

SAVE SMALL BUSINESS – SHARON, PA

Sharon, PA is a small-sized city in western Pennsylvania with a strong mill history and work ethic to succeed even in the face of change. Local small businesses were shut down for two months and are now slowly reopening because of the need to contain COVID-19 and protect human health. These businesses, the backbone of the local economy, will not survive the shutdown without direct and immediate assistance from the local government and its partners.

Every part of the City of Sharon is working hard to respond to this emergency and figure out the best way to move forward – building the strategy and implementing it all at the same time. Small business owners are working overtime to reopen, find new ways to bring staff back onto the payroll, and cover all of the new costs associated with health safety requirements to reopen.

Sharon’s small business community is small but mighty and includes a diversity of business owners and business types. Businesses are coalescing around the potential for a strong downtown and many operate as a regional draw to the area.

The **Recast City Save Small Business** memo provides Sharon with a summary of feedback from interviews with small business owners to quickly identify their immediate needs for a small business grant program and additional assistance needed to help businesses survive, build a strong downtown with a strong local economy, and include the diversity of Sharon’s small business community in this success. Recommendations are also based on best practices from other communities working towards similar goals.

The interviews with small business owners were conducted by Recast City at the start of June 2020 as businesses reopened during Yellow and Green phases designated from the state. Each business owner provided feedback about how their work has changed, loss of revenue, how the grant funding would be most helpful, and what other kinds of support would be most useful going into an unpredictable period.





1. SMALL BUSINESS INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Small business owners in Sharon, PA noted a number of assets and challenges to their businesses during the one on one interviews. Some of the challenges pre-date the COVID-19 shutdown and others are specifically due to the economic impact of the pandemic. All interviews were conducted by phone.

The major assets business owners noted in the interview included:

- Long history of anchor stores that draw customers from one to five hours away in the region,
- Downtown's growing attraction as a place to get food, visit, and come together,
- Successful efforts of local businesses, before COVID-19, to be gathering places for the community,
- Interest of business owners to work together to attract customers back to the city, and,
- Support from the city government to make things work.



Small business owners also noted a number of challenges they face. The challenges included here are specific to the COVID-19 shutdown and reopening, but also include feedback about significant differences between business owners and their needs.

The major challenges noted include:

- Major loss of revenue during the shutdown – from 25 to 100 percent of revenue – and loss of stock that was thrown out,
- High cost of reopening due to the need to install plexiglass and other personal protection equipment,
- Lack of online sales and social media marketing,
- Lack of sufficient indoor space for programming or services due to safety requirements,
- No one convening business owners to think through options together and partner on new initiatives,
- Lack of access to federal programs and no knowledge of state loan or grant programs,
- No shared marketing encouraging people in the region that Sharon is safe and open for business,
- Decrease in revenues (and increase in costs) due to spacing requirements in phase Green,
- Limited representation of Black business owners or other people of color in business community engagement.



2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The small businesses in Sharon will benefit from a number of different types of assistance. The ideas below are a combination of immediate help and longer-term initiatives that will help strengthen and stabilize the local economy. They are based on feedback and ideas from the business owners and on best practices seen across the nation.

Sharon's small businesses will benefit from a number of immediate steps including:

- **Launch a small business grant program** with an application to allow the community to invest in a diversity of business types, business owners, and business locations to support reopening, address some of the losses associated with the shutdown, and fund necessary changes to operations due to COVID-19. The grant should be released as soon as possible and allow a wide variety of uses, including reimbursement for the high costs associated with the safety measures to reopen.
- **Market Sharon's small businesses and the downtown** through a combined campaign broadcast to the broader region that Sharon is safe and open for business. A number of business owners talked about being a regional draw and both newer and legacy businesses requested help to create shared promotional work to attract customers back to the city. This marketing would be most successful both on TV as well as through social media. Local businesses could also partner on cross promotional efforts such as popup cards at restaurants or bars for local services and vice versa.
- **Give occupancy numbers to legacy businesses** so they can accommodate more customers than 12 people per thousand square feet. The state restrictions for health and safety suggest that if a legacy business does not have an established occupancy number then fewer people will be allowed in the space than can be accommodated with six foot spacing. This limits the businesses even more and may make some businesses no longer viable.
- **Create a temporary pavilion** that local businesses and organizations can use to host events and services that cannot currently be accommodated indoors. Art education and other local businesses that often host events could have large lockers for equipment and share the space to bring in revenues in the short-term, even with the required safety distances.
- **Partner with the Urban League** to conduct purposeful outreach to more Black business owners and other business owners of color to ensure that local, state, and federal programs are accessible to them. Work with the Urban League and the SBDC to provide direct technical assistance, where needed, to make sure the business owners have the materials they need to apply for the various programs.
- **Provide technical assistance to help business owners access new state funding programs.** Pennsylvania recently announced a new round of funding available to small business owners. Sharon should promote this information to local business owners, hand out flyers to everyone who is interested, and provide one on one technical assistance as needed to make sure businesses can apply.

- **Coordinate elected official, police, and Chamber visits** to the local businesses, especially those interviewed through this initiative, to show support from the community leadership. Use this time to build stronger relationships directly with a diversity of business owners.

Longer-term projects that will continue to strengthen Sharon’s economy include:

- **Invest in riverfront property** to bring together residents and attract visitors throughout the year. This area could include a pavilion and a riverwalk, even in the short-term, to host outdoor activities that can no longer be accommodated indoors because of health and safety precautions.
- **Launch the Business Improvement District (BID) for downtown** to coordinate marketing of the area, invest in storefront facades, and purposefully recruit a diversity of businesses and business owners to downtown Sharon. The BID will also be essential to create a series of outdoor programming to draw people together in the city and from the region. This effort should also work with property owners to develop small open lots and fill in main street buildings.
- **Bring small business owners together** to build a stronger connection throughout the local business community. Many of the legacy business owners know each other, but others are not included. The city can work with the Chamber of Commerce and the Urban League to host meet-ups at different business locations for owners to meet, share ideas, and develop new businesses together.

3. CONCLUSION



The City of Sharon is home to strong legacy businesses, diverse business owners who choose to be in the city, and a community of business leaders who want to work together.

Although the recovery from the economic shutdown from COVID-19, and the unpredictable nature of the next year or two, the community’s small business owners are ready to reopen and make Sharon shine again.

This time is a special opportunity to bring business owners together, purposefully invest in and support a diversity of business owners, and work with downtown to become the regional draw it can be.

