



City of Somerville Job Creation & Retention Trust Monthly Meeting

Anika Van Eaton, Managing
Trustee
Colleen Moran, Co-Manager

Trustees
Thomas Bent
Vickie Choitz
Silvana Dinka
Matthew McLaughlin
Rachel Nadkarni
Rand Wilson

Meeting Minutes

Location: Online via Microsoft Teams
Date: July 12, 2023
Time: 6:00 PM

Attendance

- Trustees: Thomas Bent, Vickie Choitz, Silvana Dinka, Colleen Moran, Rachel Nadkarni, Anika Van Eaton and Rand Wilson
- Economic Development Staff: William Blackmer

Meeting Minutes

- A Van Eaton: Meeting called to order at 6:09 pm. Quorum established with 7 trustees in attendance.
- W Blackmer: House rules about technology delivered. We had to make a last-minute pivot to meet on Microsoft Teams tonight due to a schedule conflict with the Economic Development GoToMeeting/Webinar Account. All trustees were informed of the change, there were no pre-registrations by the public, and we requested for our colleagues using the GoToWebinar meeting room to direct anyone attempting to join the JCRT meeting to our Microsoft Teams link. There are no funding nor obligation votes on tonight's agenda.

1. Review and Approval of June 7th meeting minutes

- Motion: T Bent makes motion to approve minutes as presented. C Moran seconds the motion.
- Roll Call Vote: Motion passes by vote of 7-0.

2. Review Received and Estimated Linkage Fees for 2023

W Blackmer: The Trust currently has over \$540,000 in unobligated funds. The Trust has not received any additional funds since our last meeting. An additional \$1.3M may arrive by the end of the year.

3. Regional View on Training Provider Enrollments and Workforce Changes

W Blackmer: Last month, Rand brought up an interesting point regarding the impact of the JCRT. At the same time the Trust has recently approved several no-cost extensions largely due to the enrollment challenges JCRT providers are facing. As the Trust continues to launch and fund valuable and meaningful initiatives, I wanted to dig into this further and a couple of questions surfaced:

- 1) Are enrollment challenges in training and education programs specific to Somerville?
- 2) What are some of the causes of (and potential solutions to) the enrollment challenges?

Learning more about these challenges and potential solutions should help the JCRT in having a greater impact. I spoke with reps from Mass Hire Metro North Workforce Board, career coaches and service providers, and read articles to learn more.

First, enrollment challenges do not appear to be specific to Somerville. While some training partners, including

Per Scholas, have mentioned that they are not as well-known in Somerville vs. Cambridge and Boston, The Metro North Workforce Board noted that the region is experiencing a saturation of free job training programs and job training funding streams. These include Commonwealth Corporation's [Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund \(WCTF\)](#), Funding for [Career and Technical Education \(CTE\) programs](#) at the high school level, the [ARPA Good Jobs Challenge](#), and other American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. Most of these funds apply regionally—unlike JCRT funds. Programs that offer stipends, are well-established, and have successful track records of connecting to substantial starting wages, and successful placement rates are seeing comparatively higher enrollment rates.

In addition to the saturation of the market and funding sources for job training programs, other regional and national issues may be impacting enrollment challenges. Labor force participation rates have been declining for more than 2 decades, and this was only worsened by the COVID-19 Pandemic. This is due in part to the rising costs of childcare and eldercare. The cost of living is one factor that has led to Massachusetts population decline over the past several years. Wages are not keeping pace with inflation and housing prices. There are declining enrollments in educational institutions. There is an overall lack of awareness of the free (and stipend) opportunities that residents may qualify for.

Another factor may be that the region has witnessed a surge in entrepreneurial activity as a direct result of the pandemic. With the changing landscape, self-employment has emerged as a compelling and viable choice for residents. Many training and education programs do not typically cater to individuals seeking self-employment.

T Bent: What commonalities exist among the trainings that are remaining successful? How confident are we that we are funding the appropriate types of training programs in the right industries? Is this part of the issue?

W Blackmer: Based on research, program awareness is a significant challenge. Individuals may not be aware of the multitude of free training opportunities that exist and may not be aware of new training programs or initiatives, like the job training scholarship fund that we recently launched and is being administered by SCC. I have confidence that the programs the JCRT is funding do align with regional labor market, and those going through the training programs are having strong results.

T Bent: Service providers need to take a proactive role in continually raising awareness of their programs.

V Choitz: This research resonates with what I've been hearing in the workforce development world. There are pretty big structural changes that you are mentioning. Many low-income families can no longer afford to live in Somerville and this may be part of the reason why there is a saturation of program offerings versus the demand we are seeing from residents. There've been sharply declining enrollment numbers in community colleges as well as questions have arisen about the opportunity cost of choosing education over getting a job, even when education might be free. The Trust might want to consider diversifying the types of things that it invests in, beyond job training programs. Perhaps we are spending more on helping individuals enrolled in job training programs access benefits: like affordable housing, childcare, food stamps, and it may be where the need is right now. We may want to also speak to local employers about supporting incumbent worker trainings. Overall, we should diversify our portfolio.

S Dinka: I agree that we need to focus on the priorities that Vickie mentioned.

R Nadkarni: I want to mention that with ARPA funds, the City has hired 2 post-secondary coaches that are working to support recent Somerville High graduates and connecting them

with post-graduation opportunities. This is funded for FY24 and it may be a type of service that the Trust may want to invest in in the future. We can also learn from their work about what programs the students are interested in and what barriers they are facing.

A Van Eaton: Yes, post-secondary support services was a high-ranked priority, so it's great to see this work being done. Success Boston has done research in this area that I can share with your team, Rachel.

R Wilson: I'd be interested in looking at collective strategies to raise wages and improve job quality.

V Choitz: Yes, the Trust should also continue to consider creative approaches to address job quality. Oakland County Michigan has been experimenting with community career coaches that are not tied to specific training programs and are unbiased and can advise on a variety of different training options. This could be a corollary to the efforts aimed at students and recent high school graduates.

T Bent: We need to make sure that the investments we make are still in line with the what the ordinance says. Especially because there was recent developer push back on the passing of a higher Affordable Housing Linkage Fee in Somerville. We should make sure outreach is being done directly to groups like the Somerville Housing Authority. Make sure there is awareness about all the different types of programs; maybe through a training and resource fair.

R Nadkarni: Pulling providers together is a good idea and it would be beneficial to residents. We also need to continue to understand the needs of incoming companies coming to Somerville so we can customize a training for residents to fill their specific hiring needs.

V Choitz: When looking back at the JCRT Ordinance, the purpose of the funds extends *well beyond* just funding job training programs. Our ordinance is broad enough for us to respond to the needs of the market beyond just job training.

A Van Eaton: The ordinance includes "services that will enable residents to access job opportunities that will permit them to succeed and maintain adequate income so they can continue living in the City of Somerville."

R Nadkarni: The information W Blackmer laid out could be very helpful for contextualizing our prioritization conversation as well as at our annual meeting in October. We should explain not just what we have funded, but what has been going on more broadly in the workforce development world.

S Dinka: It is important to know besides employment all the obstacles that exist including childcare, transportation, health insurance coverage.

V Choitz: I do think that it makes sense to have an intentional facilitated discussion with the whole Board as part of the reprioritization process, responsive to the barriers that W Blackmer has highlighted.

R Nadkarni: Helpful context to keep in mind is also making sure that we are mentioning the ARPA-funded programs that relate to workforce development and small businesses as we are thinking about priorities. It is important to recognize that many of our nonprofit partners did receive ARPA funding and this

may impact their capacity to launch additional JCRT programs in the coming year.

V Choitz: Given the saturation of funding from ARPA and other sources, it may be wise to also consider setting aside funds for future needs (i.e. to address the needs that ARPA is meeting after ARPA funding ends.) It would be nice to be able to continue programs that demonstrate success during ARPA.

T Bent: I would advocate for an in-person meeting for September. It is also good to keep in mind that incoming funds to the Trust may slow as construction slows down, so a conservative approach to spending may be appropriate.

R Nadkarni: Regarding in-person meetings, we are still waiting on training for Board facilitation of in-person City meetings. If this meeting is more of an in-person workshop, that might be more feasible. The goal is for all Board liaisons to have received this training around the same time.

4. Review Current Status of 2022-2023 Investment Priorities

W Blackmer: The Trust continues to address the investment priorities as voted on by the Trust this past Fall. Priority 1: Post-Secondary Supports is being addressed by City ARPA funds. For Priority 2, funds have been obligated to the Coordination and Data Collection Staff position through FY28. The Trust is currently funding 5 organizations providing industry specific training; two of these organizations, Just A Start and AACA, have recently been granted no-cost extensions. A third, Per Scholas, has expressed interest in a no-cost extension beyond Sept. 30th to reach their enrollment and retention goals. FC Tech training is currently available and sent updated Somerville-specific recruitment materials. Mass CultivatEd's program is also addressing Priority #12.

The Trust has obligated \$400,000 to Priority #4, the Good Municipal Jobs Training Program. ARPA funds and the SCALE grant are also addressing Priority #5, Digital Literacy and Training Resource.

Tonight, we will be discussing updates from the Subcommittee on Priority 6 Mental Health, Resilience, and Trauma Training for Adult Education and Workforce Development Organizations, where funding has not yet been obligated.

Under currently obligated funds, in relation to last year's priorities, funds are available for SCC's Job Training Scholarship Fund and the Professional Development Fund for Adult Education Teachers and Workforce Development Professionals. Disbursement is underway for Contextualized ESOL for Adults and English Language Learners. SCALE was granted a no-cost extension through December and BHCC is wrapping up their third year of the Somerville ELL program.

This list is helpful to keep in mind as the Trust looks ahead and considers funding priorities for the upcoming year.

5. Discussion of Recruitment Strategies for Job Training Programs

W Blackmer: Ongoing efforts to reestablish referrals and relationships between members of the ecosystem. SCALE just had a new Interim Director start at the beginning of this month. Encouraging all funded programs to regularly share recruitment flyer with me. Encouraging Somerville and JCRT-specific language on recruitment flyers. SHA has appeared to be a good recruitment channel. Other potential referral partners may be the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative, the Somerville Office of Housing Stability.

Now, the City is relying on Somerville Community Corporation as the hub organization to help individual

residents identify training opportunities because we do not have career coaches as City staff, aside from the post-secondary coaches. It is worth considering whether adding career coach capacity may be beneficial. The opportunities can also be shared with City Councilors in their ward newsletters.

T Bent: It sounds like more internal City collaboration would be beneficial when reaching out to residents. There needs to be more of a service hub for Somerville residents. If funding from the Trust was needed to make this happen, I would approve it so people are aware of JCRT programs. It would be good to know more about which referral sources have been successful.

A Van Eaton: Board members, I encourage you to continue to reach out to W Blackmer if you have further ideas.

6. Update from Mental Health Training Subcommittee

A Van Eaton: We received great feedback from discussion at last month's Board meeting. The subcommittee made some adjustments to the language to indicate that this is a training for the staff of nonprofit education and training providers since the pandemic has heightened burnout, turnover, and recruitment challenges for these organizations. We made it clearer that we are looking to train staff of Somerville-based training and workforce development organizations, but it is not limited to organizations that receive funding already from the JCRT.

C Moran: We also removed the "train the trainer" language from the RFP.

W Blackmer: To expand on this, "train the trainer" language is more appropriate when a training is teaching skills to individuals that they are then facilitating to another group. With this project, we are not looking for the workforce development training providers to facilitate a mental health curriculum to their training participants. Rather, we are looking for the workforce development professionals to incorporate what they learn into their daily work with clients.

A Van Eaton: Board members please let us know about any questions or additional feedback you have.

W Blackmer: Additionally, regarding the timeline, the subcommittee discussed that service providers may have time constraints and staffing challenges that prevent them from participating in this type of training during the summer and in the coming months. We had discussed the potential for releasing this RFP later in the fall with the idea that the training would then begin in early 2024.

A Van Eaton: The Trust would need to vote at a future meeting on obligating these funds.

R Nadkarni: Would we want to expand this to include our Somerville nonprofits that provide affordable housing services as well?

A Van Eaton: I am seeing and hearing some agreement with this, R Nadkarni.

V Choitz: We may want to make sure that this training is announced at least two months ahead of time so that practitioners can make sure that they are able to attend.

T Bent: We may want to consider making this available to City staff, and possibly later on expanding this to serve employees of small businesses as well.

A Van Eaton: What I am hearing from the group is that the big picture idea makes sense, but the subcommittee may want to revisit the audiences of this training. The subcommittee can meet to discuss these edits. We can then bring the obligation vote up for our next meeting.

7. Review Upcoming Meeting Schedule: Aug 2, Sept 6

A Van Eaton: We are scheduled to meet on August 6th, and then last meeting, we agreed to move the September 6th meeting to September 13th. I'd like to formally request that the September 6th meeting can be a Board in-person workshop to brainstorm solutions. Also, do we want to consider not meeting in August and having a short summer break?

V Choitz: I support not meeting in August but would need to join remotely for September 13th.

R Nadkarni: I will support W Blackmer in determining our options for a hybrid meeting.

S Dinka: I would not be able to attend in-person on September 13th

A Van Eaton: What about September 20th?

Since staff have fewer conflicts, we will scheduled the next meeting for September 20th.

8. Additional items not reasonably anticipate by the Chair

T Bent: What opportunities might there be for Board member to attend conferences or other learning opportunities? If there are opportunities that anyone knows about, I would be interested in attending.

V Choitz: I can work on making a list of conference and learning opportunities for workforce development practitioners to be aware of. It would be helpful for the Board to consider as well.

9. Adjournment

Motion: T Bent makes motion to adjourn. S Dinka seconds the motion.

Roll Call Vote: Motion passes by vote of 7-0 to adjourn.

Meeting Materials:

- Meeting Notice and Agenda for 7.12.23
- draft Meeting Minutes for 6.7.23
- JCRT Estimated Linkage Fees 2023
- JCRT Investment Priority Tracker
- Regional LMI PowerPoint from Metro North Workforce Board