

**Office of Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome  
City of Baton Rouge/Parish of East Baton Rouge**

**Restart BR: Mayor's Business Roundtable Economic Recovery Group**

*Co-Chairs: Jim Bernhard and Erin Monroe Wesley*

**Economic Recovery Group Meeting #1 (via Zoom video conference)**

*May 6, 2020 – 2-3 p.m.*

**Meeting Participants**

*Members Present:*

Dean Donald Andrews	John Engquist	Jim Urdiales
Paul Arrigo	Dr. Barbara Griffith	John Valluzzo
Jim Bernhard (co-chair)	Veneeth Iyengar (ex officio)	Mike Wampold
Alfreda Tillman Bester	Jerry Jones	Erin Monroe Wesley (co-chair)
Greg Bowser	Manard Lagasse Jr.	Brandon Williams
Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome (ex officio)	Calvin Mills	Mayor Pro-Tem Scott Wilson
Michael Cooks	Jenni Peters	
Helena Cunningham	Ross Reilly	
	Ann Trappey	

*Alternate Members:* Michael DiResto (proxy for Adam Knapp), Ryan Finnan (proxy for John D'Angelo)

*Members Not Present:* Gary Graphia, Dave Roberts, Mary Werner

**Welcome & Overview: Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome**

Mayor Broome welcomed working group members to the first meeting and gave context for the creation and purpose of the group.

**Introductions & Roll Call: Jim Bernhard, Erin Monroe Wesley**

Mr. Bernhard and Ms. Monroe Wesley discussed how the working group will be focused on actionable items and two sets of priorities as it begins its work – addressing near-term solutions in advance of businesses reopening, in alignment with state and federal guidance, and planning for longer-term economic changes. Ms. Monroe Wesley also mentioned how the working group would use strike teams to address specific focus areas critical to economic recovery efforts.

### **Restart BR Strategic Priorities: Jim Bernhard, Erin Monroe Wesley**

Ms. Monroe Wesley outlined the two types of strategic priorities the working group will be working to solve in the coming weeks.

Near-term priorities for businesses reopening, expected for May 15-16, include:

- Reviewing and addressing known impediments to reopening sectors of the East Baton Rouge Parish economy
- Identifying solutions in the form of protective equipment, policies, and guidance businesses need in order to reopen safely and protect the health of employees and customers (in line with state and federal guidance)
- Determining near-term workforce needs, explore workforce training opportunities, and connect available job seekers to employment opportunities as economic activity restarts
- Developing a communication strategy to raise awareness among residents that Baton Rouge is once again open for business

Longer-term priorities will be focused on economic changes as a result of the pandemic and how to plan around them, and include:

- Reviewing economic data and trends to better understand how consumer demand for products and services will alter the landscape of key industries
- Identifying industries or sectors that will be heavily impacted or changed in the post-pandemic economy, as well as the downstream impacts (e.g., supply chains, workforces, real estate, infrastructure, and adjacent industries)
- Determining new industries or sectors that are expected to grow or further develop in the post-pandemic economy, particularly those where Baton Rouge has assets and an ability to aggressively pursue (with a focus on “Blue Ocean” strategies)
- Developing solutions to repurpose assets in impacted industries or sectors and determine how best to position local expertise in pursuing new economic growth opportunities, such as through upskilling or investments in capacity building
- Developing a communication strategy to aggressively pursue economic growth opportunities while aligning local assets and building local capacity

### **Focus Areas, Near-Term Needs, Longer-Term Considerations: Veneeth Iyengar, Michael DiResto**

Mr. Iyengar discussed how Baton Rouge’s business economy has great needs this working group will need to resolve before Baton Rouge and Louisiana reopen in the coming days. Mr. DiResto outlined some of the ways the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) has been working to address

in response to this crisis, especially those involving economic indicators and employment opportunities. BRAC's primary areas of focus to-date have involved:

- Employee/employer safety and health best practices
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) needs for business, where BRAC staff are working to establish a partnership so businesses can get what they need at a reasonable price
- Looking into the question and availability of childcare and summer camps, which create a barrier to people getting back to work
- Conducting research into the guidelines of each reopening phase (e.g. occupancy limits), including working with the State Fire Marshal and others
- Looking into ways to help small businesses recover and pivot their business models to survive

Mr. Iyengar discussed a recommendation that the working group form a series of strike teams that leverage the experience of each member, spanning ten distinct industries or focus areas:

- Childcare & K-12 Education
- Business & Finance
- Health and Human Services
- Higher Education & Workforce Development
- Hospitality & Tourism
- Infrastructure & Mobility
- Personal Protective Equipment
- Public Policy
- Real Estate
- Small & Disadvantaged Businesses

Mr. Iyengar referenced these strike teams would be activated following this first working group meeting with the goal of prioritizing near-term priorities. He emphasized these strike teams should assemble and collaborate to answer critical questions such as:

- What do we know today about our needs in this category?
- What are the most significant challenges we face as we move into Phase One of our local economic recovery?
- What resources do we need to accommodate Phase One reopening activities in this category?
- What solutions or strategies do we need to employ to address these challenges?

- What data or research do we need in order to make recommendations or develop solutions?
- What do we need to communicate to those who will be impacted by these recommendations?

### **Meeting Schedule: Erin Monroe Wesley**

Ms. Monroe Wesley outlined the upcoming meeting schedule for the full working group, which includes weekly meetings through the end of May 2020, at which point the required frequency of meetings will be reassessed. She emphasized the working group's initial meetings will be focused on developing near-term goals and readiness activities needed to move into Phase One of economic reopening, followed by goals and timelines necessary to achieve target dates associated with subsequent phases of reopening.

She also mentioned the Mayor's Office would work with working group members following this meeting to schedule at least one strike team meeting before the next full working group meeting, anticipated for May 13.

### **Next Steps: Veneeth Iyengar**

Mr. Iyengar stressed the importance of public input and engaging people in this process. He announced a dedicated email address, [restartbr@brla.gov](mailto:restartbr@brla.gov), that residents and business owners can contact to engage in these efforts. He also stressed the importance of the work of these strike teams, which should be hyper-focused on actionable solutions to address the local economy's most pressing challenges so that businesses can be poised to reopen as quickly and safely as possible.

### **Open Discussion**

Mr. Urdiales emphasized the need for a campaign that promotes Baton Rouge businesses across all industries, particularly restaurants, small retailers, and hotels. He suggested this campaign be focused on supporting as many small businesses as possible, use social media to communicate that message, and help make people proud to be engaged. He further suggested that the community select a day once businesses are fully reopened (after Phase Three) and use it to promote local spending in Baton Rouge.

Mr. Wampold shared concerns regarding the federal Payroll Protection Program, which requires employees be rehired and paid within eight weeks of reopening. He commented that there is no way for this money to be effectively spent, particularly with hotels and other retail establishments not seeing any business activity right now. He recommended reaching out to Louisiana's congressional delegation to request the federal government extend the period in

which businesses must bring back their workers to expend these funds, based on the traction their businesses are experiencing.

Ms. Tillman Bester requested a list of the full working group roster, strike team information, and breakdown of recommended priorities. Mr. Iyengar responded this information would be shared following the meeting.

Mayor Broome emphasized the imminent, near-term focus of working toward initial reopening activities on May 15 given the growing expectation of the governor modifying his stay at home order.

Mr. Bernhard mentioned each strike team should meet by May 12, with the next working group meeting scheduled for May 13, and prepare recommendations to submit to Mayor Broome for implementation on May 15. He emphasized the importance of this group and its role in helping craft actionable recommendations. He also stressed the importance of social distancing, using face masks broadly, and communicating to business owners that their employees wear face masks.

Ms. Karron Alford and Mr. Paul Arrigo shared that Visit Baton Rouge will be leading a task force focused on tourism and marketing efforts that help businesses reopen and people feel safe traveling to Baton Rouge. They emphasized that the work of this working group and task force would be closely coordinated.

Councilman Scott Wilson stressed the importance of wearing face masks and noted that some people are wearing them in areas like grocery stores and some are not. He agreed that the community must get behind this message, particularly if Baton Rouge is going to move forward and move faster than other communities in getting businesses back up and running.

Mr. Williams asked if the working group had a liaison with the Governor's Office to coordinate these efforts at the local and state level. Mr. Iyengar mentioned Mayor Broome is in regular conversations with the governor and governor's chief of staff, as well as the secretary of Louisiana Economic Development, and would serve as the conduit for that coordination.

Mr. Jones shared that he was asked to serve on the retail and small business task force for the state's recovery efforts and he would share information between the two groups.

Mr. Mills shared that he sits on the National Small Business Association's board of directors based in Washington D.C. and participates in ongoing conversations at the national level, which

he will share with the working group to ensure local small business planning efforts consider these conversations.

**Next Steps**

- May 7: Members will be assigned to a strike team or teams.
- May 12: Strike teams will meet and submit potential solutions for their focus area.
- May 13: Working group will meet to discuss solutions crafted by each strike team and to develop recommendations for Mayor Broome.
- May 15-16: Tentative Phase One re-opening.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:52 p.m. on a motion by Jerry Jones.