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Council approves ARPA funds timeline

By Lou Fancher

Lafayette city council members at the July 26 meeting heard a presentation about the American Rescue Plan Act and how the city plans to use the ARPA funds from Economic Development Manager Thomas Myers and Barry Foster of HdL/Econ Solutions. As previously reported by Myers on June 28, the city will receive a total of \$6,372,376, half of which was received the week of July 14. The second half will be distributed in July 2022. All funding must be designated by Dec. 31, 2024, and used by Dec. 31, 2026.

The funds can be applied as follows: in response to COVID-19 public health emergencies and negative impacts; for expenditures related to essential workers employed during the pandemic; for government services rendered due to public health emergencies and related to change in revenues collected during the year prior to the emergency (Myers noted that meant the applicable cutoff date for Lafayette would be the fiscal year end in June of 2019); and for investments in sewer, water and broadband infrastructure.

Foster said a "robust community engagement process" would solicit input about needs and best use of the funds from businesses and from the broader community. A PowerPoint presentation outlining the timeline began with three initial, immediate steps: distribution of a survey to local businesses; development with input from a council ARPA subcommittee of a gift card program and a sales tax data analysis to review the impact of Covid-19 on city revenue.

The extended timeline includes returning to the council at the Sept. 13 meeting to share feedback from the business survey and sales tax review, present gift card updates and specifications for launching the program, and gather direction from the council for conducting community surveys and workshops about spending the funds from the community. Foster said they are hoping to do Zoom and in-person public workshops and distribute the community survey to residents in mid-September. Following staff analysis of the results, summary presentations would be made the week of Oct. 25.

Myers said the gift card approach recommended by city staff and HdL/Econ Solutions would begin with a pilot program. Endorsing the overall concept of a gift card that designates use in Lafayette and can be customized with additional features, he said, "Money spent in the community stays local when our local businesses are invested in the community's future." The e-commerce card (not a physical card) can carry a graphic design emblematic of Lafayette and be issued in a range of denominations. It can be further customized with specific hours for use, subsidies, BOGO offers and other features. Foster said the gift cards he has reviewed in other cities had "a rippling effect," and added, "It's easy to do, but you get a lot of bang for your buck."

Council members during a question period asked if nonprofits and new businesses opened during the pandemic were to be involved in the survey process. Foster said input from nonprofits would be valuable and their participation could easily be integrated into both the business and community surveys. Vice Mayor Teresa Gerringer asked specifically if insurance and realty companies would be included with other professional businesses. Myers said all Lafayette businesses open at the time of the survey's distribution in August will be included.

Mayor Susan Candell asked about nonprofits located outside of the city but whose services benefit Lafayette residents and whether they would be included in the surveys. City Manager Niroop Srivatsa said the council could choose to extend parameters that currently restrict inclusion to Lafayette-based organizations if they discussed and voted to authorize extending the parameters.

Receiving no public comments, the council unanimously accepted the ARPA timeline, authorized staff to proceed with the business survey (with the addition of nonprofits and new businesses), and approved gift card plans to proceed with development by staff and the ARPA subcommittee aimed at delivering a final report/update at the Aug. 23 or Sept. 13 meeting, at which council will determine changes and vote on approval for funding the gift card program launch.

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[back](#)

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