

May 4, 2020

Jonathan F. Mitchell, Mayor  
City Hall  
133 William Street  
New Bedford, MA 02740

**RE: Proposed Principles for Economic Mitigation, Recovery, and Expansion**

Dear Mayor Mitchell:

We are in unprecedented times. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused unprecedented viral sickness and fatalities, but has laid bare economic and social justice weaknesses that have been hidden in plain sight.

In response to your request for the Regeneration Committee's insight, we propose to act on two equally important tracks with the overarching goal of having New Bedford emerge in an even stronger place before any of us heard the term "novel coronavirus." The first is centered on re-opening New Bedford businesses in all industries safely and as quickly as possible, bringing to bear all possible resources to assist employers and employees of all types for what is sure to be a long and uneven recovery. The second is centered on policies and actions that can strengthen our local impacts on global issues such as food insecurity, domestic manufacturing of critical supply chain products, equitable and high-speed connectivity, and housing needs for homeowners and renters at all income levels.

When we take the time we unexpectedly and unwantedly have at our disposal, we can see that the larger concepts we have articulated for realizing New Bedford's full potential are worthy of pursuit as the basis for not only economic recovery, but future expansion. We know that much of what we proposed in our recent full report continues to be advanced as current circumstances allow, but as quickly as possible these underlying principles and strategies should be pursued more aggressively than ever. An innovative ocean-based economy is still our economic and cultural core, and New Bedford is a critical link in the global food supply chain. We will still need a strong downtown connected to the waterfront as a base for restaurants, craft retailers, entrepreneurs and a growing and diverse residential population. Arts and culture venues and programs should not only be embraced but be an accelerant for citywide economic growth and social connectivity. And the cultivation of new leaders, innovations, and collaborations that the stress of the pandemic has brought to light can serve our community long into the future.

As we eagerly await specific guidance from Governor Baker's Economic Reopening Advisory Board we are encouraged that you and other local leaders are members of several committees of that board. While the schedule and risk-management policies will be framed by the Governor, as a city, we can begin to formulate local actions, policies, and collaborations that will give our local economy the greatest possible future competitive advantages.

It seems clear that emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic will generally happen in three phases: mitigation, recovery, and expansion. Outlined below are recommendations for each phase in order to facilitate the earliest possible successful re-opening of New Bedford businesses while shaping longer-term policies that place the city in a leadership position in finding workable solutions for community health and wellbeing.

#### **Mitigation: Today-August 2020**

- Continue to communicate the importance of adhering to all social distancing requirements, since the better we do here, the sooner and more aggressively we can return while keeping our health care infrastructure below capacity for a potential summer or fall surge in COVID-19 cases.
- Advocate to Governor Baker for a re-opening date that does not go beyond May 18 for non-essential business. We assume strict guidelines will be in place, and state policy should allow individual business to decide if they can meet all public health-based requirements. Such policies should also allow for workers not to be punished if they feel the execution of those guidelines at their particular facility is not safe—at that point the BOH should step in to make a determination of safety. Perhaps here what is most important is preparing for May 18 with as much advanced notice of the guidance and practical application so manufacturers, retailers, and other organizations fully understand the new rules of operation.
- Proactively promote the state's WorkShare program as an alternative to large-scale layoffs. WorkShare allows an employer to reduce the hours of work for employees who will receive unemployment benefits to supplement their reduced wages.
- Continue the NBEDC's aggressive communications platform targeted to the business community to continuously update information on available financial resources and operational guidance as part of the City's comprehensive COVID-19 communications program.
- The NBEDC and its business development partners must continue to directly assist small business owners as they navigate the current federal, state, and local resources.
- Launch a local program to provide direct financial assistance to small businesses with a focus on those deemed non-essential and which are either closed, operating at limited capacity, or can expect a longer return to full capacity. Small investments can go a long way with new costs to mitigate COVID-19 sanitation and distancing requirements.
- Identify all roadblocks for current pipeline of housing projects focused on the downtown for aggressive and community wide advocacy to state agencies for needed incentives. These projects can act as economic stimulus, have generally low risk for construction workers, benchmark rents, and can provide the long-term mix of housing types that a vibrant downtown needs to expand the retail/restaurant base post recovery.
- Where possible enact other mitigation measures to assist in limiting the impacts of full-closure such as deferred property taxes and other local fees for those landlords that are also deferring rents to tenants.
- Establish a working group of restaurant owners, employees, the Board of Health, and the Department of Inspectional Services to develop local strategies that adhere to state requirements for sanitation, PPE use, access limitations, etc.
- Continue to drive arts & culture as a citywide resource for virtual programming while formalizing the means for in-person programming to begin. Also, aggressive and coordinated advocacy should begin for large-capacity venues and programs that will require long-term financial mitigation measures.
- Place greater focus on the current efforts of community partners working to address food security. This is a topic that was raised as part of the City's comprehensive resiliency plan and

those recommendations should be accelerated so New Bedford is a regional leader in policy and a central food-hub.

- Take steps to ensure parks, sidewalks, and other public spaces are safe and well maintained. As more citizens get back to these public spaces there will be a greater appreciation of how these spaces make us feel.

#### **Recovery: September 2020-December 2021**

- Continue all modified social distancing guidance (expected to change as milestones are met) and communicate changing guidance to all New Bedford industry types. During this time social distancing relaxation is expected to be uneven and will affect different businesses in different ways at different times, presenting an ever-changing landscape of information that must be clearly communicated to all to avoid slipping back.
- Assess Internet connectivity citywide and establish a collaborative partnership to provide high-speed access to all homes in New Bedford. Perhaps public housing can be a pilot for this lifeline to any distance learning—either as a last resort in emergency or as a tool for more accessible expanded academics in normal times.
- Continue and expand financial assistance programs to those businesses that are not ready to open or not able to open at full capacity or not assisted fully by federal programs.
- Advocate for additional state and federal resources to ensure all “tools are in the box” to assist small business for a prolonged recovery, specifically for those businesses where social distancing is not possible under a previously successful business model.
- Continue preparations and actions to launch long-term projects that can accelerate in the post-recovery phase (i.e. waterfront investment in infrastructure and future development, TOD districts and commuter rail, golf course redevelopment, entrepreneurial eco-system development, and progressive zoning policy).
- If resources are available, develop and launch an aggressive marketing campaign for the City—a safe place with great opportunities for investment, living, and visiting—and begin a focus on data-driven business and a developer recruitment game plan with a focus on manufacturing and distribution of critical supply chain products and services.
- Launch an update of the City’s comprehensive master plan as a formal platform to establish land-based and programmatic goals and policies that can advance food insecurity initiatives, equitable and high-speed connectivity, and housing needs for homeowners and renters at all income levels. This exercise can be a tool to galvanize citywide buy-in from citizens and attract state and national resources for implementation.

#### **Expansion and Continued Regeneration: 2022-2023**

- Activities are expected to be normalized, albeit with new operational requirements for sanitation and worker/customer safety. Local COVID-19 driven policies and requirements should be easily accessible to business owners, workers, and customers.
- Invest in an expansion of the marketing campaign for the City as a means to attract investment, residents, artists, entrepreneurs, and industry.
- The NBEDC and its mission-aligned partners should fully execute a data-driven business and developer recruitment initiative with shared regeneration committee and City of New Bedford core principals serving as the strategic baseline for such recruitment.
- Conduct a study of all generally accepted best practices and lessons learned with a specific goal of understanding how they were applied locally. This report should be the basis for promoting needed policy changes post-pandemic that will best create long-term competitive advantage.

In conclusion, it will take all of us to get back the gains that COVID-19 has pushed to the side. We understand that we will need to work harder, smarter, and in greater partnership than ever before. All of the members of the Regeneration Project Committee want to let you know that the businesses and organizations we represent are up to that challenge, and we have great appreciation for being able to offer this framework of recommendations for your consideration.

We see this as a first step and look forward to a continued and productive dialog.

Sincerely,

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New Bedford Economic Development Council

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President & CEO  
Southcoast Health System

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