areas where businesses already exist. He also questions if students and workforce graduates are staying in the area.

Tracy McMillion thanked the Branch from the Fort Myers community and spoke about key points as fire chief. The common trends are that they can't afford to live here, can't save for down payments, and other pieces such as people not wanting to cut their own grass. What we hear is that they can't afford to live here. There is an interest in more activities and locations within the community.

Betsy Haesemeyer asked that in other communities how long have their recoveries lasted? Having a disaster workforce and help with grant writing should be a priority.

Concluding Remarks and Adjournment

Mr. Criswell  thanked the members for attending and then adjourned the meeting at 4:30 PM.