

ARPA TOWN HALL MEETING OVERALL THEMES

City of Battle Creek Funding Recommendation

Action and response: The city's list of recommended projects for ARPA funding was the focus of the early town hall meetings. Predominant concerns centered on the organizational-centric nature of the recommendations, along with the notion that the public did not have adequate say in the recommendation, and little influence. In response, staff began to further emphasize the town halls as an opportunity for the public to formulate their priorities for funding and clarified (while increasing) the amount of unallocated funding available for community priorities.

The modified city project list remained a topic of discussion at later town halls however, much more emphasis was placed on community recommendations. Ultimately, the public submitted 26 projects or project ideas (with potentially more to come) that will be considered for funding by the commission.

McCamly Hotel priority project

Action and response: The McCamly Hotel priority project was also an important topic of discussion at early town halls. Town hall attendees were reluctant to support investment given the past performance of the hotel and the overall amount of the recommendation (\$2.5 million). Early discussions focused on the transition to local ownership, the overall importance of the hotel to downtown economic vitality, job creation, and the direct and indirect spending that would result from the project. Staff also emphasized the positioning of the facility as a "teaching" hotel in the hospitality industry, and a commitment to local hiring.

The commission approved the McCamly Plaza investment on Oct. 19, 2021, and we shared information on the rationale for the commission's decision at the balance of the town hall meetings. For the most part, the project was not a significant topic of discussion after it was approved.

Programs and Services for Youth

Action and response: We received numerous comments concerning the need for programs and services for youth. We commonly heard that young people (and older adults) do not feel the community offers enough things to do, particularly for a younger audience. Town hall attendees offered recreation as an area of opportunity for program development (e.g. roller rink) and attendees emphasized the need for training and workforce development for youth. Younger attendees emphasize that their generation is interested in arts and culture programming as a way to provide things to do for young adults.

The city's recommendation for allocating ARPA funds includes recommendations to improve youth-serving facilities such as Flash Flood Water Park and Full Blast, however, those facilities tend to serve a middle school and elementary-age crowd. Funding for a youth-led Cultural Council is included in the public submissions for ARPA funding. The City's Small Business Development team has been collaborating with organizations like Color the Creek and Penetrator Events to offering programs like disc golf downtown, Que the Creek, and kayaking to try to appeal to a younger demographic.

Support for Arts and Culture

Action and response: Support for arts and culture was a consistent theme throughout all meetings. It was a dominant point of discussion at the youth town hall, and a group of representatives from Kingman Museum provided valuable information on their collaborative efforts in the community at the Kool Center/Voces town hall.

Again, funding for a youth-led Cultural Council is included in the public submissions for ARPA funding. The Village Network (CCG) request envisions providing culturally relevant arts and culture experiences. And we anticipate a request from Kingman Museum to support a collaborative of local Arts and Culture providers. The city's SBD team continues to sponsor arts and culture events and activities, and we are currently discussing a new grant with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to support additional arts and culture activities.

Public Engagement

Action and response: Town hall attendees expressed a variety of thoughts and ideas about public engagement. Residents want to know that city administration hears and recognizes their struggles and is willing to take them seriously. From a resident's perspective, it is important that the city invite input and leverage a variety of ways and means to engage the public and solicit feedback. Residents are looking for formal and informal feedback loops when the city asks for and receives input.

Ideas and needs on public engagement did not necessarily result in an ARPA request so much as a desired commitment from the city to continue to engage in meaningful ways, like the town halls.

Small Business Support

Action and response: Attendees at several town halls articulated a desire to see general support for small business. Although the conversation did not focus on a lot of specifics, there was broad recognition for the struggles of small business during the pandemic, and the need to assist with recovery. The city was able to share information on the numerous resources to support small business that have been deployed over the last 18 months (e.g. the city's RMAP rental assistance program, and social district/commons area). We expect that additional stimulus funds from a variety of entities, such as the U.S. Economic Development Administration, will be available for small business support.

Broadband support

Actions and response: There are several initiatives underway, including state and federal grants designed to address the lack of broadband access, and inequities in the provision of services in our community. First and foremost, the County is sponsoring a broadband taskforce to develop service solutions in Calhoun County, and the Governor just recently announced an executive directive to state departments and agencies to collaborate with the legislature and ready the state to continue expanding high-speed internet access. The federal infrastructure bill passed this fall provides \$65 billion in funding to build robust broadband infrastructure and address the many digital equity issues.

The city's revised recommendation for ARPA spending retains \$1 million set aside to support access to high-speed internet in the community, with a focus on underserved areas. While there were no specific project applications from the public addressing this issue, we are optimistic that between the city's recommendation and the likelihood of accessing additional state and federal dollars, the city will be able to meaningfully collaborate with providers and funders to develop a comprehensive broadband strategy, with implementation for the community.

Housing

Actions and response: Attendees often addressed housing insecurity. Comments would suggest that there is awareness of the various housing needs in the community across multiple price points, with an emphasis on affordable housing.

Community conversations and project recruitment continue around housing. Multiple initiatives are in the works from a diverse set of organizations to address housing needs. We expect that the state will emphasize housing needs in the allocation of their ARPA funds, and we received several public submissions during the town hall process related to affordable housing and housing insecurity.

The commission has already approved ARPA funding for the purchase of the Dolliver property, and hotel/motel communal kitchens to address affordable housing and housing insecurity. Dollars remain available for eviction diversion and rehousing, and the city's community development department has additional U.S. Housing and Urban Development funds that have yet to be allocated. A team of city and community stakeholders are also developing a strategic value scorecard to help prioritize the allocation of resources to housing needs.

Transportation

Actions and response: Attendees identified transportation as a need for a variety of reasons, including work, appointments, school, and more. Residents expressed a desire to see expanded service, affordable rates, and more on-demand options. Coordination with schools was recommended, as well as public/private partnerships. Language was also identified as a barrier to use of public transportation systems.

We shared information on the current efforts to expand on-demand services and implement a true county-wide service model. City staff shared that various alternative sources of funding will likely be available to support transportation, including new funding in the recently passed infrastructure bill. We did not receive any community submissions directly tied to transportation, although our understanding is that the CCG/Village request includes elements of transportation. Our hope is to utilize alternative funding sources to support transportation while pursuing a county-wide approach.

Access to food

Actions and response: The lack of convenient access to food and general food insecurity was raised during many of the town halls. Residents are seeking access to neighborhood food resources and are concerned about those who are not getting enough food due to the pandemic. Participants suggested the use of vacant property for urban gardening, and investment to address food desert conditions in Washington Heights and the Post/Franklin neighborhoods.

There are several community requests addressing food in the public submissions. They include a GAP nutrition program for infants, a food distribution program, funding for a food education center, and funding for the direct purchase of food for distribution. The request from the Village Network also includes funding for food systems, including urban farms and culturally relevant fresh food markets within mini villages. The city's SBD team is also actively recruiting potential grocers for targeted investment.

Childcare

Actions and response: Early childhood development and childcare came up at several town halls. It is well-known that this industry is struggling to attract workers, and dealing with issues such as low pay and affordability for users. Childcare remains a key barrier to employment.

There is a robust network of local stakeholders collaborating to meet childcare needs in the community. Our understanding is that a plan is forming with multiple components to address challenges in the industry. There is a funding request for early childhood incentives in the public submissions.

Language access needs

Actions and response: Strategies and tactics to effectively address language barriers were a popular discussion point, particular at the Burmese and Latinx hosted town halls. Residents talked about the need for translation at schools, for workforce programs, transportation, and municipal services to ensure that users can access important support systems and services, in as close to real time as possible. Funding for critical service providers such as the Burma Center or Voces was identified as a way to provide support for ESL constituencies. Both the Burma Center and Voces have submitted requests for ARPA funding.

Premium pay for essential workers

Actions and response: Town hall participants acknowledged the direct stimulus support received by individuals and families during the pandemic, but expressed continued struggles. Because premium pay for essential workers is limited under the ARPA guidelines, staff focused on recommendations, such as indirect support through utility bill forgiveness, as a way to provide financial relief to residents.