

TOWN OF GROTON COVID UPDATE
July 14, 2020

Questions received from Council Franco:

1. Is the town prepared for the impact on our Human Services, does Human Services have a plan?
2. Would Human Services explain the process someone would go through to qualify for assistance?
3. How did Human Services deal with this past spike in need from March to June, and what changes do they think they could do to improve for the future?
4. Where can Human Services get additional funds if needed?
5. What other resources are in Groton for those who permanently lose their job and need assistance?
6. How many people are using services (including food) now, and compared to April 2020, as well as compared to a typical year?
7. What kind of trend is Human Services seeing and predicting?
8. What can Human Services do to help with rent relief after July, who is eligible, how can they help those not eligible?
9. Is Human Services prepared for an increase in food insecurities that may come in August and beyond?
10. Is there anything the Council could do to help Human Services?
11. Is it possible for the Town to do secured low interest loans to community businesses or organizations - is this part of the local recovery committee?
12. What is the pulse of our business community?
13. What is Groton's unemployment % during COVID, and compared to pre-COVID?
14. What is going on with the development on Rt 184 near Tollgate, a new 11.75 acres for sale sign is now there.
15. What is going on with town development projects such as Groton Heights?
16. How many COVID tax deferments came into the Town by the July 1 deadline?
17. What kind of trend is Economic Development seeing and predicting?
18. Is there anything the Council can do to assist the business community?

HUMAN SERVICES UPDATE

1. Is the town prepared for the impact on our Human Services, does Human Services have a plan? Human Services will be prepared to offer its basic services-- assistance with rent, utilities, food, fuel oil based upon eligibility criteria for the various programs it manages directly or administers on behalf of other agencies. Should needs increase, the department will apply for local, regional, State or Federal grants as they become available. Additionally, many local groups, service clubs and private citizens are willing to help support the department.
2. Would Human Services explain the process someone would go through to qualify for assistance? There are numerous different assistance programs available through the department. The social workers determine what programs are the best fit for each individual client based upon his/her circumstances and needs. A pre-application is completed for each client that helps the social workers understand the client's situation. Based upon information gleaned in the interview with the client, any past history with the client and knowledge of the available resources, the social worker makes her determination as to what assistance programs will be most helpful to the client.

3. How did Human Services deal with this past spike in need from March to June, and what changes do they think they could do to improve for the future? The primary need from March to the present has been food. The need has been and continues to be met. No changes are necessary - The food assistance program works very efficiently as it is currently set up.
4. Where can Human Services get additional funds if needed? There are grants available from local, regional, State and Federal entities. Service clubs, individual donors, community groups are ready and willing to help. Groton has always provided for its less fortunate residents; Groton is a very giving community.
5. What other resources are in Groton for those who permanently lose their job and need assistance? "Permanently" needs to be clarified. Resources are determined on a case-by-case basis; each client's circumstances are different and there is never a one size fits all solution. The circumstances of how a person lost his/her job must be considered. Is there a disability that has or has not been identified? Are there substance abuse issues? What skills does the person have? Are there language issues? Immigration status issues? What is the person's individual work ethic? Does the person have (reliable) transportation? Does the person have child care issues, etc.? Are there family members or relatives who can assist? Referrals to appropriate agencies are based upon these questions and more. Assistance in what form and how much is determined based on many factors. (See further below for the answer from Economic Development)
6. How many people are using services (including food) now, and compared to April 2020, as well as compared to a typical year? For food assistance, we are currently assisting at least twice the number of clients that we would normally. Other areas of assistance (rent and utilities) are presently below the normal number due to the moratoriums that are in place.
7. What kind of trend is Human Services seeing and predicting? At the present time, in the midst of a Pandemic, it is difficult to predict trends. It is similarly difficult to identify any true or significant trends because so much is currently in a state of flux. The coronavirus holds all the cards.
8. What can Human Services do to help with rent relief after July, who is eligible, how can they help those not eligible? We will utilize the funds we have available through the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (\$10k) and the Community Foundation's "Neighbors for Neighbors" program (\$12k) for clients eligible per those respective programs' criteria; we also have monies available in our department's Donations Trust Fund and limited funds in the Flora Perkins Trust. Maximum assistance levels of \$400 per household must be adhered to (for all funds) in order to stretch available funds as much as possible. Persons not eligible for assistance are referred to 2-1-1 for local shelter programs and specific programs associated with the Governor's Housing Assistance Plan (which has numerous avenues of relief for renters and home owners in a variety of circumstances.)
9. Is Human Services prepared for an increase in food insecurities that may come in August and beyond? YES- We are constantly assessing the needs of our community and our client bases and always planning with an eye towards future needs.

10. Is there anything the Council could do to help Human Services? Encourage the community to donate non-perishable food and cash donations to the Food Locker and also the department's Donations Trust Fund. Consider re-directing monies supporting outside social services and cultural agencies to the Town's Human Services Dept. for direct assistance to residents in need. Consider donations to the Groton Utilities Energy Assistance Fund, which are matched \$.50/\$1.00 by Groton Utilities. Maintain existing staffing levels in Human Services.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

5. What other resources are in Groton for those who permanently lose their job and need assistance? The only source of funding assistance is the CT Unemployment Insurance Program through the Department of Labor. The federal CARES Act provided supplemental funding (Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation) to assist those without work including increased weekly payouts of up to \$600.00. This supplemental funding is set to expire in July. Also, the CARES Act provided funding to employers in the form of Payroll Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) that provides funding to rehire employees. The PPP offers forgivable loans to employers who hire back their employees. The EIDL provides low interest loans with terms up to 30 years for non-payroll operational expenses.
11. Is it possible for the Town to do secured low interest loans to community businesses or organizations - is this part of the local recovery committee? There were nearly 60 Groton businesses that received PPP funding estimated at over \$14 million. Likely most of it will be forgivable loans if used for primarily payroll expenses. Federal PPP funding is still available to businesses. We have not been provided EIDL funding business listings yet. The state also provided direct loans to businesses as well through the CT Bridge Program. The town has yet to discuss providing low interest loans directly to businesses or organizations. If the Town Council is interested, a funding allocation would be required plus targeted parameters (business size, type, maximum loan/grant). It likely would be small in comparison to available federal and state funding.

Additionally, staff is working with ECHO in preparing for a future Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) COVID grant proposal for Groton. We are targeting about \$300,000 call addressing an initial \$7 million in grant funds for small communities in CT. Part one of our grant will establish a stockpile of critical PPE and supplies which were and are difficult to purchase during the current pandemic including face masks, N-95 respirators, gloves, Tyvek protective clothing, Plexi-Glass for barriers, plastic sheeting for isolation and critical barriers. Part two will involve preparation of personnel who will be on the front lines. Part three will involve the adaptation of health curriculum within the existing public-school systems at all levels with age appropriate lessons on the health and wellness activities. Staff and ECHO have held positive meetings with both Groton Public Schools and Grasso Technical School.

12. What is the pulse of our business community? Groton has conducted two business surveys to date with three more planned between now and the 2020 holiday season. The first survey was completed from April 9th-21st). Results were concerning at the beginning of the COVID shutdown. 83% of the respondents were small businesses having fewer than 10 employees. 49% were closed and 41% only partially open. 92% experienced loss of sales. 39% experienced loss of future orders. 35% encountered

supply chain disruptions, 23% had sanitation and PPE cost issues. Greater than 50% planned on taking federal business assistance. They were asked “how long can you remain at current status before closing permanently?” Responses were as follows: thru May – 84%; June – 61%; July - 41%; and August- 28%.

Additionally, Groton has partnered with Naviretail, a retail analytical firm, to directly contact a large sample of existing Groton businesses. The goal is to track retail impact trends from COVID-19 and compare with pre-COVID baseline consumer information. The first phase has been completed. Three more phases will be conducted through 2020 and the holiday season. Details from Phase I will be available in the future, but preliminary findings include:

- gyms/recreational sports having problems recouping time lost and disinfecting space is challenging due to product short fall
- salons challenged with PPE hard to find and high risk between workers/patrons
- hotels/motels struggled when only allowed to admit essential workers as guests
- single proprietors had one source of income, but cannot take on other work due to restrictions
- small businesses having issues purchasing PPE (supply and cost),
- issues with customers following safety protocol,
- 28% of businesses were rejected by federal financial assistance (SBA/PPP/EIDL),
- supply chain issues due to short falls,
- multi-lingual translation challenges, and
- government hotline resources for unemployment or loans “can be a wild goose chase.”

13. What is Groton's unemployment % during COVID, and compared to pre-COVID?

Groton’s May unemployment rate is 12.4%. Pre-COVID unemployment rate averaged 3.5%. Note the immediate action by small businesses due to the statewide shutdown was to steer employees to the Unemployment Insurance Program in anticipation of future federal and state financial assistance.

14. What is going on with the development on Rt 184 near Tollgate, a new 11.75 acres for sale sign is now there. The developer has paid for the exclusive land option agreement for the property. We are awaiting plans from the developer.

15. What is going on with town development projects such as Groton Heights?

Groton Heights Elementary School: Groton is still awaiting ThayerMahan's final comments on the town's Purchase and Sales (P&S) agreement. We are also awaiting response on the DECD Brownfields grant agreement. They have been adding new hires for months, securing new federal contracts, but most recently were impacted by COVID. We are in regular contact with ThayerMahan.

Mystic Education Center: Staff continues coordinating with the Respler Homes team regarding the “Mystic River Bluffs” project. See the link for more project information <https://resplerhomes.com/mystic-river-bluffs/>

Staff emphasis continues to be on the proposed zoning language for future P&Z Commission review. Also, staff has been discussing financing options with Respler. Greenplay and town staff have been working on the engineering study for the Pratt Building plus the focus on the community wide recreation needs

assessment. Coursey & Company serves as Respler's project outreach coordinator. The public is encouraged to reach out to Coursey with questions. Fuss & O'Neil, Respler's engineering contractor, has begun refining design and engineering concepts for the site including reviews for building location, utility upgrades and roads/infrastructure. Financing discussions are ongoing. Most of 2020 will be used to complete the planning, design, engineering, permitting, and programming for the Mystic Education Center property. Groundbreaking for Phase I is envisioned in 2021 entailing the adaptive reuse of all existing buildings plus installation of needed infrastructure. Subsequent development, primarily residential construction, is planned for Phase II.

Seely School: The "Triton Square" redevelopment project is advancing. Don Mar Development Corporation will construct a 280-unit multi-family apartment development with amenities. Targeted future tenants are young professionals and "empty-nesters." Pre-development work ongoing. See this project page. <https://www.seelyschool.com/>

Colonel Ledyard School: The City/Town Committee completed its review and made a recommendation. Staff has coordinated with the recommended "preferred developer" to prepare for a future direct

16. How many COVID tax deferments came into the Town by the July 1 deadline? There were 23 applications for COVID relief received. 14 accounts were approved (8 Real Estate and 6 Personal Property). 6 applications turned out to be for accounts automatically enrolled (Mixture of Real Estate & Motor Vehicle). 3 accounts were denied due to lack of necessary documentation.
17. What kind of trend is Economic Development seeing and predicting? Over the short term, unemployment will improve over the summer plus businesses will continue to reopen. The fall will be the true test as to which existing small businesses choose not to continue. Larger businesses are less likely to be impacted. We are seeing new investment enter Groton from other geographic areas. Small infill developments in growth areas are occurring. School redevelopment sites such as Pleasant Valley School are drawing significant attention. Existing redevelopment projects are advancing at slightly quicker pace than pre-COVID. These former school properties are anticipated to be significant future tax generators to the community. Relatively speaking, Groton offers excellent quality of life at highly affordable rates to the investment community. Infrastructure investments to the community, like schools, is a major advantage to the community. Longer term, Groton may benefit from the economic turmoil impacting New England.
18. Is there anything the Council can do to assist the business community? The Council deliberated on and approved direct property tax deferment program for property owners. Property taxes are the single largest financial variable the Town controls. After evaluating how many are using the program, it might be appropriate to consider next steps for the program.

FURTHER HUMAN SERVICES INFORMATION

- Human Services Building remains accessible by appointment only and this is working very well. Clients have readily adjusted to using the newly installed GHS Drop Box to leave off documents needed for Renters' Rebate apps, rent assistance and utility

assistance. The Dept also helps with determining eligibility for Groton City playground program scholarships and the drop box has been routinely utilized for documents relating to this program. Some clients send documents via email. (Registrars' office has signs posted to call that office if needing to register to vote. But on-line voter registration is also available if a person has a CT Driver's Lic or State-issued ID.)

- Managers at local Senior/Disabled housing complexes are assisting the department with the Renters Rebate Program by submitting applications and documentation for their residents that in the past have been collected at the respective sites by department social workers doing in-person visits. Covid ruled out such in-person visits. Upon receipt of apps/documentation from the complexes, social workers are entering the information via computer for submission per OPM requirements. It is expected the department will submit approximately 600 applications for Groton renters-- on par with last year's number of applicants.
- Rent and utility moratoriums remain in effect (basically through August.) It is anticipated that the impact resulting from lifting the moratoriums will be felt in September, unless the moratoriums are extended once again. Human Services is assisting relatively few utility and rent customers at this point. Grant monies received from the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) and the Community Foundation of Eastern CT will be utilized to help maintain housing. The majority of utility consumers in Groton are Groton Utilities customers and GU has reached out to Human Services to help bolster the GU Energy Assistance Program operated by Human Services. (GU recently donated \$2000 to the fund and matches all donations \$.50/\$1.00.) Most clients being assisted to date have not been seriously behind on rent or utilities; this picture is expected to change when the moratoriums are lifted.
- Food remains the most prevalent need at this point and donations have kept up with the demand. Households in need contact the dept by phone and the social workers obtain basic info and then assign a time slot for households to pick up their food. The department is giving out an average of 35 food orders per week, to a combination of family and individual/couple households. In addition to the non-perishable food, the dept provides gift cards to local grocery stores and also local restaurants. The latter gift cards have been donated via two Covid-inspired community initiatives, Groton Feeds Groton and SAFE in Groton. Food is generally requested once per month by most households but is available if needed as often as every two weeks. Household cleaning supplies and personal hygiene items have been donated in bulk by local service clubs and have also been obtained with a grant from Children First Groton; these items are provided along with the food orders.
- Groton is fortunate to have several food resources available that are operating concurrently: Groton Schools' Grab n' Go Summer (breakfast/lunch/weekend) Meals for Children 18 Yrs. and under, the Senior Center's Grab n' Go lunch meals, Community First's Weds and Friday to-go dinner meals, Groton Community Meals' Monday to-go dinner meals and the Groton Food Locker. Additionally, local low-income families with school age children have benefited from the Pandemic EBT Program, which provides approx. \$114/mo per child with eligibility determined primarily via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Free and Reduced-Price school meals program.

- None of the Food Programs noted has been overwhelmed with participants; it is assumed many households in Groton have benefited from the mandated increase to Unemployment Compensation and the Federal Stimulus payments. These sources of assistance plus the rent and utility moratoriums have at least *temporarily* mitigated and/or postponed any significant impact of the coronavirus and the resulting economic downturn.
 - The United Way Mobile Food Pantry has temporarily ceased operation because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. According to United Way, it has halted its MFP operation because of the risk to volunteers, participants and staff at the United Way Food Center and ten sites (including Groton Human Services) throughout NL Co. No date has been provided re. resumption of this program.
- In view of the Covid-19 pandemic and the uncertainty of overall community health and well-being in the upcoming fall and winter months, Human Services is switching its annual School Backpack Program and Holiday Distribution Programs from their usual formats: Rather than assembling and distributing actual backpacks, food and toys, the dept will be providing gift cards for such items to eligible families. This will significantly lessen the number and length of contacts between clients, volunteers, staff and donors, thus significantly reducing person to person interactions and lowering the risk of contracting Covid-19. It is anticipated these programs will return to their usual formats in 2021.