

**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 #5 (via Zoom video conference)

June 17, 2020 – 2-3 p.m.

Meeting Participants

Members Present:

Donald Andrews	Veneeth Iyengar (ex officio)	Ann Trappey
Paul Arrigo	Jerry Jones	John Valluzzo
Greg Bowser	Manard Lagasse Jr.	Mary Werner
Helena Cunningham	Calvin Mills	Erin Monroe Wesley
John D'Angelo	Ross Reilly	
Dan Gardiner		

Guest Presenters: Dr. Pamela Ravare-Jones and Vernadine Mabry, MPA

Members Not Present: Jim Bernhard, Alfreda Tillman Bester, Michael Cooks, John Enquist, Gary Graphia, Dr. Barbara Griffith, Adam Knapp, Jenni Peters, Dave Roberts, Jim Urdiales, Mike Wampold, Brandon Williams, Scott Wilson

Call to Order and Roll Call: Erin Monroe Wesley

Ms. Monroe Wesley called the meeting to order and oversaw the roll call.

Open Discussion: Ongoing Needs & Challenges

Dean Andrews commented that some people are still not wearing masks and suggested a campaign to encourage continual PPE usage.

Mr. Arrigo highlighted a misconception that hospitality workers are reluctant to return to work due to unemployment benefits. Rather, the bigger problem is in the industry and market for workforce, not a lack of personal initiative. Mr. Jones reiterated this point, stating people want to work but the hospitality industry is seeing low traffic.

Small Business Assistance Program Update: Veneeth Iyengar and John D'Angelo

Mr. Iyengar noted the four focus areas the working group agreed to: the pandemic's impact on disadvantaged businesses, its impact on the childcare industry, its impact on workforce

development, and how the city-parish can accelerate economic recovery. He mentioned that small businesses were unable to access larger pools of capital due to a lack of a banking relationship. Further, many of the businesses in need are disadvantaged businesses. To address this, in addition to ongoing assistance from the federal and state level, the city-parish will launch a microcredit program focused on disadvantaged businesses in the next 10-14 days with nearly \$500,000 currently committed toward a funding target of \$1 million. Additionally, the city-parish is working to create a line of credit program with another financial institution that will provide a total of \$1 million in microloans to disadvantaged small businesses. The city-parish will also communicate with Louisiana Treasurer Schroder so that this program works in tandem with the state's new small business assistance program.

Mr. D'Angelo added that numerous businesses have expressed a willingness to contribute financially. Another goal of this program is to establish banking relationships for small businesses. Mr. Iyengar noted that this program will build capacity in small businesses throughout the East Baton Rouge Parish economy and will be critical to help businesses grow and accelerate in the short and medium term.

Mr. Jones noted that he is thankful for and impressed by this this program, which he thinks will benefit many businesses.

EmployBR Program Update: Vernadine Mabry, MPA and Dr. Pamela Ravare-Jones

Dr. Jones and Ms. Mabry presented on the Division of Human Development & Services' Office of Social Services and EmployBR program.

Ms. Mabry provided an overview of DHDS programs and services and the assistance available through these offices. She highlighted that EmployBR provides eligible jobseekers with training, education, and supportive services needed to succeed in the workplace. The program serves adults, dislocated workers, and in and out of school youth. EmployBR also assists employers in developing and preparing participants for the workforce by facilitating trainings, conducting pre-screenings, and hosting job fairs.

Ms. Mabry noted that the Division of Human Development & Services has utilized various technologies to improve program efficiency, effectiveness, accessibility, and outreach while adapting to COVID-19.

Ms. Cunningham noted a potential upcoming housing crisis due to high unemployment and asked how the city-parish is preparing for this. Ms. Mabry stated that, if DHDS receives an eviction notice and is able to contact the landlord, her office will work to prevent eviction by leveraging the grants and funding streams available for related programs. Ms. Cunningham

emphasized the importance of communicating the availability of this program to the broader community in advance of any such issues or challenges tenants may be facing.

Mr. Mills inquired if EmployBR has reached out to small businesses regarding their financial and employment needs. Ms. Mabry noted their business services unit works directly with local employers to meet their needs. Dr. Jones mentioned that the office wants to identify more businesses they can support, and she asked the working group to provide their office with names of companies to see how EmployBR can help them.

Dean Andrews asked about DHDS' capacity to reach out to and assist more people. Ms. Mabry commented that her team has the capacity to assist more people so long as they qualify for assistance.

Ms. Liz Smith shared that BRAC's BR Works program has a continuously updated list of available jobs on BRAC's website, with hundreds of companies that have submitted more than 500 job opportunities to date.

Mr. Iyengar commented on the importance of streamlining the resources available to job seekers in Baton Rouge and communicating job openings aggressively in advance of the conclusion of expanded unemployment benefits.

Future Planning: Veneeth Iyengar

Mr. Iyengar noted that the working group will begin to pivot toward longer-term economic recovery solutions with special considerations as to how industries are changing and how Baton Rouge can leverage its various assets and resources to support the expansion of existing businesses or relocation of businesses to the area. Potential solutions to help create an environment for business recruitment and expansion activities include facilitating broadband expansion and emulating programs like Tulsa Remote for technology-based job opportunities.

Next Steps: Erin Monroe Wesley

In closing, Ms. Monroe Wesley thanked John D'Angelo for his commitment to fund the microcredit program and Ms. Mabry for the EmployBR program update. She asked everyone to review the Tulsa Remote program and to begin thinking about ways to prepare Baton Rouge for future economic growth. Three major takeaways from the meeting include the need for a mask usage campaign, demystifying the concept that hospitality employees don't have a desire to return to work, and the need to address and communication opportunities for rental assistance as expanded unemployment benefits expire. The next meeting will be held July 1, 2020.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:54 p.m.