



City of Tucson: Navigating the Impacts of COVID-19

Barbra Coffee • published in the May 2020 issue

As we approach National Economic Development Week May 4–9, it occurs to me how vastly different our focus is right now in Tucson and around the world, for that matter. Last year, at this time, we were responding to a variety of relocation and expansion projects, enjoying robust activity in our downtown and commercial corridors, and experiencing very low unemployment. Today, we are treading water and struggling to keep businesses afloat as they experience the radical changes brought about by COVID-19.



Boxes of face shields and masks made for local healthcare workers

And yet, it occurs to me, still, that this is why we exist. As economic developers, our role is to support existing business in our community, first and foremost. We know that 80% of our new jobs in a community come from the business and industry that is already here. So, it is imperative that we do what we can to keep those businesses here and help them grow and expand. Today, that mission is especially significant, as we have watched offices go remote, restaurants close their dining rooms, and theater and entertainment venues literally shut down and close the curtains.

Our goal is to get back to business again as soon as it is responsible to do so. To move through this crisis, the City's Office of Economic Initiatives has shifted its entire focus to helping small business navigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We immediately began staffing up our small business hotline in order to field calls coming from the business community trying to understand and interpret each new state or local executive order that was issued in the early days of this pandemic. In the first four weeks, we fielded over a hundred calls and offered referrals to local business resource partners who could offer business counseling and financial assistance.

We reacted quickly by standing up a weekly webinar on Monday afternoons at 3 pm, now heading into its 6th week, to share resources with small businesses and connect them to the latest information and updates from our partner organizations. We have averaged more than 80 participants on each webinar and have had more than 500 downloads of the recorded webinars which are posted each week on our city's YouTube channel. We have posted



Volunteers making the face shields and masks

all resources and links to webinars on www.ConnectTucson.com which we just launched in February as the City of Tucson's first standalone economic development website.

Mayor & Council have now approved one million dollars as part of a Tucson Resiliency Loan Program in order to provide additional financial assistance to local small businesses that have been hit the hardest in our community. When we surveyed our business community in the first two weeks of the stay-at-home orders, we discovered that more than 60% of our businesses do not have standing lines of credit and yet more than 80% are paying their employees even if they are unable to work right now. But we also heard is that only 22% could make it four weeks before having to close. That four weeks has come and gone. Our mindset is on economic recovery now. We will be working to find ways to support business getting their doors back open.

Our team has reinforced outreach efforts specifically to the monolingual Spanish speaking business community. We are proactively reaching out to these businesses in order to ensure they are receiving the information and access to resources and assistance to enhance their survival rate. It is essential that they have the same access and support available to them in their native language.

It is no accident that we landed on ConnectTucson as our domain name for our website. It's in our DNA, as economic development professionals, to connect people to resources and assistance in order to grow jobs and develop the economy. But the words ConnectTucson have taken on even more meaning in this period of quarantine and self-isolation. They offer hope, that if we stay connected, if we stick together, if we continue to support one another through this challenging time, that we will come out of this more united and more resilient than ever.

I only have to look at the story of the work that Hope Worldwide is doing in Tucson. When Daniel Dicochea reached out to us in late March and shared that his volunteers were making face masks in an empty hotel ballroom

cobbling together supplies and trying to keep costs and overhead low, I knew we needed to find him a solution. A few quick emails to our partners in economic development at Pima County, and we had a connection to Steve Pagnucco with Universal Avionics. Universal Avionics was able to take underutilized warehouse space and offer it up to Hope Worldwide so that they could produce even more masks so desperately needed by our local health professionals and first responders.

This is the essence of Tucson. We will continue to find ways to connect our small businesses to the resources they need to move through this challenging time. It is our goal that they recover quickly and recover strong.

Barbra Coffee serves as Director of Economic Initiatives for the City of Tucson. She is responsible for the city's economic development strategy, which includes local business retention and expansion programs, business attraction, small business and entrepreneurial development and business ombudsman activities. Her division is also responsible for annexations and the economic development and workforce grants program. She can be reached at Barbra.coffee@tucsonaz.gov.

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