



## APPROVED Minutes

April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 at 1:00 pm | Web Conference

### Members Attending

Rudy Marconi .....	Town of Ridgefield - Absent
Jim Marpe .....	Town of Westport
PJ Prunty .....	Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce - Absent
Brian Griffin .....	Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce - Absent
Robert E. Mallozzi .....	Bankwell Financial Group, Inc - Absent
Jackie Lightfield .....	Norwalk 2.0
Tracey Alston .....	Eversource
Sean Loughran .....	Western CT University - Absent
Terrence Cheng .....	UConn- Stamford - Absent
Andrea Rynn .....	Western CT Health Network - Absent
Tom Long .....	The WorkPlace - Absent
Hal Kurfehs .....	Coldwell Banker Commercial
Lisa Scails .....	Cultural Alliance of Western Connecticut
Betsy Paynter .....	CityCenter Danbury
Mendi Blue-Paca .....	Fairfield County Community Foundation - Absent
Lisa Mercurio .....	Business Council of Fairfield County - Absent

### Others Attending

Sarah Harris of Westport and WestCOG staff members; Francis Pickering and Mike Towle

### Meeting Call to Order

### Public Participation

No public comment provided.

### Approval of 1/9/2020 Meeting Minutes

A motion made by Hal Kurfehs of Coldwell Banker Commercial and seconded by Lisa Scails of Cultural Alliance of Western Connecticut. The 1/9/2020 Minutes were unanimously approved.

*For language assistance or other accommodations, contact Western Connecticut Council of Governments at least five business days prior to the meeting at [help@westcog.org](mailto:help@westcog.org). Para asistencia con el idioma y otras adaptaciones, por favor póngase en contacto con WestCOG por lo menos cinco días hábiles antes de la reunión al [help@westcog.org](mailto:help@westcog.org). Para obter assistência língua ou outras acomodações, entre em contato com WestCOG pelo menos cinco dias úteis antes da reunião em [help@westcog.org](mailto:help@westcog.org). Pour obtenir de l'aide linguistique ou d'autres mesures d'adaptation, contactez WestCOG au moins cinq jours ouvrables avant la réunion à [help@westcog.org](mailto:help@westcog.org).*

## COVID-19 Economic Response & Recovery Discussion

Each WCEDD member presented their current Economic Situation and recommended solutions in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Mike Towle explained the purpose of this meeting is to develop an potential solutions that the COG can pursue to allow for economic recovery.

A set of discussion items were used to facilitate discussion:

1. *What sectors are doing well? What sectors are not doing well?*
2. *Where are people losing jobs or hours? Where is there a need for more people or hours?*
3. *What information do we need to understand these questions and develop solutions?*
4. *What can we do to help?*
  - a. *Financial*
  - b. *Non-financial*

### Hal Kurfehs - Commercial Real Estate.

- Commercial Real Estate is slow, due to a few reasons.
  - Applications for real estate are either not able to be approved or slow as town departments are limiting business operations.
  - Financial Institutions are slow responding to the high level of uncertainty.
  - Limited communication with customers.
- **Recommends** a rapid and early lift to turn the economy back on.
  - Recognizes the economic interests are in direct conflict with public health interests. Public Health has control of the situation justifiably so.
  - Wants to have a plan to get the economic side back in action when the directive to turn the economy back on is made.

### Observations:

- Hotels used to have 80% occupancy now a little over 20%
- Restaurants are not functioning.
- Many small businesses will go under (hospitality, lodging, etc.) if we do not get things started going again
- People need to feel comfortable going out again. There will be a lag for people getting used to going back out.
- Online shopping is picking up, and this will have impact in future, accelerating the trend from bricks and mortar retail to online
- Government should have an increased consideration on businesses.
- CT has already lost many of its economic gains over the past few years.
- Businesses operating at mandatory half capacity will still struggle, they will need as much occupancy as possible to make a profit
- April is unlikely to see change in economic situation, hopes to see efforts made in May.
- No reason to think this is a recession-type situation; actual economy is strong
- Keys to get out of this quickly:
  - TESTING (get noncontagious people back to work),

- treatments – accelerate those with promise (give people confidence, economy is based on confident, more confident people are, the more growth there will be)

### Tracey Allston – Utilities

- Utilities are working fairly seamlessly.
- Only essential work is being performed right now. Some big projects have been suspended.
- Contacted by multiple nonprofits looking for assistance and Eversource has responded by making donations.
  - Their donations are targeted to small organizations that are working directly to address COVID-19 related issues.

### Betsy Paynter – City Center Downtown

- Businesses have historically been about getting people out and socializing. This message has changed in Danbury in response to COVID-19. The New logo “Downtown Strong” with banners out in downtown.
- Commercial listing and real estates are being listed.
- The City Center is concerned about its large-scale investments as stocks are declining.
- Banks are swamped with applications.
- Danbury has a Makerspace, which is being used to create needed supplies such as face shields.
- Curious as to how land-use public hearing will be performed. Jim Marpe mentioned Westport has done Zoom public hearings.
- Believes the COG or a regional economic agency could prove helpful for economic development.
- How would business networking start up again?
- Challenges for business owners where English is a second language. The existing process is already cumbersome to seek financial aid.

### Jacky Lightfield on Norwalk in General

- Restaurant industry primarily drives traffic to downtown and is struggling.
  - They have little cash on hand
  - Half of restaurants doing takeout/delivery
- Signage has been provided to business to indicate they are open and in what capacity (delivery or pickup for example).
- Helping biz in creative economy sector: 1099, freelancers, gig workers, salons, musicians, artists, photography, videography
- Lots of confusion for creative economy workers about what they qualify for (cf. with restaurant workers, who file for unemployment)
  - Not lack of information but conflicting responses to applications that they are filling out from state and federal levels, and from banks
  - Sometimes lack of response (e.g. SBA)
- Land use applications are still going through in Norwalk.
- A digital divide is being exacerbated.

- Underserved populations with lack of high-speed broadband, have reduced potential to utilize web-based solutions.
- Numerous businesses had no online presence or just a placeholder website before the outbreak (especially older businesses). Developing web-based sales may be a short term solution.
  - Older business owners may have trouble setting up web-based marketing and sales.
- Non-online based businesses often do not have internet access at work.
- **Recommended Long-term Strategy:** Place more high-speed internet infrastructure in an equitable way.
  - Track locations where infrastructure is inadequate
- **Recommend Policies** to assist with the expected fragile economy that will last for many months.
- **Policy Concept.** Review user fees – this may prevent economic recover effort, (what can be deferred or waived?)
- Consider impact on state finances of revenue reduction, e.g., in gas tax. Also applies to transit.
  - How to sustain services long-term?
  - How to have the infrastructure we need for next big event?
- **Recommended Strategy:** Collect economic data, for informed decision making.

### Lisa Scails on Non-Profit and Cultural Alliance

- The arts are negatively impacted.
  - 38k loss on average per agency.
  - 92% of all organizations have canceled all events.
  - 103 organizations have lost over two million in Fairfield county.
- A 10-million-dollar relief program to provide relief funds for artists for artists is expected.
- Art organizations like cultural alliance, are moving to zoom meetings. They are transitioning to get their programming online.
- Artists are also looking to give back to their communities. This is through classes or training for students or activities for seniors.
- Small businesses and nonprofit generate revenue online differently. Products can be tied to a monetary value easily. Services by nonprofits are artists – have increased difficulty for setting prices.
- Observation a fair amount of online networking, virtually happy hours etc.
- **Recommendation.** Collect data, it's a perfect time for it.
- **Recommendation.** Do not forget about arts for economic recovery. It is currently lumped with tourism, but the tourism side of that partnership is overshadowing the arts.
- **Recommendation.** Government aid is Limited, bridge grants and fast grants are not enough to support the arts.

### Concerns

- People may flock out when social distancing is over

- Which may cause a surge in COVID cases.
- Arts programs are triaging, advocating for organizations to apply for relief funding.
- Is business advice, which would be effective during good times, enough?
- This is unprecedented, numbers are staggering.
- Even if small businesses are empowered and functioning, are there enough people willing to spend money during the pandemic?

### Sarah Harris Westport

- Across the board business are hurting. Liqueur, grocery, and pharmacy are doing ok.
- Businesses are looking to adjust, use new ideas, and attempting to work quickly.
- Westport is providing business advice and guidance, the “Trusted Advisor Program.” Acquired thirty volunteer successful entrepreneurs to assist other businesses looking for advice. Web presence and financial advice being common themes to develop creative ways to change businesses to stay afloat.

### Other Business

Establishing WCEDD next steps. EDA is processing still. Confirming documents.

### Upcoming Meetings

Jul 9 2020, Oct 8 2020, Jan 14 2021

### Adjournment

2:00 PM