



BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS' WORK SESSION

Monday, June 15, 2020, 1:00 P.M.

Virtual Meeting – BlueJeans

The Board of Commissioners held a public work session to the COVID-19 County Relief Block Grant application. Commissioner Michael Pipe convened the meeting at 1:00 PM on Monday, June 15, 2020.

In attendance were Commissioner Michael Pipe, Commissioner Mark Higgins, Commissioner Steven Dershem, Administrator Margaret Gray, and Executive Office Supervisor Natalie Smith.

County Personnel present included Human Service Administrator Natalie Corman, Controller Jason Moser, David Lomison, Chad Joyce, Lee Sheaffer, and Krista Davis.

Guests present included Andrea Cook, Cary Asendorf, Curt Knouse, David Pribulka, Denise Gembusia, Edward Stoddard, Faith McGuire, Gary Hoover, Joanne Tosti-Vasey, John Peterson, Kristen Moyer, Laura Shadle, Michael Danneker, Mike Bloom, SPEFCU, Sue Hannegan, Wendy Vinhage, and several guests by phone.

Representatives from the news media included Marley Parish.

Administrator Margaret Gray provided an overview of the major categories for expenditures for the COVID-19 County Relief Block Grant (CRBG) program. These categories included personal protective equipment, response and planning efforts, behavioral health and substance use treatment services, broadband deployment, tourism, nonprofit assistance programs, businesses with less than 100 employees and businesses who may have experienced COVID-19 expenditures.

Since the initial distribution of guidance from the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), the County has learned that the application will be due on Wednesday, not Tuesday evening. The County has also submitted questions for additional clarification regarding expenditures. The application does not need to include dollar amounts, but it must include a plan for how the Commissioners will allocate or distribute funds across the categories.

Commissioner Pipe expects the County to receive additional money from the State or Federal Government and shared that sentiment with members of the public participating in the work session. The County has also received funding from the Community Development Block Grant and the Pennsylvania Commissioner on Crime and Delinquency. He emphasized that the community can help businesses and nonprofits by working to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Commissioner Higgins also expressed concern about mitigating the effects of the virus for both infection and health. He reported 4,869 businesses in Centre County with less than 100 employees. Businesses that received PPP or EIDSL will not be eligible for funding through the CRBG program. He suggested the Board work diligently to help small businesses and nonprofits.

Commissioner Dershem agreed that general business relief is important along with health, medical, and nonprofit organizations. He also recommended providing personal protective equipment for the general public and helping Penn State succeed in their endeavors to reopen this fall.

The Board was joined by Human Services Administrator Natalie Corman who is focused on behavioral health and substance use services. Natalie is comparing funding received with clients' expenses for services that cannot be covered due to a loss of income or insurance due to COVID-19. Additional resources could also be used for suicide prevention and awareness. Nonprofit organizations are not only supporters but are also employers in the community. Natalie considers organizations that have increased food security, addressing homeless needs, medical needs, organizations that have had to restructure services to meet needs within the community. Margaret added that the common denominator within proposals from county departments and community organizations is personal protective equipment and alterations to make safe spaces for work and education.

The expansion of technology and the ability to work and communicate remotely is essential for many businesses. Chief Information and Records Officer Chad Joyce provided an overview of the changes that were made within Centre County Government for the IT infrastructure to support daily operation requirements.

Commissioner Pipe opened the meeting for public comment.

Joanne Tosti-Vasey of Bellefonte Borough asked if funds from this program will be made available for municipalities. Commissioner Pipe shared a link to the guidelines from DCED with meeting participants (<https://dced.pa.gov/download/covid-19-county-relief-block-grant-guidelines-2020/?wpdmdl=94990>). Ms. Tosti-Vasey suggested CRBG funding for hand sanitation in parks, funding for Center Volunteers in Medicine (CVIM) to provide services for uninsured or underinsured residents, and reimbursement programs for individuals who are unable to pay utility bills due to loss of employment. The Bellefonte Borough Council will be meeting this evening and can provide additional recommendations following their discussion. Commissioner Higgins also suggested streetscaping, widening sidewalks and improving traffic flow in areas with heavier foot traffic.

The suggestions by Ms. Tosti-Vasey are very viable for Commissioner Dershem, however the county may need to consider someone to field the requests and confirm the validity of the expenditures. A lot of requests will be submitted, so it would be helpful to have a system in place. Commissioner Higgins added that the Penn State Small Business Development Center may be able to offer this type of service. Commissioner Dershem suggested hiring an employee within the Office of Financial Management or Commissioners' Office. Of the \$14.7 million, Commissioner Pipe noted that the county is able to allocate up to \$200,000 for administrative expenses. He would be open to having a discussion about creating a new position within the county.

Mike Bloom of College Township asked if DCED has given any indication if the county can transfer funds between designated funding buckets as needs evolve. Commissioner Pipe reported that they have given the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) guidance that the funding is flexible. He is unsure if there is a cap about how much funds can be transferred.

Gary Hoover of the Bellefonte Intervalley Chamber of Commerce shared the Chamber wants to help and offer any services they can. He is excited about the proposed broadband development. Gary asked questions for future planning and preparation: is there a second wave and what could be done better? When testing becomes available, what is the most

efficient way to handle that? What are different scenarios for efficient distribution of the vaccine? With so many resources, Mr. Hoover also suggested radio broadcasting for community education.

Community Relations Director of SEDA-COG Kristen Moyer submitted a question to see if DCED has given any guidance on grant compliance. In order to be a recipient of the funds, Commissioner Pipe explained that entities must follow certain guidelines. The County is still getting word back from DCED. Before distributing any money, the entity's receiving funding will be given clear guidance on how the money can be sent and requirements for reporting.

Rob Schmidt from the Downtown State College Improvement District added to Mr. Hoover's previous comment supporting the PSA broadcasting. He asked if grant funds can be used for marketing messages related to COVID. Commissioner Pipe referenced the DCED guidance stating that county governments can use CRBG funds to cover response and outreach efforts. Mr. Schmidt emphasized the importance of messaging the college students when they return. He also addressed the issue regarding visitors who visit from out of town and are not taking the same precautions. He likes the idea of messaging, signage and hand sanitizing stations. Commissioner Dershem agreed with Mr. Schmidt's comments, with the influx of students it is important to continue education. Safety precautions are very important to continue student activity.

Sue Hannegan, President of the Roland Curtin Foundation agreed with Ms. Tosti-Vasey that PPE is consistently needed and many parks across the county may benefit from hand sanitizing stations. There may be a cost savings from buying in bulk and then municipalities can submit requests. Ms. Hannegan noted an uptick of cases in the Amish community, and suggested there may be non-English speaking populations that may benefit from print resources instead of traditional marketing strategies. Commissioner Dershem agreed that the county needs to purchase large amounts of PPE. Normalizing PPE will communicate that Centre County is serious about keeping our community safe.

Mike Bloom of College Township said that the County will be inundated with requests. He suggests establishing some priorities within the categories; the more the county can remove the subjectivity and be transparent in making the future awards better. Commissioner Pipe explained that the County will consult with health experts to better understand investments and allocate grant funds.

Leslie Kistner of the Happy Valley Adventure Bureau would be willing to help lead messaging both to communicate requirements and that Centre County is a safe destination.

Ed Stoddard suggested allocating funds for the Centre County Visitors Center and Bellefonte Train Station as we provide information and welcome visitors.

While acknowledging limits around his idea, John Peterson recommended keeping money in the Commonwealth economy by purchasing goods and services in Centre County or other areas within the local economy.

Public comments can be submitted to BOC@CentreCountyPA.gov or by calling 814-355-6700 and on social media platforms Facebook and Twitter @CentreCountyGov. There will be meetings held on Tuesday, June 16 at 10 AM and 4 PM.

On a motion by Commissioner Higgins, seconded by Commissioner Dershem, the Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 2:18 PM.

Respectfully Submitted

Natalie Smith,
Executive Office Supervisor
Commissioners' Office