



**Star City Strong
Recovery Fund
Task Force Recommendations
July 20, 2020**

Letter from Mayor Sherman P. Lea, Sr. and Vice-Mayor Joe Cobb

In March, COVID-19 arrived in Roanoke. In a matter of weeks the virus went from a distant news story to local hospitalizations, closed businesses, essential services delivered remotely and a local economy reeling from the impacts. This has not been equitably borne, our Hispanic community has been disproportionately impacted by the virus, and businesses engaged in hospitality and food service have suffered the brunt of the economic impacts. Small businesses, performing artists and cultural institutions had to pivot; closing their doors and innovating new ways of reaching their customers and patrons. The virus once again highlighted the vulnerability of our community and the inequities that have long existed. In May, unrest caused by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis amplified these vulnerabilities and inequities.

But, Roanoke is an All-America City! We never just sit back and let things happen and the current circumstances would be no different. Almost immediately upon arrival of the virus, non-profits came together, coordinated by the United Way of Roanoke Valley to begin addressing the immediate basic needs of our community, businesses began reinventing themselves and the products and services they could offer, local government began providing technical and financial assistance and adapting delivery models for essential services and health care providers ramped up to prepare for whatever may come their way.

While the community continued its response to COVID-19, the City began preparations to support the community's recovery. This started with the formation of a framework (Star City Strong: Response, Recovery, Resiliency) to guide our efforts and we did what an All-America City does - turned to our community to determine what is needed next. This engagement included a series of "community conversations", consisting of virtual focus groups and individual interviews, on-line solicitation of ideas, weekly press conferences and a comprehensive social media campaign.

In June, the Council formed the Star City Recovery Fund Task Force to evaluate the situation and make recommendations to the Council about how best to financially support the community's recovery. This dynamic group of thirty-six appointed community representatives immediately went to work and have delivered a set of recommendations that support the community's recovery and in a way that makes us stronger and more resilient. This effort itself is just a step along a long path which will later this year, include updating the City's Strategic Plan and preparing the FY22 budget - ensuring we are conducting the City's business and investing our tax dollars in ways that transform our community to one that is more equitable and just.

For these efforts we say thank you to the Task Force members for doing their part to ensure we remain Star City Strong!

Mayor Sherman P. Lea, Jr.

Vice-Mayor Joe Cobb

Introduction

In late May the City unveiled its preliminary plan for supporting the community’s recovery from COVID-19-related impacts. This plan, Star City Strong: Response, Recovery, Resiliency, was designed to guide the City through its on-going response to and its recovery from the virus, both grounded in the values of equity and resiliency. On June 1 the City Council formed the Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force (Ordinance attached) which was to be co-chaired by the Mayor and Vice-Mayor. On June 15 the Council appointed thirty-six community members to serve on the Task Force.

The stated objective of the Task Force was “to consider the challenges confronting the City from the COVID-19 pandemic disaster and the opportunities available to the community through the Star City Strong Recovery Fund, and to make recommendations to City Council regarding the use of the Star City Strong Recovery Fund”. The Task Force worked diligently to achieve this objective in a short time-frame and presents the enclosed recommendations.

The Members of the Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force are:

Co-Chairs

Mayor Sherman P. Lea, Sr.

Vice-Mayor Joe Cobb

Citizens-at-Large

Pamela Smith

Tommy Page

Jan Keister

Joshua Patrick

Gloria Manns

Andrea Micklem

Bethany Lackey

Kat Pascal

Nathan Webster

Manufacturing

James E. Smith, Sr., Genedge

Troy Cook

Tamea Franco

Outdoor Recreation

Pete Eshelman, Roanoke Outside

Chris Bryant

Carol Rowlett

Health Care/Biomedical Research

Cynthia Lawrence, Carilion Clinic

Shanell Steelman

Antonio Segovia

Hospitality/Entertainment

Landon Howard, Visit Virginia’s Blue Ridge

Diane Haley

Brian Wells

Vulnerable Population/Non-Profits

Abby Hamilton, United Way of Roanoke

Valley

Karen Pillis

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Small Business

Joyce Waugh, Roanoke Regional Chamber
of Commerce

Arts & Culture

Shaleen Powell, Roanoke Cultural
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Ellen Stick
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Education

Carole Tarrant, Western Virginia
Community College
Jerel Rhodes
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**Roanoke Branch of the National
Association for the Advancement of
Colored People**
Brenda Hale

**Roanoke Chapter of the Southern
Christian Leadership Conference**
Mignon Chubb-Hale

Roanoke Latinx Community
Dr. Elda Stanco-Downey

**Youth Services Citizens Board
Representatives**
Christian Bryant
Brianna Wilson

The Task Force was assisted in its efforts by several members of the City of Roanoke staff:

Ex-Officio

City Manager Bob Cowell

Dan Callaghan, City Attorney
Susie McCoy, City Clerk
Brent Robertson, Assistant City
Manager

Amelia Merchant
Rob Ledger
Tiffany Bradbury
Angie O'Brien





Background & Context

On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. On March 12, 2020 Governor Northam declared a State of Emergency for the Commonwealth of Virginia. On March 17, 2020 a local State of Emergency was declared by the City of Roanoke and so began the first stage related to the pandemic. Roanoke is approaching this unprecedented public health and economic crisis within the context of three stages – Response, Recovery, and Resiliency. While each are unique in their challenges and necessary actions, overlap is expected as the community transitions from one stage to the next. Each stage is further explained in the following:

Response

With the enactment of the local State of Emergency on March 17, the City of Roanoke officially initiated its response to COVID-19. As of the preparation of this document, the City remains in the Response Stage while initiating the Recovery Stage. The Response Stage included a number of significant actions designed primarily to address the public health needs of the community and the City workforce and secondarily to mitigate economic impacts associated with the virus. Notable actions in addition to the State of Emergency declaration included activation of emergency operations, closure of municipal facilities and cancellation of most civic events and public meetings, implementation of community-wide extreme physical distancing, alterations in public service delivery, COVID-19 testing and contact tracing, emergency financial support to small businesses and vulnerable populations, municipal expenditure controls, and various policy adoptions.

Recovery

Though we remain in the Response Stage, it is necessary that the community progress into the Recovery Stage. It is therefore appropriate to undertake recovery initiatives and projects even while continuing to respond to the immediate health and safety needs of our community. The Recovery Stage is informed by data and guidance from local, state and federal sources. The focus of the Recovery Stage is supporting the “re-opening” of the local economy and municipal operations in a safe manner and supporting our local businesses and impacted individuals and families.

Resiliency

As has been the case historically, Roanoke will face similar challenges in the future that place the community’s health and well-being at great risk. Most immediately is the risk of resurgence of the COVID-19 virus over the upcoming months or even years. Once recovery is well underway, steps should be taken to fortify our community and local economy against similar future shocks, to the extent practical. As the current pandemic has demonstrated, such crises rarely limit their impacts to a single jurisdiction or geography. Actions in this stage therefore must be fully integrated in similar efforts at the regional, state and national levels.

At the time this report was prepared nearly four million Americans had tested positive for COVID-19 – 809 in the City of Roanoke, and more than 142,000 had succumbed to its impact – 24 in our region. In addition to the loss of life, the Nation and our area have experienced unprecedented economic loss and associated unemployment. At the time of preparing this report more than 12% of the residents of the City of Roanoke remained unemployed with many of those in jobs in hospitality and restaurants. A disproportionate number of those impacted by the economic losses are Hispanic or African American.

Businesses throughout the Nation, Virginia and in our area have been greatly impacted. Small businesses and those engaged in hospitality and food service have been especially impacted. Gig workers, performing artists, and arts and culture groups have likewise been impacted with many venues still unable to open and few able to perform. Area non-profits have seen unprecedented demands on their services for access to food, emergency health care, and requests for assistance with basic needs such as housing, utilities, and transportation.

For the past several years Roanoke has experienced significant economic growth led by the high-growth sectors of health care, biomedical research and higher education. These have been accompanied by growth in tourism, hospitality and advanced manufacturing. What has emerged in the past decade is a strong city with a vibrant urban core set amongst great outdoor amenities and natural beauty. It has been known for some time that not all in our community have participated in this recent resurgence. The City and the network of social service providers and non-profits have worked diligently to address the issues of poverty. COVID-19 laid bare the depth of these challenges and the more recent demonstrations around racism and inequities have amplified these even more.

What is needed is not just recovery – not a return to what the pre-COVID-19 world was like but a new recovery – one that regains the momentum we were experiencing but in a manner that focuses on addressing the inequities that kept many of our residents, families, and businesses from fully participating in the success of our community. The work of the Task Force, combined with the work the City Council will be doing throughout the remainder of the year on revising their Strategic Plan and shaping their FY22 budget, is one step in shaping this new, better, stronger Star City.



Star City Strong Recovery Fund

With the adoption of the Star City Strong Plan, the City Council stated its intent to provide at least \$1 million to support the community's recovery. The Council has been able to honor this commitment and further it. There is currently more than \$7 million available to support recovery. The bulk of this support comes from funding made available through the CARES Act passed by Congress earlier this year and made available to the City through the State on June 1. The City received \$8.6 million in CARES Act funding. \$3 million of the funding is being retained to address COVID-related costs incurred by the City in the Response Stage. The other \$5.6 million is available to support the recommendations of the Task Force. Use of these funds is tightly regulated by the Act and must be spent by the end of the calendar year.

In addition to CARES Act funds, the City received a special allocation of CDBG funds in the amount of \$1.056 million. Most of these funds were immediately distributed to local non-profits in the Response Stage of the City's efforts. However, \$405,000 of these funds was allocated to support small businesses; these funds have been designated to support the recommendations of the Task Force. The City also received two special allocations of ESG (Emergency Solutions Grant) funding from HUD to address homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. Combined these allocations equate to \$1.4 million. As with the special CDBG allocation, a portion of these funds were immediately put to use providing housing support for homeless individuals and families in need of housing during times of self-isolating or quarantining due to COVID. At least \$1 million remains available to support the recommendations of the Task Force, though they come with restrictive limits.

The City has also designated \$500,000 from Economic Development funds to support the recommendations of the Task Force. In addition to these funds, the CARES Act provided approximately \$6 million in aid to the Roanoke City Public School Division and \$20 million to the Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport. Valley Metro, the City's transit operation received an additional \$8 million in aid which was used to support operations during the Response Stage.

All combined these funds represent the opportunity for a significant response to the recovery needs of the community and will help support many of the Task Force's priority recommendations.

The Process

Leading up to the formation and meetings of the Task Force the City Council convened a series of focus groups, each oriented around a different aspect of our community with the objective of hearing first-hand what individuals, families, businesses, institutions and organizations were doing in responding to COVID-19 and their greatest needs as they moved toward recovery. These focus groups were further supplemented with interviews of key individuals by Council members, seeking similar information. Additionally, an Economic Advisory Panel consisting of leaders in key economic sectors has been established to keep the City Administration abreast of changes and challenges in the local economy.

Beginning June 26 the Task Force started meeting. They met a total of four times and conducted a public hearing. At each meeting they were presented data and information and participated in a series of facilitated discussions regarding funds, the restrictions around the sources of funds, need, etc. These discussions generated a list of more than 50 possible initiatives and projects that could aid the community's recovery efforts. During the last two meetings, the Task Force focused on reducing the list of possible initiatives and projects to a list of prioritized recommendations. This process of prioritization was guided by a specific emphasis on equity with the Task Force making use of an equity tool promoted by the Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race & Equity. This tool subjected each proposed priority initiative or project to the following questions:

1. Who could benefit/be burdened by this initiative?
2. Can the initiative be prioritized for people, families and businesses most in need and already marginalized?
3. Is the service associated with the initiative accessible regardless of ability or status?
4. Will initiative help build toward a more just and sustainable future?
5. Can or is someone else providing or performing the initiative or project?

Use of this tool helped the Task Force refine or enhance their recommendations to ensure equitable outcomes and reinforced the need to be as inclusive as possible when each of the prioritized initiatives and projects are rolled out for implementation.

The Task Force concluded their work at their meeting on June 15, grouped their recommendations into "emphasis areas" and forwarded them to the City Council for consideration at the July 20 Council meeting.

Recommendations

The Task Force recommends that the City Council support the community's recovery by emphasizing four specific areas believed essential if our recovery is to be sustainable and equitable:

- Community Health
- Economy
- Safety Net
- Youth & Education

The Task Force strongly believes that the greatest benefits will come from supporting the local economy, particularly small businesses as they grapple with the impact of COVID and in ensuring the most vulnerable portions of our population are provided the support they need to not only survive through the Response Stage but be better prepared to fully join in the community's post-COVID economic recovery.

Community Health – At least \$1.2 million

This set of priority initiatives and projects very much represent the bridge between the Response Stage and the Recovery Stage, recognizing that any sustainable recovery is dependent upon successfully responding to the virus.

- Increased availability of COVID-19 Testing – It is recognized that even as the Virginia Department of Health conducts COVID-19 testing and associated contact tracing, their resources are limited, which could impact the amount and timeliness of testing which they depend upon for public health responses and upon which business, families and individuals depend to make decisions. This recommendation provides additional funding to support an increase in testing and related support services with a particular emphasis on reaching high-risk and vulnerable populations.
- PPE – health screenings, air filtration, cleaning, etc. – In addition to timely testing and contact tracing, it is recognized that adequate PPE and physical upgrades to spaces used by people are essential in managing the virus and keeping people safe. Access to PPE and the associated costs can be a burden to many, including individuals, businesses, and performing arts venues and cultural institutions. This recommendation provides additional access to PPE and additional funding to support the acquisition and distribution of PPE, staffing needed to conduct appropriate health screenings and appropriate physical upgrades to facilities, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable populations, small businesses and local performing arts venues.
- Funding to address mental health care (trauma, substance use, etc) – The unprecedented response required to combat COVID-19 and the associated physical and social distancing that has resulted, has placed a significant toll on the mental health of our residents resulting in increases in those seeking mental health counseling, substance use and suicide. This recommendation provides additional funding to support the

expansion of services to address these challenges, with an emphasis on services provided through local no to low cost clinics and on responses to substance use.

- Funds to address increased costs to health clinics – Local demands for increased services placed upon our local no and low cost clinics have strained them greatly from a personnel and financial perspective. This recommendation provides additional funding to support the costs incurred by these clinics both to adapt their services and to address the increased demand for those services.

Economy – At least \$2.5 million

This set of priority initiatives and projects acknowledge the tremendous toll the response to COVID-19 has had on our local economy, especially on small businesses and workers employed in specific industries hit particularly hard, such as hospitality, entertainment and food services.

- Job training for displaced workers – The stark reality is that many who have lost their jobs will not see those jobs return anytime soon. This places these individuals and their families at great risk and also jeopardize the City’s ability to regain its pre-COVID momentum. This recommendation provides additional funding to support programs that re-skill displaced workers with a particular emphasis on connecting them to resilient occupations in high-growth sectors.
- Funds for marketing reopening/tourism – It is essential that we safely get our local economy running again. One path to doing so rests with our well-developed niche in outdoor recreation and tourism as folks seek safe opportunities to recreate outdoors and not too far from their homes. Similarly it is essential that potential consumers locally and regionally know that our businesses are open and are prepared to safely welcome customers and patrons. This recommendation provides additional funding to support marketing campaigns that highlight our COVID-safe recreation and tourism opportunities and the businesses that are ready to welcome customers with a particular emphasis on our established business districts and corridors.
- Funding and support link between restaurants, performing arts, farmers, etc. – The response to COVID-19 has limited the ability to gather in large groups. This has disproportionately impacted restaurants, performing artists, farmers markets, etc. This recommendation provides funding to support programs that establish collaborations between restaurants and performing artists and restaurants and farmers.
- Funds to assist small businesses (change business practices to be more COVID-friendly, bring back furloughed employees, assistance with back-office help, etc.) – Small businesses have borne the brunt of the economic impact of responding to COVID-19. This in turn has impacted local tax revenues and employment. This recommendation provides funding to assist small businesses in their efforts at adapting business practices to COVID-safe practices, returning furloughed employees, securing additional legal, accounting and human resources assistance to address COVID-related funding opportunities and regulations, with a particular emphasis on restaurants and on businesses able to pivot their offerings/operations in a way that increases employment or makes them more resilient.

- Funds targeted to assist arts & culture organizations – Arts and culture organizations have played a significant role in the vitality of our community and have been severely impacted by the response to COVID – with many venues still unable to open and host patrons. This recommendation provides funding to arts and culture organizations so that they may remain viable during the Response and Recovery Stages.
- Funds for maintenance/enhancement of outdoor assets – COVID-19 has placed a severe strain on our local parks and outdoor assets as more people pursue safe outdoor recreation opportunities. This recommendation provides additional funding for the maintenance and enhancement of those outdoor assets.

Safety Net – At least \$2 million

Prior to the onset of COVID-19 many in our community were struggling. Poverty is particularly high in the Northwest and Southeast portions of our community and most notably among our African-American population. COVID-19 has placed our most vulnerable at even greater risk, threaten even more with poverty and has strained our local safety net to the breaking point. This set of prioritized recommendations seeks to strengthen that safety net with particular emphasis on ensuring the basic needs of shelter, food and child care are addressed.

- Funds targeted to assist non-profits with increased costs/service demands due to COVID – As noted previously, the local providers of social services and addressing the basic needs of our most vulnerable community members are strained to their limits due to increased demand. This recommendation provides additional funding to support these organizations in meeting the increased costs associated with this increase in demand.
- Non-Profit System navigation & communication – With so many new programs and many newcomers to safety net programs, there is an increased challenge associated with effectively communicating about and navigating through the local non-profit system. This recommendation provides funding to enhance communications and develop an adequate navigation system, with a particular emphasis on non-English speaking members of our community.
- Addressing Basic Needs - Child care, access to healthy food, assistance with utilities, rent, mortgage, transportation, etc. – As noted, no greater need exists among our most vulnerable community members than in ensuring their basic needs are addressed. This recommendation provides additional funding to support greater access to healthy food, assistance with utilities, rent and mortgage and the ability to secure child care for those returning to work.
- Interpretive Services – focused on empowering vulnerable communities to educate and inform themselves about issues, needs, responses – Roanoke is home to many where English is not their first language. Additionally, culturally relevant responses to COVID-19 and in support of the community’s recovery are necessary. This recommendation provides funding to support projects that empower vulnerable members of our community to educate and inform themselves of the best way to respond to and recover from the virus.

Youth & Education – At least \$1.18 million

Our local schools have and will struggle with the challenge of adequately educating our youth and keeping them safe while doing so. This has and likely will continue to involve aspects of virtual or “off-campus” learning. Additionally, students at our higher education institutions will similarly find themselves learning remotely. This set of prioritized recommendations seeks to create safe places for our youth when they are not in their physical classroom and support a comprehensive community response to supporting students and families as they learn virtually.

- COVID-safe parks and recreation programming (mobile/portable equipment) – With more children studying more often at home and less often in their physical classrooms there exists a need to bring “recess” closer to where they live. This recommendation provides additional funding to acquire and deploy COVID-safe mobile parks and recreation equipment and program with a specific emphasis on reaching youth among our more vulnerable populations.
- Funding to promote links between organizations and schools in educational offerings – While there may remain some uncertainty in exactly what the school year will look like in the near future, it is certain that it will be different than in the past. This creates opportunities for non-traditional approaches to education and the potential for collaborations between cultural organizations and schools in developing educational offerings to supplement those provided in physical class-room settings. This recommendation provides funding to support such collaborations.
- Access to broadband/internet and devices to connect for distance learning, job searching, etc. – Never has affordable access to reliable broadband and internet service been more important. Students, job seekers and remote workers depend upon this as much as they depend upon any other utility. This recommendation provides funding to enable access to such services.
- Youth advocacy – supportive system for students and families (inside schools and virtual addressing trauma, interpretive services, facilitate community collaboration, mentoring, virtual academy, etc.) – As noted, the upcoming school year will be like no other. Therefore a response like none seen before is necessary. This recommendation provides funding to support a coordinated system of virtual learning, mentoring and supportive services, and alternative physical learning spaces.

Next Steps

With the Council's final determination on the Task Force recommendations (at the July 20 Council meeting), staff will initiate the development and implementation of the actual initiatives and projects called for in the approval. In most instances the emphasis will be on using existing providers and networks to maximize efficiency in delivery of these much needed funds and associated services. In a few instances new initiatives will be needed as well as perhaps new collaborations. Use of existing processes, such as that used with the Arts Commission and the Human Services Advisory Board, will be used as often as practical to solicit proposals and award funds. The objective is rapid deployment of needed resources with as minimal bureaucracy as necessary.

Just as critical is ensuring as many as possible are aware of these efforts and how they may be able to access assistance. Communication should be extensive, multi-lingual and culturally relevant.

It is possible that additional funds may become available either through further Congressional action, State action or philanthropic resources. If so, to the extent practical, those funds will be used to further the approved recommendations.

It is the genuine belief of the Task Force that timely and effective implementation of the identified priority recommendations will have immediate and long-lasting benefit to our residents, families, institutions, and businesses and will enable us as a community to more rapidly regain the momentum we had prior to the arrival of COVID-19 and to do so in a more equitable and just manner.



Appendices

Resolution 41741-060120 forming the Star City Recovery Fund Task Force – June 1, 2020

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force By-Laws and Rules of Procedure – June 26, 2020

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Meeting Agenda/Minutes – June 26, 2020

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Meeting Agenda/Minutes – July 1, 2020

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Meeting Agenda/Minutes – July 8, 2020

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Public Hearing Agenda/Minutes – July 14, 2020

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Meeting Agenda/Minutes – June 15, 2020

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Potential and Priority Initiatives and Projects – July 8, 2020

