



Minutes

Town of Ayer, MA CDBG-CV Grant (COVID19 Impact)

Public Hearing

Monday, June 1, 2020 6:00PM

Remote ZOOM Meeting/Hearing

Participants:

Cyndi Lavin, Ayer Resident

George Bacon, Ayer Resident

Jonathan Kranz, Ayer Resident

Ron Morrison, Ayer Resident

Laurie Sabol, Ayer Resident

Reza Rahmani, Ayer Business-Owner

Gary Groleau, Ayer Resident

Sarah Withee, Ayer Resident

Jannice Livingston, Ayer Resident

Shaun Copeland, Ayer Resident

Dan Pattenaude, Ayer Resident

Geof Tilotson, Ayer Resident

Tim Silva, Ayer Library Dir.

Alicia Hersey, Community Dev Prog. Mgr.

Public Hearing Facilitator – Alan S. Manoian AICP, Dir. Ayer Office of Community & Economic Development

A. Manoian opens the Public Hearing at 6:05PM.

A. Manoian provides Public Hearing participants with an overview of the US Dept. of HUD CDBG-CV Grant opportunity, including the Microenterprise section and the Public Social service section, as well as Housing Assistance. A brief overview of (LMI) criteria and current conditions in the Town of Ayer resulting from COVID19 State of Emergency was also provided.

A. Manoian then opens for Public Comment and discussion:

Ron Morrison – commented on the current conditions of the local housing and (residential) rental market as impacted by the COVID19 State of Emergency. Rental properties remain in high-demand with low inventory, and with a rapid escalation of costs.

George Bacon – commented on the impact upon Ayer's passenger rail commuters in terms of employment. G. Bacon stated that he and those he knows are hesitant to once again travel on the MBTA passenger rail at Ayer Station. He also added that he will not ride the subway in Boston, and that his employer (in Boston) has discouraged employees from using public transportation upon return to work.

Tim Silva – commented that the Ayer Library (LMI) patrons have needed access to the internet to understand the scope of the health threat and where they can access resources and assistance. He stated that the daily (LMI) patrons they serve cannot afford Netflix, or home computers, are not "tech-savvy", cannot use e-books, are in need of public computers, and are increasingly becoming isolated, and increasingly at-risk.

Cyndi Lavin – commented that with the coming of COVID19 the Stone Soup Kitchen Ministries which as she stated was “all about food & community” has been severely challenged. The free wellness checks, hair dressing service, literacy training, job-training assistance, and most devastatingly, the Pot Luck Diners on Friday nights were all terminated – which has most adversely impacted Ayer’s homeless population and elderly (in poverty) population.

Reza Rahmani – commented that his newly opened and popular bar/social destination place in Downtown Ayer must now completely re-invent itself to survive. Food offerings/service was originally only 30% of the business revenue – now, it is 100% - this is a new business model that will not be sustainable. The unknown about phased business re-openings, social distancing measures, emerging regulations, staff safety, customer safety – has made sustaining the business very tough.

Laurie Sabol – commented that the Massachusetts COVID19 State of Emergency ban on the use of re-usable plastic bags has resulted in adverse environmental impact in Ayer and the region. New rules for re-cycling centers and swap-shops are still unclear. She stated that COVID19 has had many “rippling” effects and that it is a bad time for the re-use/re-cycling community.

Dan Pattenau – commented that he has been required to work from home since mid-March – and that his employer has informed him that he may not be going back to his office in Boston until Spring 2021. He also stated that, like George Bacon, he will no longer be riding on the MBTA passenger rail at Ayer Station, and will use no public transportation into the foreseeable future – he will be driving. Dan has also started home-gardening to provide more fresh food for his household and his neighborhood.

Geof Tilotson – commented that he works in an essential industry (commercial property maintenance), and therefore fortunate to have been at work and earning income since the declared COVID19 State of Emergency. He stated that his concern is his neighbors and those most vulnerable in Ayer are becoming dis-connected. Also he stated that he is concerned about the functionality of the Ayer Planning Board – and the ability for development applicants and board members to effectively review, process and deliver on applications – cannot properly review plans (remotely).

Jannice Livingston – commented that the Ayer community has done a lot to keep people, families, neighbors, classmates, etc. connected and positive during the frightening COVID19 State of Emergency. She stated that we need to advance the establishment of a Town-wide Internet service platform – many Ayer residents, our most in-need do not have internet service and cannot get information for needed resources. Also, not being able to meet has been hard on many people, organizations, and businesses – and that people will continue to be nervous to once again meet together.

Shaun Copeland – commented that as a professional Social Worker his main concern for Ayer and the region is the loss of access to Social Services for the people most in-need and at-risk. He stated that rental assistance and the food pantries should be Ayer’s immediate priority. Also, assistance for day care centers that serve Ayer’s LMI working families are in need of support. He cited Loaves & Fishes Food Pantry as being worthy of our community support during this time. He also stated that Ayer’s small businesses should be provided with “forgivable loans” to keep LMI employees at work.

Cyndi Lavin – commented that when the first federal relief checks were received by the community the number of patrons at Stone Soup Kitchen dropped – then within two weeks the demand for food & life/health care products has spiked 10 times. She stated – “they are back – and the money will soon run out”.

Shaun Copeland – commented that poverty was here in Ayer, our region and country before COVID19 – and will still be here after – we must stay focused not only on the immediate critical need but also for the long-term needs of Ayer’s least advantaged.

Jonathan Kranz – commented that there is a deep issue of underlying poverty in Ayer, and that the CDBG-CV grant is an important start to a long-term community effort. He stated, COVID19 exposes the Town of Ayer to both challenges and opportunities. Food is at the core of so many issues – Ayer has opportunity to develop local food security, agri-business development, and an enhanced transportation/distribution network to feed the Commonwealth.

Reza Rahmani – commented that local food sourcing is the future of his business – it’s good for business. We are learning new lessons and new approaches to running a microbusiness. The PPP was a great thing – it gave us just enough cash flow – but we need to make outdoor/sidewalk café dining happen if we are to survive. If we can’t get that – we would rather stay closed.

A. Manoian then thanks the Public Hearing participants and closed the Public Hearing to comment.

A. Manoian adjourned the Public Hearing at 7:05PM.

(Respectfully submitted by Alan S. Manoian, Dir. Ayer Office of Community & Economic Development)

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "A. Manoian", followed by the date "6/10/20".