

Meeting Minutes

Business Development Council – Sept. 1, 2020

Council members present: Billy McGonigal, Blakely Roof, Bobbei Ruswinckel, Gina Trimarco, Jeffrey Wisniewski, Mara Love, Meredith Donahue, Michelle Diepholz, Monica Archer, Peter Gasca, Tony Troiani, Mike Clark.

Staff Present: Cindy Gettig, Jimmy Gray, Amanda Blomquist.

Others present: Amy Stevens.

The meeting was called to order at 3:04 p.m.

Amy Stevens gave an update on Tidelands Health and the pandemic.

She said Tidelands Health currently (as of Sept. 1) has 20 COVID-positive patients with three possible cases pending test results. Of the 20 patients, eight were in the ICU and four on a ventilator. She said those numbers are improved from two weeks previously. Stevens said COVID patients throughout the spring were at a fairly stable, low number but about the second week in June the volume exploded with a 1700 percent increase and remained consistent between mid-June and mid-August with between 40 and 60 COVID patients.

She said the pandemic presented staffing challenges because there was a quick increase in cases and COVID patients are very resource intensive – in the hospital longer and need more attention. She said critical care units were currently at 109 percent capacity, meaning there aren't any critical care beds available. Additionally, Stevens said there were patients across the age spectrum – not all old – and not all of them had comorbidities. She said the hospital asks everyone to do the basic things – wear a mask, wash your hands, practice social distancing.

Stevens said masks really helped and the numbers declined in correlation with the mask ordinances taking effect in the area.

Tidelands Health partnered with DHEC for several large-scale free testing events. She said 6-7 percent of everyone in Horry County was tested as a result of those efforts. Free testing events continue.

Stevens said the hospital is encouraging people to get a flu shot and said there will be education coming from Tidelands Health about flu shots.

Billy Huggins asked if there was a common denominator for patients that are on ventilators. Stevens said there's not and that's part of the challenge.

Michelle Diepholz asked if it is beneficial to get the test if you have no symptoms and wondered if that would be a waste of test kits.

Stevens said generally, DHEC's position is that it is valuable to test even without symptoms because that can help tell the spread of the virus in the community. She said the antibody test isn't as reliable and encouraged people to talk to their doctor with questions about the antibody test.

Jimmy Gray gave an update on MBACC Legislative efforts.

Gray said we've been watching the hospitality fee dispute. He said that is a large source of revenue and the source of local funding for I-73 in South Carolina. He said interstates aren't built 100 percent with money from the federal government anymore and that it requires local contributions. He said there's been positive movement for the local municipalities to agree on a settlement in that dispute.

Gray said locally we've advocated for mask requirements because it was clear the mandates would be helpful. Gray thanked the council for encouraging people to wear masks and cautioned that businesses don't need to get into fights enforcing the mandates.

Statewide, Gray said all businesses are now allowed to be open. Attractions and theaters were among the last to get that permission. There is a requirement of size limits at 250 people, exceptions can be requested. Gray said that's an automated process.

Gray said the state house will be in session again in two weeks. He expected liability protections to be discussed that would help make sure a business couldn't be successfully sued if someone contracts the virus on their property.

He said the South Carolina received \$1.9 billion in federal funding. The first \$1.2 billion was spent in June and none went to small business relief. Gray said we will advocate that monies be made available for small business support, tourism support and hospitality industry support.

At the federal level, Gray said there seems to be about a \$1 trillion dollar gap between Republican and Democratic plans and there's not much negotiating happening at all. Gray said we'd like to see a second round of PPP loans and an unemployment extension.

Gray said if he's not talking about anything that is a concern to the council members, it means he doesn't know about it and encouraged them to reach out to him so the chamber can best advocate for our investors.

Cindy Gettig gave other chamber updates.

She said renewals were sent out. The chamber board made a great decision about dues. She said there is normally a 2 percent cost of living increase on dues. That was rescinded this year and an additional three percent discount was applied. Gettig said payment plans are available and the due date was pushed to the end of September.

Gettig said we've held several virtual events – 63 Chamber Academy sessions, plus networking events like B2B Connects. Gettig told the council about the EVOLVE series of diversity related education classes presented by our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council. Two have been held so far and Gettig encouraged the council to sign up for the next sessions.

The council was shown the 2019 annual survey and asked for input on updates to the survey, particularly where to add questions about diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and COVID. The council consensus was to add DEI to questions 3 and 4 which rate the importance and effectiveness of chamber functions. A new question will be added for COVID response, Amanda will work on what that wording will look like.

Council Member Updates

Gina Trimarco said theaters are open! Carolina Improv had just decided to close their place and has found a new home. She said it took a couple of weeks to be open. She said theaters still really need help. Between being closed for so long and 50 percent occupancy requirements, she said it's still very challenging for theaters.

O'Neil McCoy said there's been an increase in claims related to employment – layoffs, promotions, etc. He encouraged the council to make sure their businesses have good practices in place for handling layoffs which will help protect against those claims. He said another thing he's seeing in the insurance industry is cyber coverage. He said it used to be supplemental but is now becoming necessary with the number of people working remotely and increases in ransomware, social engineering and phishing.

Blakely Roof with United Way said from a community needs standpoint the 211 call volume has increased about 60 percent in the last two months. The biggest need is utility assistance followed by rent assistance. She said food resources seem to be pretty good, but the United Way is holding some money in reserves in case that need changes.

Bobbei Ruswinckel said the back to school season is usually really busy for the kids hair salon. She said she's been hearing from a lot of parents and business owners who are saying help with childcare is needed because schools aren't in session the normal hours and days. She said maybe the chamber can provide information about who is offering these programs.

Diepholz said SERVPRO is grateful to have made it through the first storm and first hurricane. She said a fear was how customers would handle the protocols when standing in flooding waters. She said COVID becomes an afterthought when you're trying to get water out of your house. She said that process went well and she is grateful her staff is safe.

Mara Love with Tradd said the homeowners she works with are not having as many challenges finding renters now and things seem to be improving on that end.

Meredith Donahue said Habitat for Humanity is accepting applications for the home buyer program. Volunteer opportunities are also available.

Jeffrey Wisniewski said the hospitality association will have their annual golf tournament. There are still team spots, sponsorship opportunities and volunteers slots available.

The meeting adjourned at 4:36 p.m.