

SIMMONS TRANSITION POLICY COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee Name: Economic Development
Co-Chairs: Fran Pastore & Simon Koster
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I. Overview

Mayor Simmons wants to make Stamford's economy more vibrant and inclusive for all. The Economic Development Policy Committee considered how the Simmons Administration can best stimulate economic growth and create well-being and a high quality of life for all the residents of Stamford. Through its four subcommittees, the Economic Development Committee studied ways to support small business, recruit and retain established businesses, strengthen our workforce, and modernize and simplify city government. Our recommendations are prioritized below, followed by a short analysis of additional considerations.

II. Recommendations

1. BUILD A GREAT TEAM

Having a robust, experienced, and responsive economic development team will announce that Stamford is open for business and is critical to meeting Mayor Simmons' goals for the economy. These leadership positions should be filled, or at least announced, in the first 100 days of the new administration.

- **Prioritize hiring a Director of Economic Development**, a key member of the Mayor's Cabinet and an important partner in the city's growth.
- **Reinvigorate the Economic Development Commission**, which is currently underutilized. Rather than acting as a procedural step for popular projects, EDC members could offer strategic input and undertake more substantive work if given a wider remit and clear goals.
- **Create a cabinet role for a Small Business Commissioner**. This individual will be charged with being the direct point of contact and chief advocate for small businesses
- **Future Hires: Small Business Expediter(s)**, to route their needs within city government. The city should not expect small business owners to have the time or expertise to properly navigate the city systems and policies.

Furthermore, Fairfield County is home to some of the brightest business minds in the country. We recommend that Mayor Simmons leverage her substantial experience in economic development and take a leadership role in convening conversations and building networks.

- **In the first 100 days, create a forum for Stamford business leaders to give input.** We recommend that the Mayor create business councils for three categories of companies and convene the groups quarterly beginning in Q1 2022 -- community small businesses (family-owned or independent) and trade businesses; entrepreneurs and high-growth small to medium-sized businesses; and large, well-established enterprises.

These spaces for increased, purposeful collaboration between business and government would help the city better understand the needs of Stamford businesses.

- **In the first 100 days, create a Business Welcome Committee.** A roster of established Stamford business leaders should serve as a welcoming committee that helps to recruit and support businesses moving to Stamford.

2. MAKE DOING BUSINESS IN STAMFORD EASIER AND FASTER, INCLUDING DOING BUSINESS WITH THE CITY ITSELF

Buried in our city are a lot of government processes, large and small, that aren't working. We heard repeatedly from the community: *"Zoning is the holdup on everything."* *"Permitting can take 6-18 months and is a byzantine, opaque process."* *"City staff apply rules arbitrarily and unevenly depending on who you know."* *"Starting a small business in Stamford is a lengthy and expensive process."* *"There's not enough diversity among city contractors."*

- We recommend that Mayor Simmons identify those inefficiencies by conducting a **top-to-bottom efficiency study by an Outside Efficiency Consultant** (hired in the first 100 days) on the Zoning and Permitting departments, paying particular attention to Health, Environmental, WPCA, and Zoning Departments. Longer term, a survey could be integrated into registration and permitting processes that automates the collection of feedback.
- **Implement the state's BusinessCT System in Stamford** as a one-stop shop for Stamford business owners.
- **Commit to be responsive.** Mayor Simmons should set the benchmark that city agencies should be required to respond to any small business inquiries within 48 hours and that all permits should be reviewed and processed within 30 days of submission -- and then staff to those benchmarks. This expectation can be set in the first 100 days.
- **Simplify the fee structure.** Fee structures within these city entities are confusing, applied unevenly, and operate at odds with small business economic cycles and realities, creating extra work for business owners. City fees should be combined into a single, transparent annual fee.

In considering the contracting process, minority-owned and women-owned businesses are too small a percentage of those who do business with Stamford.

- **We recommend the Mayor immediately review contracting procedures** with an eye toward improving communication/marketing of opportunities and right-sizing the requirements to business with Stamford. Inefficiencies in the contracting process are not only a barrier for small business, but hamper diversity and inclusion.
- Put in place **reciprocity for contracting and licensure arrangements** with similar state agencies, such as CT Department of Administrative Services or Dept of Consumer Protection. In this way, vendors with existing approvals do not need to go through extra steps to work with Stamford.

3. FOCUS ON REDUCING COMMERCIAL VACANCY RATES

Stamford commercial space is both vacant and expensive. The Simmons Administration should explore all means necessary to fill these spaces, particularly mixed-use spaces and study how to be creative with tax incentives on vacant subprime spaces, like basements, alleyways, second story retail, prime-adjacent).

- **Create Business Improvement Districts**, modeled on the DSSD, to cover the South End, East Side, and West Side neighborhoods. Use champions for these neighborhoods from within the communities as the point person for developing the districts and ultimately running them. Alternatively, we recommend expanding the DSSD to cover more areas. Similarly, a key part of driving customers into small businesses is making business districts “clean and green,” while also having activation via events and services to draw people into the districts and into Stamford. For example, if Stamford were a more appealing place to shop, shopper traffic would increase. The city should prioritize the basics, like more and better sidewalks, cleaner streets, etc.

4. CREATE A FUND FOR STAMFORD

Economic development aims to strengthen the well-being of our community not only through strong economic growth, but through investment in our high quality of life. To that end, we recommend a new avenue for private dollars from industry and philanthropy (eg, large companies, community foundations, family foundations, and other private sources) to be employed on a variety of important “quality of life” projects.

- **We recommend that Mayor Simmons create a “Fund for Stamford.”** Such a fund would be administered by a Stamford-endorsed nonprofit and would be an effective mechanism to attract private (corporate, philanthropic) funds into public works and public use projects for social good. *Creating the Fund for Stamford is a year 1 priority.*

5. RECOGNIZE THAT QUALITY OF LIFE MATTERS TO EVERYONE

Not only are things like transportation, housing, and green spaces important to families looking to relocate, they are critical to economic development, too. Businesses seeking to relocate value being able to offer employees a reasonable commute, affordable housing, strong public schools and universities, and an abundance of shared outdoor space.

- **We recommend a marathon push to support the 30-30-30 Plan for regional rail transformation, with high priority on the Stamford-NYC line.** Commuter rail is the lifeblood of small businesses in Stamford: It’s how their employees get to work and how their customers get to Stamford. The current transportation situation is untenable; the I-95 corridor traffic and commuter rail inefficiencies continue to negatively impact Stamford businesses’ ability to attract and retain employees, raising the direct and indirect costs of labor. While intra-CT connections are important and Mayor Simmons could make vocal appeals for infrastructure development around 30-30-30 and the railroad station in her first 100 days, we highly recommend prioritizing a reliable, frequent 30-minute express link to NYC as soon as possible. This would be transformative.
- **Rebuilding and redeveloping the Stamford Train Station must be a high priority.** The Stamford train station should look and function like the modern hub that it is, offering

small business retail and restaurants on site that make it a Grand Central-style destination. There are multiple private companies that have offered to fund and develop changes to the train station with no success. The city could offer private development rights around the train station that would both pay for station improvements as well as rejuvenate the district with new mixed-use facilities.

- **Affordability in the housing sector must be addressed.** Creative, visionary, and inclusive solutions (including planning, zoning, and tax incentives) to Stamford's affordability issues must be explored. The best long-term solution is a meaningful increase of supply of market rate housing to meet demand. We recommend studying additional development rights, height limits and zoning for housing in the downtown core and South End.
- **Better utilize public outdoor spaces.** Whether by permanently protecting the "streeteries" pioneered during the pandemic, identifying outdoor areas to transform into urban piazzas closed to traffic, or granting concession rights at city beaches and parks, we recommend that the Simmons Administration borrow from neighboring NYC's creative approach to integrating small business and recreation in new city spaces.

6. SUPPORT UCONN STAMFORD'S GROWTH AND INDEPENDENCE

According to the Brookings Institute and others, the presence of a major "downtown" university has a significant positive impact on urban economic growth by undertaking the research that drives innovation, producing corporate partnerships and startups, and anchor innovation districts and clusters. (Scott Andes, "Five Reasons Why "Downtown Universities" Matter for Economic Growth," in Brookings, October 11, 2017).

- **Stamford benefits tremendously from UCONN Stamford.** We recommend supporting the expansion and growth of UCONN's Stamford campus, including developing a new satellite of UCONN Stamford in another downtown area, substantially increasing the availability of student housing, and bringing four-year degree courses of study to the Stamford campus.

7. AS PART OF LARGER MARKETING STRATEGY, IMPROVE THE CITY'S WEBSITE

We recommend taking a fresh look at the City of Stamford's marketing strategy by hiring an outside marketing agency to create a new plan for the city and share it broadly with city staff, citizens, and businesses. The City's website -- *a critical part of that new marketing strategy* -- is the portal to government services.

- **In the first 100 days, we recommend a comprehensive review of the city's website to ensure it reflects the City's priorities and is appealing and easy to use.** A top-shelf website is part of a larger marketing strategy to attract people and businesses to Stamford. A terrific example of this is [Dallas](#).
- **Create an engaging, informative place online designed just for businesses.** We recommend investing time and money in a website or landing page created with businesses in mind. Great examples of a more targeted approach are [Des Moines](#) and greater [Oklahoma City](#). [Cincinnati's](#) call for startups and entrepreneurs.

- **Link to state and federal services.** Residents don't always intuitively understand which services are municipal and which are state or federal, so we recommend that the City's website include a section with links to frequently-used state and federal resources.
- **Stamford city government should be transparent.** At the Mayor-elect's virtual Town Hall on November 29, a resident suggested creating an online legislative digest of city government actions, including votes and minutes. We think this is a terrific idea and recommend it highly for inclusion on Stamford.gov in the first 100 days.
- **Hire an outside marketing agency** to create a new branding strategy and plan for the city, with a goal of sharing it broadly with city staff, businesses, and citizens to adopt and use as they see fit.

III. Discussion

Timing is important, as the new administration will benefit from the momentum of a successful first 100 days. The majority of the recommendations above can be employed by executive action in the first 100 days of the new administration. Where legislative action is required or execution is likely to take 6-12 months or more, we recommend that Mayor Simmons take immediate introductory steps, like beginning the planning process or publicly announcing her intention to undertake action.

For example, while the recommendations may take multiple years to see to fruition, a one- to two-page page roadmap can be produced and published in the first 100 days that highlights the administration's high-level plans for the Stamford Transportation Center, the 30-minute Stamford-NYC link, a Fund for Stamford, and a website and marketing overhaul.

In addition to the new recommendations above, we recommend that Mayor Simmons make a major push supporting the city's applications for an Innovation Corridor Grant and a Connecticut Community Challenge Grant in her first 100 days.

In terms of execution, some of the committee's recommendations will require legislation, while others can be achieved through executive action. For example:

- *Small Business Commissioner/Small Business Department.* Creating a new department, inclusive of office space, hardware, etc. would require broad support from Stamford's Boards and Commission. The specifics are dependent on the final form of the initiative, but would require awareness and engagement from all stakeholders in advance and throughout the process. This policy priority, and all priorities that include City funding, will require de minimis cuts from the Board of Finance and Board of Representatives which will be required.
- *Efficiency Study.* An efficiency study could be paid for out of the City's operations department budget or similar source. Once a study is complete, and staffing levels are adjusted accordingly, appropriate funding will need to be allocated by the mayor and passed by the BOF and BOR, likely in administration year 2.
- *Licenses, Certificates, and other Regulatory and Fee Mechanisms.* Streamlining and reducing fees will require buy-in and support from the impacted city departments, BOR committees.

- *BusinessCT System for Stamford.* The purchase of this system could be handled using economic development funding (or small business department funding if that was created) through the normal budget planning process.
- *Stamford Transportation Center.* This effort would largely require the buy-in and support of state officials and stakeholders at the DOT. The potential for zoning and traffic impact and local legislation changes could be required after a proposal has been published.
- *Business Improvement Districts.* BIDs require a vote of the businesses within the geographic area, as well as the Board of Reps' approval given the special tax considerations.
- *Streeteries.* A suite of policy changes should be enacted to make it easier to request the closure of parking lots, large sidewalks, and other good prospects for Streeteries locations. Potential partner organizations could handle the financial mechanics such as Stamford Downtown, the Stamford Chamber of Commerce, and similar organizations.

Finally, it will be critically important to plan and demonstrate how these recommendations will foster inclusive growth and economic mobility so that all the citizens of Stamford enjoy an increase in economic well-being. While many of our recommendations do not necessarily require legislation nor city funding, they offer our new Mayor a unique opportunity to establish a new paradigm of more thoughtful, purposeful, inclusive planning.

IV. Conclusions

The Committee's recommendations for accelerating economic growth in Stamford recognize that the state and our region have a tremendous amount to offer families and businesses looking to relocate. Northeastern US cities as a whole are challenged by certain structural hurdles to growth, like the high cost of living, that are not challenges for the rapidly-growing "fly-over cities" of the Midwest, and this makes leveraging Stamford's competitive advantages even more urgent. Connecticut has made things like reducing the cost of doing business and adopting a business-friendly posture a priority. Surveys like CNBC's "Top States for Business" have given Connecticut strong marks in recent years, and the progress is exciting.

In formulating many of these policy recommendations, the Committee considered data and programs championed by Brookings, including the Opportunity Insights toolset, and the Opportunity Atlas. For considering the industry and jobs to support through workforce development our committee considered the data set provided by the Brookings Mobility Toolkit, composed of dozens of unique data sets. We also considered numerous pieces of research from Brookings' Future of the Middle Class project.

The pandemic and the political climate have caused businesses and families to reassess priorities, and we believe that Connecticut's competitive advantages (ie, health resources, livability, diversity and inclusion, and a well-educated workforce) will prove to be worth the higher cost of living.

The Committee had a number of other creative ideas for development, like working with the DSSD to better engage local small businesses in the Alive @ 5 series, accelerating redevelopment of the Stamford Mall and the area around it, and studying the development of a new special event/concert arena similar to Jones Beach at Cove Island Park.

We thank the Mayor for the opportunity to study and present these recommendations and remain fully at her disposal for further analysis and discussion.