

## **NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center - Rural Planning Program Interim Report on COVID-19 Teleconference Meetings with Communities (Week of April 19, 2020)**

### **Assignment**

- Hold virtual “check in” meetings with local governments in each county.
- Ask communities about challenges and immediate and future needs for economic recovery.
- Ascertain the types information, assistance, and resources that may help fill such needs.
- Share information about a special allocation of CDBG funds for COVID-19 response.
- Convey the RPP’s commitment to partnering with and assisting communities.
- Follow up on communities’ requests for information.
- Communicate communities’ needs and challenges to the Rural Economic Development Division.

### **Meeting Numbers - Week of April 19** *(additional meetings scheduled for week of April 26)*

- **39** meetings held
- **37** counties served by meetings
- **81** local units of government & economic development organizations participated
- **87** individuals participated

### **Meeting Participants**

- City, town, and county managers, administrators, clerks, and mayors
- Other local government staff - planning directors, economic development directors, downtown program directors, and emergency management directors, among others

### **Most Significant COVID-19 Challenges and Needs** *(details on following pages)*

- **Budget Impacts/Uncertainty** - Local governments very concerned about FY 2020-2021 budgets due to uncertainty about state sales tax and other revenues, deferred utility payments, and more.
- **Broadband Access** – Existing imitations on broadband service magnified by increasing need for teleworking, virtual classrooms, online government and business transactions, etc.
- **Funding and Technical Assistance** – Infrastructure expansion and improvements; other economic recovery needs including training, equipment, and other support
- **Small Business Assistance** – Loans, grants, training, and other support to help them reopen safely and become more resilient
- **Amplification of Existing Challenges/Needs** – Including broadband (see above), ongoing hurricane recovery, limited rural healthcare services, rural/urban divide, etc.

### **Some Encouraging News**

- Generally, most local governments indicated they were doing okay (maintaining, surviving, etc.), given the circumstances, and have been figuring out how to continue to provide services.
- Some communities indicated that construction projects were progressing and there are plans for future development (residential, commercial, industrial, etc.).
- Some economic development organizations are still receiving periodic inquiries regarding potential projects.

## **CHALLENGES AND NEEDS**

Some of the most common (and some unique) conditions, challenges, and needs identified by meeting participants are summarized below.

### **Local Governments**

- Operating, many with staff working staggered hours, reduced hours, from home, etc., and having little to no in-person public contact.
- Many are trying to conduct regular business remotely, but are having issues with holding board meetings, public hearings, and other meetings, while ensuring public access, in accordance with state law. Some lack equipment, experience with the technology, broadband access, and/or other tools to conduct business and have employees work remotely.
- Some have altered services and processes, such as offering more payment options, expanding programs that feed seniors, recording public service announcements for radio, etc.
- Most are very concerned about their FY 2020-2021 for reasons including, but not limited to:
  - Uncertainty regarding revenue projections (state sales tax and other sources)
  - Late property tax payments
  - Late/deferred utility payments, suspension of late fees, etc.
  - Reduction in Powell Bill funds as gas tax receipts will be down due to less driving
  - Cuts will be made but to what extent is to be determined
- Broadband service, access, and availability issues have been magnified by situation (with teleworking, virtual classrooms, online government and business transactions, etc.) including:
  - Need for funding last mile broadband
  - Spotty service; limited Wi-Fi hotspots; and more
- Economic issues that already existed in some communities have been amplified, such as ongoing hurricane recovery efforts, limited healthcare services/facilities/infrastructure, prison closure, concerns that rural areas will be left behind in recovery (rural/urban divide), etc.
- Communication needs improvement - from federal and state government to local governments, the business community, non-profits, etc., and from local government to citizens (particularly those without access to broadband, computers, tablets, and smart phones)
- Communities more dependent on tourists and/or second homeowners expect local economies to be negatively affected. There are also concerns about the impacts of festivals, concerts, and other community events being cancelled and historic and cultural attractions being closed.
- Some need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for public safety, emergency services, and other frontline personnel. Lack of PPE and adequate testing in general of concern.
- Local food banks need more resources as supplies are running low; some communities are food deserts

### **Businesses**

- Businesses are struggling and concerned about having to remain closed or continuing to offer limited services for a longer period.
- Small businesses in many communities have been hit hard and help has been limited or difficult to obtain. Communities are concerned that many will have to close permanently.
- Self-employed people may be not be benefitting from relief programs, may be receiving mixed messages on eligibility, etc.
- Some larger industries have been more resilient and have pivoted their operations to increase production, add shifts to spread out workers, and/or to produce PPE and other needed products.

- Other industries are laying off workers and dealing with issues such their ability to continue operating as employees are diagnosed with COVID-19, supply chain problems, shortages of equipment (such as masks) etc.
- Commercial property owners that are losing revenue due to tenant businesses closing (temporarily or permanently) may need relief.
- Ensuring the safe reopening of child and adult care services as more people return to work.

## **RESOURCES AND SERVICES TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES AND NEEDS**

Some of the more frequently mentioned ideas for support suggested by meeting participants are summarized below.

### **Local Governments**

- Budgets and Other Financial Assistance
  - Guidance on state sales tax and other revenue projections
  - Advocacy (e.g. NC League of Municipalities, Rural Center, etc.)
- Public Meetings
  - Statute changes (NC General Assembly) to provide clear direction on holding open meetings with public participation remotely
  - Guidance on online meeting platforms to address technology needs and security concerns
- Funding
  - Infrastructure (e.g. broadband; water/wastewater system improvements and expansion to serve planned and proposed projects)
  - Downtown development/redevelopment support
  - Staff to help counties with COVID-19 contact tracing
  - Equipment (e.g. laptops and/or cameras) for teleworking, remote meetings, etc., and software (accounting, teleconferencing, etc.)
  - Planning (see Technical Assistance, below)
  - Resources for food banks
- Technical Assistance
  - Training/support/planning for rebuilding more resilient local economies
  - Training/assistance with recruiting businesses to replace ones that close
  - Training for elected officials/other local government officials on economic development
  - Modelling and strategic planning for emergencies of all types
  - Food supply planning/coordination
  - Seeking and administering grants. Simplify the process for securing state grant and loan opportunities less complicated and more flexible.
  - Corridor planning, economic development strategic planning, etc.
  - Project development support, including research on funding sources

### **Businesses**

- Start process to allow businesses to reopen and get people back to work
- “Hands-on” reopening assistance for local businesses
- More federal funding for business loans (and an easier/faster process with banks)
- Advocate for federal stimulus funds to go to small businesses (20 employees or less).
- State or other funding for local revolving loan funds for small businesses
- Promotions/marketing support

- Training with Small Business Centers and community colleges
- Work on supply chains, “on-shoring” so state can produce what it needs, etc.
- Support for safely reopening child and adult care services

#### **FEEDBACK ON NC MS&RP CENTER INFORMATION AND OUTREACH**

- Many are receiving the NC MS&RP Center tips and resources, finding them very helpful, and sharing them with citizens and businesses. Some suggested consolidating information with other agencies, putting the information in one location, etc.
- Many indicated the meetings were helpful and appreciated being invited and asked for input. Some were interested in participating in future meetings.