

Taking Steps Toward Economic Recovery through Community Engagement

A small island takes town meetings online [PM Magazine, July 2020]

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No man is an island, but the town of Nantucket is. Thirty miles off the mainland of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, the 55 square mile island provides critical services to approximately 17,000 year-round residents, 56,000 seasonal residents, and thousands of additional visitors during the prime tourist season. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the island economy very hard and drove an early influx of seasonal residents from all over the country who came to the island to shelter in place.



The island has unique vulnerabilities because of limitations with its health care infrastructure. The town government through its Select Board and Board of Health, in conjunction with the Nantucket Cottage Hospital, were quick to put important orders in place to protect the health and safety of residents and visitors. Some of the actions the town took to protect the island were more stringent than state orders. However, these more stringent orders had a disproportionately adverse impact on the island, as did statewide restrictions that did not take into consideration the unique environment on the island.

For example, if you lived on the mainland and needed art supplies for your child's remote learning projects, you could purchase those at a store like Target. There is no Target, or anything similar, on Nantucket—so rather than local small businesses being allowed to provide these essential supplies to residents, people on the island were forced to use mail-order services. This situation created a delay in getting needed supplies and a lost

opportunity for the small businesses that make up the only retail on the island to be of service to their community.

Likewise, much of the construction and landscaping trades industry is dependent upon commuters traveling by ferry from the mainland to the island. While these workers are a vital part of the Nantucket economy, the risk associated with potentially increasing community spread on a small island with limited health care facilities prompted swift action, and all but emergency construction and repairs were halted. Such a decision is a micro-version of the tradeoffs between lives and livelihood—a decision the town did not make lightly, but has helped minimize the spread of COVID-19 on the island.

The Nantucket economy is heavily dependent on tourism. Hotels and inns closed for all but essential workers, and short-term rentals were not permitted. As with much of the country, restaurants have been closed and gatherings of more than 10 individuals discouraged or even banned. Because of the unknown future for businesses that depend on tours and charters, plus the cancellation of long-planned weddings, vacations, and popular events, local businesses grew increasingly concerned about their long-term viability. For many, their livelihood for the year is earned during the short summer season when Nantucket is a major tourist destination.

The town’s director of culture and tourism was asked to pivot her responsibilities to support economic recovery efforts that were initiated by the town in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce and local business community. An Economic Recovery Task Force was formed, and their first task was to conduct community roundtable meetings with various sectors of the local economy. Several affinity groups were created:

- Arts, culture, and nonprofits.
- Construction, landscaping, and trades.



- Health, human services, and childcare.
- Retail, fitness centers, and personal care.
- Tours, charters, and activities.
- Restaurants, events, and entertainment.
- Transportation.
- Accommodations.

In the time of COVID-19, community meetings are anything but business as usual. The town reached out to The Novak Consulting Group, now a part of Raftelis, to determine the best way to engage with local businesses. Eight roundtables were convened using the Zoom online meeting platform, and more than 230 people participated in productive discussions to share their ideas for how the town could support various sectors of the Nantucket economy through orders, actions, or advocacy.

Meeting invites were sent using Eventbrite (an online event management site), so the facilitators knew (approximately) how many people to expect. Some sessions had more than 50 participants. The meetings required a carefully planned agenda and adherence to ground rules. The facilitators set very clear expectations about participation—and the participants were great about adhering to them! The Zoom platform allowed for the efficient use of breakout groups where meaningful discussions could be held on specific topics. A combination of large group discussions and breakout groups, followed by report outs, allowed each person to share their piece in this series of interactive, one-hour meetings.

A town resident who was a former marketing vice president for a major beauty brand shared this comment on the virtual meeting platforms: “...I have attended more than my share of facilitated brainstorming; the ones you have conducted this week are the very best both in organization, ability to elicit good comments/ideas, and speed of the visual facilitator’s recap.”

The results of the sector meetings were funneled to the Economic Recovery Task Force that met twice to review the complete report and content from the sector meetings and develop specific, actionable recommendations. They presented their recommendations to the Select Board on May 20; 26 recommendations for town action fell into three categories: communication, permitting, and public spaces. The ideation required creativity and reimagining how the town could support

GROUND RULES

- Wait to be called on by the facilitator.
- Say your name each time you speak.
- Mute your microphone when not speaking
- If you would like to add comments, please use the chat feature. Comments will be included in the meeting notes.
- Facilitators will keep strict time limits.
- Meeting notes will be provided.

its business community. Town staff, who have been working long, long days during the pandemic, were challenged by the town manager to suspend judgment, listen, and imagine an environment where traditional permitting rules and uses for public spaces were suspended in order for the town's businesses to have a chance to survive.

An email to town staff assigned to support implementation said, "We have all been working extremely hard these past eight weeks, and it would be easy for us to hear a new idea and want to explain why something can't work or isn't practical. Our posture needs to be one of breaking down barriers and exploring how we can help.... Our job as town staff is to work collaboratively with the task force to bring forward recommendations to the Select Board that we will ultimately be tasked with implementing."

Local governments have long been yearning for a way to end the public participation expectation of "three minutes at the microphone." Being forced to imagine an entirely new way to engage with a community that needed its local government created a way to do just that. A new way to engage with our communities is one of the bells that will not be "unrung" as we return to traditional ways and places of work— we now have new tools for public meetings.



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