

Virtual Neighborhood Engagement Meeting
CDBG COVID-19 Recovery Funds
April 21, 2020

PARTICIPANTS

Michael Mac Mann – Moderator
Darcie Clark – Staff support
Kelley Lucero – Community Action
Nickie Davis – Downtown CID
Mark Farnen – Small business/Government relations consultant
Mary Ratliff – Columbia NAACP
Monica Miller – Teacher/NEA Political Chair
Keith McIver – Columbia College/Minority Men’s Network
Annabelle Simmons – (Joined the meeting after introductions were made.)

GENERAL MEETING MINUTES

The meeting was called to order online via Zoom at 5:30 PM, Tuesday, April 21. After a few minutes of technical connection tweaking, the meeting began. Each participant provided a brief self-introduction and Michael MacMann introduced himself as the moderator for the meeting. MacMann assigned the task of note taking to Mark Farnen.

MacMann began by informing the group that the city is poised to receive ADBG funding from the federal government in addition to their regular annual CDBG fund allotment. It is estimated that within the next 30 days the city could receive \$573,000 and possibly more in the next 60 to 90 days. Other funding streams are also in play for different segments of the government and economy including some ESG funds that could materialize. None of the money is in the bank at this point in time.

The task facing the group is to comment on potential uses for these funds and to help prioritize the allocation of funds to different specific activities or programs. Surveys of other communities have indicated that rental assistance; small business relief and short-term loans or grants; and other public services were the most frequently identified uses for such funds.

The moderator indicated that this meeting was designed to solicit input from the community in a practical and meaningful way – input that the city council and staff may not have received at this point due to the compressed time frame within which this entire situation has unfolded.

The moderator indicated that to explore this situation, he would pose three questions to the group, allow everyone to respond to each question, then follow up with general discussion of funding priorities. He hoped that the answers to the initial questions could help inform the decisions suggested by the group.

The three questions were as follows:

1. How has your experience with the current crisis exposed your deepest fears and hopes for Columbia?
2. What daily life struggles of low to moderate income households impacted with the crisis need to be lifted up to leaders the most?

3. What is your hope for Columbia's future as we work through this crisis and grow as a community?

The moderator suggested that before answering the questions, the group think about other people – their friends, neighbors, families, co-workers, etc. He suggested that hard choices will need to be made in assigning funds to any one project and that some programs use money more quickly than others. For instance, although rental assistance was a top priority in many cities, \$400,000 may only help 400 end users while some other programs may spread the funds to a wider group of people who need help. He urged the group not to make or allow our leaders to make decisions about the use of these funds in isolation. There will be more meetings on this topic in the future.

(What follows is a general recap of comments made by meeting participants in response to the initial questions followed by some overall comments regarding funding options. These responses are not verbatim, but rather reflect an attempt to report the general content of the statements made during the meeting.)

Question 1: How has your experience with the current crisis exposed your deepest fears and hopes for Columbia?

- This situation reminds me of driving. I think I drive well, but I don't always trust all the drivers around me to do the right thing – so I drive defensively. I think many people take the precautions they need to – but not everyone. That is my biggest fear. I hope we can come out of this whole thing stronger, but I think it will look different than it does today. I think we need to use this money in a practical way and address the problems that confront us now. I like the rental assistance idea. I think if we are going to require masks for businesses and customers, we could use money to provide masks to all the citizens of Columbia.
- My greatest fear in this whole thing is that people would get sick and die. That hasn't happened so much here. I am glad that we moved quickly to implement social distancing. I am worried about workers who have gig jobs or are independent contract workers who may not have access to the same kinds of loans or unemployment benefits that some other workers do. I hope we take care of each other and that we look at some of these problems in a new light. We have had the rental assistance need for a long time and hope that somehow we can address the longer term issue.
- This whole situation exposes the inequities that exist in our society. We have divided workers into essential and non-essential groups. There are some people who have to go to work whether they are termed essential or non-essential because they have to earn a living. I fear that those people will not get the visibility they need to make their case. Public transit is and has been a problem for low wage workers I hope we will address that. We need to expose those kinds of inequities in the system. We have seen that people of color have been inordinately affected, but really, people without access to healthcare get hit hard.
- The rent thing is big. People live paycheck to paycheck, and they need to be able to have a place to live. I particularly worry about single parents who are the heads of their households. What happens to the kids if the adult gets sick? If someone recovers and comes back home, how do we clean it so that other people in that house are accidentally infected? What about people who recover but require longer term therapy and care? Can they pay for that? We are learning as we go. Maybe we could use some of this as seed money and let it grow. Set aside some now in case

we are faced with a similar situation in the future – and then we can respond immediately. Let's let people know we've got their back.

- I am really worried about some of the younger, less experienced entrepreneurs we have in this town. Many don't have good business knowledge and they don't understand how government works. They had a good idea for a business. We need to make sure those kinds of businesses grow so we don't become a big box store kind of town. This is an awesome community. We need to re-open as quickly as possible.
- I think this epidemic has hit the African American community disproportionately. I always say that when everybody else gets a cold, our community gets pneumonia. That's what this is like. How will small businesses bounce back to keep those people going with an income stream – particularly minority small businesses? We should all become social agents. We should leverage donations to the cause from people who are in a position to do that. We need to jump start the employment situation and become social agents.
- I would like to know if we are going to get thermometers for testing when people come back to work, particularly if they have been out sick. Is that a part of this money or does it get deducted from this money? I saw someone from Medicaid say that we would get thermometers. They are the first line of screening. And, if someone has a high temperature, make them get the full test. I am concerned that the person standing next to you could infect you if we don't know if they are active or not. I hope this ends soon.

Question 2 - What daily life struggles of low to moderate income households impacted with the crisis need to be lifted up to leaders the most?

- I think this is a real struggle for people with kids at home. That is really hard to manage. People have to go to work. They can't just stay at home all day. People have to go back to work to provide for those kids. It's a Catch – 22.
- Mothers with kids is a big problem in this. Many low income workers have to work in places where there is currently no testing in place. What happens when those people go back to their homes where there are other people? What good is having a good economy if you don't have a life? We need testing to make people aware and keep people safe.
- I hear a lot about people getting breaks on rent or expenses here and there. But, some of those deals are based on the idea that you pay the back rent when you can. How will people be able to pay the back rent while the business is rebuilding? These programs now may not get businesses back to where they were before this whole thing began so those businesses are still in the hole. What will the economy look like then? We have survived this part – then what?
- I worry about children left at home alone when parents have to go to work. I know some places have allowed preschools to remain open and take in children, but only for children of "essential business" workers. It is not a good situation to have an 8-year old in charge of his little brothers and sisters all day. Low income people don't have good options. They need masks and gloves just to go out. What about elderly people who are in the high risk group who need to go to the

pharmacy. They don't know where to get all this stuff. We need realistic planning. How long will that take? This will become increasingly real over time.

- We need to share this information and these thoughts with anyone we know. It has been difficult to get the word out about all the options people do have.
- People are going to have trauma coming out of this. They are not going to trust the places they go to in public. Are all of these places clean or am I at risk? How do we trust these spaces? This may not be directly about the use of these CDBG funds, but this is going to be a real problem we will have to deal with.
- The most pressing need is childcare. I also think we should consider implementing antibody testing. That would at least give us some relief if we could know that we have already had the virus and are over it. Some people out there had nothing when this started. And now they have nothing and no money at all coming in. They need food right now. There is an existing program that can give people free rides to stores (like for seniors), but they need to know about it. I think we need hope.
- I think we need to focus on the very basic things like rent, food and the ability to earn a living. It gives us dignity to do what we can for ourselves and not just get a handout. I think we can get testing and that sort of thing through funds that will go to the medical community. I want people to be able to live independently to the extent that they can – and I think helping provide the basics, including a job – will help keep people from slipping into a worse situation like homelessness. I think this first round of funding is 30-day money and it needs to be spent on immediate basic needs, like within the next two weeks.

Question 3 - What is your hope for Columbia's future as we work through this crisis and grow as a community?

- I think we need to focus on the people who "don't have" first. Then, you go to the next level of need, like people who are just getting by. Then, you get to the people who do "have" – and they don't really need the help right now. This is who we are and we need to take care of our basic needs first.
- I think we will come out of this much more tech-savvy than we have ever been before. What are our next steps? We have helped downtown businesses with ways to provide curbside pick-up – and maybe we can keep that in place after this is over. I am also interested in how we deal with the homeless problem. That has been a concern in the downtown area for a long time on a daily basis. It's not great. Maybe this will help us focus on that issue on some level.
- I am amazed how quickly our community reacted to the virus. I hope we can keep some of these things in place. I think our business meetings in the future will look different. I think this whole thing has exposed our weak spots. We need to build trust. We need to think long-term. And that brings up the topic of mental health. We will need help there. We need to talk to our landlords. Can we get agreements to put in a little extra at the end to get relief now? We don't want an economic collapse like in '08.

- This is a college town. We also want to be a health care town and have both of those things as a cornerstone of our economy. But, we can't just make this economy be about the people at the top. This is a University town. That's separate money, but how they do will affect our whole economy. I live downtown and I see the impacts this has had already.
- I think the health care effects of this have the most impact. Not just now. Think about the long-term medical debt that might be incurred. I hope this draws attention to changing our health care system and move to a single payer system. I hope it changes our tax structure. I hope some of the services we institute today as part of our emergency response stay around for a while.
- How do we make this money work? I think we need to look at the people who are hiring other people and providing jobs. Those jobs keep everyone going. I think we need to take a little time and assess that kind of impact. We haven't done that yet.
- If we didn't have the University and Columbia College and Stephens College here, we would be Sedalia – and that's not where I want to live. I don't know exactly what this will look like on the other end, but I hope the next time we put a use tax on internet sales on the ballot we have the good sense to vote for it – and I hope they do that in Jefferson City, too. I don't think we have much confidence in our national leadership right now. We can take care of that with our votes in November. But as for this new CDBG money – I think we spend it now on essential service – rents, food and jobs.

At that point, the moderator offered a little more information. He noted that many rental assistance programs have been implemented through the use of voucher programs, much like HUD uses. Some people have suggested that such a program could be administered through the Voluntary Action Center. He noted that on the small business loans – they could come in the form of small business loans or grants – forgivable or not. The city has already tried that this year and went through about \$90,000 in loans to low to moderate income small businesses within one day, and some people were frustrated that they never had the chance to apply. On the Federal level, they went through more than \$300 million in about a week. The third thing people have used the money on is “other services” and many of those have been mentioned by participants today.

In the final few minutes people offered the following thoughts.

- Communications seemed to be an important topic. It seemed that many people don't know about all of these programs even if they are advertised on the radio, TV and newspapers. One person said even among the business community there seems to be a lack of awareness about programs on some level, and then the glut of information that pours in becomes overwhelming.
- One person said they believed that the people who are really needing these kinds of programs aren't getting the information – and that needs to be addressed. People simply don't know what to do or where to turn for help.
- One person noted that a month ago, nobody knew what ZOOM was – they thought that was how fast you go, not a business meeting platform. They thought Corona was a beer. We have a steep learning curve here and that is hard to communicate on any level. As we get stronger, we need to learn to tell the story better.

- One person said that it was an alien concept to him that people didn't get the news since he hears it all day on the radio and on TV and reads the papers – but he believes it is a true phenomenon that people do not get information. He thought social media could help. He asked if everyone knew that today was the day you could get a free Doritos Taco at Taco Bell. They spent hundreds of thousands of dollars advertising that and people still didn't know about it. He thought the churches could help across the board. He also thought neighborhoods were good at spreading news, especially rumors. He did worry about the integrity of news spread in that fashion, however.
- One individual suggested that everyone gets mail from the city once a month. It's your utility bill and everyone opens it. Maybe we need to put special program information in with the bill, even if there are rules about it.
- One participant was dismayed that the microloan program ran out of money in just one day and some people never even knew about it. What do we do? Call more people? Give a longer lead time when you announce new programs? Let everyone put in applications all at once and award them based on need not first one in the door? She also thought we should make sure there aren't a bunch of loopholes in these new programs where the big guys exploit the programs at the expense of the little guy.
- Finally, one individual said he hope this will bring us all together. Another suggested that we spend the money on basics, and maybe if we can't help everyone with all the rent money at once, we subsidize part of the rent for more people to make the money go further. One person said we need to focus on the neediest and get some mental health professional out in the field to get people situated.

The meeting ended at 7:00 PM.

(Minutes submitted on behalf of the group by Mark Farnen: mfarnen.strategists@gmail.com)