A Possible Framework for Economic and Community Development Recovery Planning for your City
Adapted from the work of Rich Bradley

Overview
Regenerating the city’s economy is clearly a priority for community and business leaders, even as they attempt to address the immediate consequences of the still-unfolding combination of health and economic crises. The following is a preliminary attempt to offer a framework for a recovery planning process, while recognizing the time and resource limitations of the present circumstances. It focuses on three levels of possible attention:

- Industry (the core economies)
- Place (major and neighborhood based commercial districts), and
- Institutional support (financial, philanthropic and governmental)

It suggests possible ways to support and integrate these multiple levels with differing sets of potential partners. This renewal effort proposes to apply basic strategic analysis to the development of action-oriented plans with short-range timetables, while putting a high-priority on engaging with place-based management and economic development organizations. This planning process could also be designed to take into consideration broader community social and health needs as well as concerns for equity.

Core Industry Analysis and Planning

A central tenet of urban economic development planning is the need to focus on existing core industries as well as their secondary impacts (local contracting) and related impacts (local hiring). In order to assist in this kind of planning, some cities have established “industry councils” made up of the business executives of these sub-economies who are asked to help shape future direction through both coordinated private action as well as public policy. Elements of this kind of entity may already exist in your City (business roundtables, sector alliances, etc.) and should be utilized. These organizations have the capacity to quickly access information about the relative well-being of their member organizations. This information can be supplemented by data collected by the city or other private stakeholders which tracks, among other variables, employment trends, which overlap with the information from the core industries, and provides insight into the economic well-being of many aspects of city life. For example, in Washington DC this information gives a good picture of employment in their economic cores (pre-COVID-19), i.e., government, 250,000 jobs; health, 71,000 jobs; education, 61,000 jobs; and food, 55,000 jobs, in addition to large agglomerations like professional services, 95,000; and nonprofit organizations, 67,000.

Each of these core industries could be invited to form a task force and given a suggested template with a request to produce a short-range plan within two months. It is possible that these plans could provide guidance to the cities elected leaders with respect to what public expenditures/investments would be most effective and efficient. Ideally an existing broad-based business focused organization with coordinating experience would provide process support. It is expected that key public sector leaders would also be involved throughout the process. The intended product of this effort would be a set of six to ten plans with recommendations for collective action between private and public interests.

Place-Based Planning
There are often multiple place management organizations with a city. For example, Washington DC has 11 BIDs and 17 Main Street programs with a combined budget of over $40 million. They are ideally situated in neighborhood commercial centers, designed to support local business, while also focused on “place” development approaches, and deeply connected to the businesses and residents in their areas. Most are already actively involved in addressing the immediate crisis. They are also well connected to other community, civic and non-profit organizations, many of whom serve on the boards of directors of these local “place” entities. This broad neighborhood base could also allow them to focus on the broader needs of community health and social development and identify ways to funnel investment and programs for the benefit of their communities.

Each of these organizations could be asked to lead a strategic planning process for its area. They would be given a template to follow, including ways to create a local coordinating task force. Additionally, it might be possible to arrange for graduate student support from a local or nearby University Department of Urban and Regional Planning or similar programs when available as well as assistance from city-wide BID Council or similar enterprise.

Institutional Support

Central to a city’s recovery will be the capacity and activities of private financial institutions, as well as public funding entities. The proposed strategic plans may help guide this supplemental funding. These entities also play roles (such as relaxing repayment schedules) which can help support the capacity and instrumentality of locally based economic and community organizations. It will be important to unlock as much funding capacity as possible – perhaps by raising the city’s debt limit – as well as deploying existing or new kinds of organizations, such as Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) to bring recovery closer to those in need. The philanthropic sector can also be a key player, given its existing relationships, its history of capacity-building of local community-based entities and its ability to provide flexible terms on its funding.

General Support

Obviously, some kind of coordinating group will need to be created to ensure that there is clear process guidance and that the information is organized and packaged into plans that can help with both policy formation as well as identification of innovative and effective practices. Additionally, it will be valuable to create a web-based communication platform to aid in collection and distribution of relevant information, offer a forum for continuous communication among stakeholders and provide the transparency necessary to maintain accountability and public support.

Conclusion

It is hoped that coordination at many levels, increasing the number of engaged leaders, marshalling city-wide resources and directing and delivering services and resources closest to the immediate need will accelerate recovery in a bold and equitable manner.