



Anika Van Eaton, Managing
Trustee
Vickie Choitz, Managing Trustee

City of Somerville Job Creation & Retention Trust Monthly Meeting

Trustees
Thomas Bent
Silvana Dinka
Jim Hachey
Jacob Luria
Wilfred Mbah
Rachel Nadkarni
Rand Wilson

Meeting Minutes

Location: Hybrid: Online via Zoom Meeting AND In-Person at Tufts Administration Building
(167 Holland St, Somerville, MA 02144)

Date: March 25, 2025

Time: 6:30 PM

Attendance

- Trustees: Thomas Bent, Vickie Choitz, Silvana Dinka, Jim Hachey, Jacob Luria, Rachel Nadkarni, Anika Van Eaton, and Rand Wilson
- Economic Development Staff: William Blackmer

Meeting Minutes

A Van Eaton: Meeting called to order at 6:33pm. Quorum established with 7 trustees in attendance. S Dinka joined after attendance was taken

W Blackmer: House rules about technology delivered.

1. Review and Approval of past meeting minutes

- a. Vote to approve January 29th meeting minutes
- b. Vote to approve February 4th meeting minutes

Motion: T Bent makes motion to approve January 29th and February 4th meeting minutes. J Luria seconds the motion.

Roll Call Vote: Motion passes by vote of 7-0. S Dinka was not present for this vote.

2. Review Received and Estimated Linkage Fees for 2025

W Blackmer: Since we last reviewed these funds we have received final payment from an additional project at 100 Chestnut in the Brickbottom district. The current balance sits at around \$500,000 with a few projects expected to make payment in 2025. At this time, we aren't projected to receive any funds in 2026 or 2027.

J Luria: Why are some fees highlighted in yellow?

W Blackmer: We anticipate receiving those funds in the next 3 months.

3. Discussion on Federal Funding and its Impact on Workforce Development and Education Systems

A Van Eaton: As Co-Chairs, Vickie and I wanted the Board to take a pause and reflect on what we want to be spending JCRT funds on in light of the shifting federal funding landscape. This shift has great potential for impacting the workforce development world, higher education world and Somerville residents. Working for a college affordability nonprofit, we are following updates at the Department of Education very closely. Cuts may

impact financial aid programs. Some higher ed institutions may potentially have their federal funding pulled, so there is a lot of concern about how to support people enrolling in higher education.

V Choitz: About half of the workforce at the Department of Education was cut last week putting a strain on the administration of federal financial aid programs. Funding cuts will also impact workforce development. There is a lot of chaos as organizations try to figure out how certain executive orders, like the one targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion “DEI” initiatives that was later reversed, might impact program funding. Chaos is mirroring the uncertainty felt during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has made me think that the JCRT should have a little bit more of an “emergency mindset.” What should we be funding, what are our grantees and partners on the ground facing, and should we be supporting them in different ways than we have in the past? Our funding since the COVID-19 pandemic has been trying to structure and massage Somerville’s workforce development system to be a model of best practice. That’s why we’ve supported industry-specific training, contextualized education because we were in a place where we could help our grantees move in the direction of national best practices. But the environment is changing from an “innovation environment” to a “survive environment.” We should be thinking about funding our partners a little bit differently to survive this kind of emergency fundraising moment.

T Bent: What are your thoughts on how we approach this situation?

V Choitz: Maybe when we put out requests for proposals that are more flexible or general, similar to how Boston solicits proposals for its linkage fees. Ask providers to show us what programs they want to run. Ask them what problems they are currently facing and what they need funding for.

R Nadkarni: We should consider how to connect with employers more. Is there a way to stretch our dollars further through matching programs? Can we implement something like the Massachusetts Life Sciences Tax Incentive Program? Are there tools besides a direct partner funding model that we may be able to look at?

J Luria: My company benefitted from a program like that where we were reimbursed 75% of the salary for high-tech workers in Massachusetts. Administratively it was a nightmare and slowed things down because now the business was taking out a long-term liability. I was not receiving reimbursement until 18 months post-hire. Unless you are a bigger organization it is very hard to rely on this type of funding arrangement. I’d be more interested in an RFP directed toward previous recipients that have proven success and that we have a bit more confidence in.

V Choitz: Can we do an RFP limited to past recipients?

W Blackmer: RFPs need to be open to a public process but we have, and can continue to, ask proposers to demonstrate success running the same or a similar program in the past. In our scoring rubric we could consider weighing past experience more heavily.

T Bent: We want to make sure that programs with proven success can continue to serve the participants on their continued career trajectories.

A Van Eaton: Nonprofit and higher education partners are facing threats of losing funding at a federal level and from foundation funders. I’m wondering if we know how this is impacting individual organizations in our ecosystem and if there is a role that the Trust can play in meeting some of these potential funding deficits while also simplifying our processes to support our partners during this challenging time.

R Nadkarni: We need to determine whether there is space to cover administrative costs for our partners.

R Wilson: The Trust has seen a slowing down of its income, but we may see a significant bump in unemployment, and we need to make sure to meet the needs of residents who experience unemployment.

T Bent: Would we also have the flexibility of releasing funds earlier in the grant period to grantees?

W Blackmer: When we are putting out RFPs, we are asking what it takes to serve X number of individuals in a program. We are not restricting them from including, for example, the cost of the electricity needed to run the class, or the cost of renting classroom space. We are supplying them a very blank budget sheet and don't have any percentage restrictions on certain categories.

A Van Eaton: Perhaps we could add language that is more explicit in RFPs that indicates that this funding can cover general operating expenses. William, remind us how the funding is distributed. Is half of it distributed at the midpoint in the program?

W Blackmer: The terms of each grant agreement is unique. For many programs, grantees get a portion per participant enrollment and a portion per participant completion or job placement. We have started considering whether there are portions we can distribute sooner. For example, we could pay the organization for actively starting recruitment, creating flyers, or holding information sessions. Ultimately, the City has to pay for work that has been completed, so we cannot give a portion upfront before deliverables are met. Some of this comes back to how the organization is engaging with us when we are finalizing the grant agreement. An agreement isn't set in stone until both sides have signed it, so there is some room for discussion. What we want to avoid is an organization getting most of the payment toward the beginning of the grant because this could potentially disincentivize the attention spent on achieving later milestones of the grant (i.e. job placement).

V Choitz: Most of our grants have been based on training and employment programs. What would it be like if we had more of a general operations grant? What would be the performance metrics that generate payment, or would we have a completely different structure that was not performance-based so that we support organizations and prevent them from folding.

T Bent: Would anyone be trained then?

A Van Eaton: If it is a nonprofit that does provide training, a general operating budget can ensure that they will have future capacity and that we won't lose a vital workforce development organization in our ecosystem.

R Nadkarni: Something that stood out, Vickie, were your comments about us having been in an “innovation mode” and encouraging partners to take on new programs. Is there space to maybe say we are looking to fund programs that already exist rather than encouraging partners to take on new programs, hire staff for those new programs, etc. One technical step we could explore is a request for information to ask organizations what programs they provide and how greatly federal funding may be impacting their capacity or longevity.

J Luria: Can we put out an RFP to the organizations we have funded that have the best results? The strongest 50%?

A Van Eaton: We’d need the RFP to be an open process. We can also ask if there are new concerns and needs popping up with program participants that are unmet.

R Nadkarni: Most programs we fund are continuing through some point in 2025. If people here about this program from a friend today, we want to ensure that successful programs are consistently available to residents.

V Choitz: In the past we’ve done renewal grants. Is this possible?

W Blackmer: My understanding is that the City can have a contract or grant agreement for up to 3 years. After that, I believe the City can approach City Council for a potential extension. I’ve been operating off a model similar to other OSPCD funds that we want to ensure that we have a competitive process year after year because community needs can change, funding is not consistent, and we want to be able to responsive to what we are seeing. The result has been mostly funding partners for one round at a time. The Board has taken votes both for no-cost extensions to contracts, but each time an organization is looking to do work with a new set of participants, they have needed to respond to an RFP.

J Hachey: I want to suggest that we put out a survey or needs assessment to stakeholders we have funded in the recent past to really identify where the need is now and in the near future. This would answer a lot of our questions. Ask them if funding beyond one year be helpful.

W Blackmer: We can work on a succinct survey for both our grantees and subgrantees.

T Bent: At the end of the day, organizations may not entirely know what impacts they might face. I like the idea of a survey.

(Taken Out of Order)

5. Review of Active Programs and Obligations

A Van Eaton: Let’s next discuss a review of active programs and obligations prior to our votes. I will give the Board a moment to review our spreadsheet of active programs and obligations and then I welcome questions. We will also have a “report out” from the Good Municipal Jobs Training subcommittee.

V Choitz: What is the status of the \$250,000 obligated for Financial Literacy?

W Blackmer: At last month’s meeting it was suggested that this group meet in then next 1-2 months to talk about this idea. I will schedule that in the next month.

V Choitz: So, it sounds like that funding is very loosely committed. In other obligated funds, we have drafted RFPs for the \$300,000 Childcare Career Advancement Initiative and the \$400,000 Good Municipal Jobs that we are discussing on tonight’s agenda. \$81,000 was also released as an RFP in the past for Job Quality and Human Resources for Somerville small businesses and entrepreneurs, but we did not get strong responses.

a. Update from Good Municipal Jobs Subcommittee Meeting

W Blackmer: The subcommittee of Vickie, Rand, Tom, and Jim met last week. I updated them on my recent meeting with the Department of Public Works (DPW) with regards to hiring needs. This RFP had been on hold due to past Somerville Municipal Employee Union (SMEU) negotiations involving some of the vacancies that this training may seek to address. The subcommittee has an RFP that we are ready to release, and it would be the responsibility of proposers to connect with relevant stakeholders, including DPW to build a responsive program. In my meeting with DPW, they expressed that they don't have much capacity to be heavily involved in the program. Personally, it might be challenging to get together a coalition of partners working together to take a cohort of residents through a uniform series of steps with the goal of them all being placed into similar City vacancies. It seems ambitious. But, if we do release the RFP, we would have a longer window for applying and we would have an info session that we invite various stakeholders to in the hope that they would continue to have conversations around a group proposal.

T Bent: We talked about this a lot, and we really need to get DPW and SMEU working together on this. It sounded like William's conversation with DPW was not so warm and fuzzy.

R Wilson: I think we need to put out the RFP with a time window and then just see who applies. DPW is not the only entity in the City with vacancies. If we don't get responses, we can reallocate the funds elsewhere.

R Nadkarni: As a non-subcommittee member, my understanding was that the audience of the RFP was a training provider to coordinate this project.

A Van Eaton: We voted to obligate the funds and release an RFP, so do we want to take a vote to "uncommit" these funds? If not, I think if the subcommittee wants to review the RFP again outside of this meeting, they can schedule a time to do that before it's released.

4. Obligation Votes

A Van Eaton: We have two obligation votes on tonight's agenda that were discussed in the memo shared with Board Members in advance of tonight's meeting. The first request from the Economic Development Division was discussed at last month's meeting and would allow for the Post-Secondary Success Program to extend beyond June and into late Fall 2025. Though Board members expressed support, we were advised to hold a formal vote on this on tonight's agenda.

- a. To obligate \$65,000 of Post-Secondary Success program funds to cover Coach salaries
 - i. Motion: V Choitz makes motion to obligate \$65,000 of Post-Secondary Success program funds to cover Coach salaries. T Bent seconds the motion.
 - ii. Roll Call Vote: Motion passes by vote of 7-0. R Nadkarni recused herself from this vote since she supervises these staff positions.
- b. To obligate \$300,000 to an updated Childcare Career Advancement Initiative RFP
 - i. Motion: T Bent makes motion to obligate \$300,000 to an updated Childcare Career Advancement Initiative RFP. S Dinka seconds the motion.
 - ii. Roll Call Vote: Motion passes by vote of 8-0.

6. Adjournment

Motion: V Choitz makes motion to adjourn. T Bent seconds the motion.

Roll Call Vote: Motion passes by vote of 8-0.

Meeting Materials:

- 3/25 Mtg Notice and Agenda
- draft 1/29/25 Mtg Minutes
- draft 2/4/25 Mtg Minutes
- JCRT Received and Estimated Linkage Fees
- JCRT Investment Priority Tracker
- March JCRT Memo Re: Active Programs, Obligations, and Related City Updates

Approved 5/15/2025