

Town of Northfield--ARPA funds discussion

June 9, 2022, Brown Library Community Room, plus online access

Selectboard Facilitator: Julie Goodrich

ARPA committee resource person: Merry Kay Shernock

Note-taker: Tim Swartz

The meeting convened about 6:30 PM.

In-person attendees:

Jeff Schulz (town manager)

Sally Davidson

Joan Davidson

Lynn Doney

Bethany Drum

Online attendees:

Ray Pelletier

Lydia Petty

Britta Eberle

John Wall

Jeff Schulz gave a quick overview of the ARPA (American Relief Plan Act) spending situation. Note that this list includes ways that the funds can be spent, they are not required to be spent in these categories.

- Northfield will receive a total of about \$1,920,000; half has been received already.
- We have until Sept. 2024 to obligate the funds.
- The funds must be actually expended by Dec. 31, 2026.
- There are several broad categories in which funds can be spent:
 - Clean water, which includes water supply, sewer, stormwater areas.
 - Personnel costs—including first-responders and costs to retain existing staff.
 - Make-up for lost revenue due to COVID—since the Town lost substantial revenue, this could provide a substantial sum, and money received for this can then be spent with fewer restrictions.
 - Funds can be spent to reimburse non-profit or commercial businesses for lost revenue, or for start-up costs to encourage new services.
 - Can be used for municipal activities and initiatives—for example, to make improvements to public spaces.
 - Can support expansion of broadband internet connections.
- Northfield has used a small amount of the funds already for water/sewer improvements.

Merry Kay Shernock, lead organizer of the ARPA community input project, also added some information on the process and what is allowed:

- Some money has also been used to augment the salary offered for the new, full-time Economic Development Director who has been hired by the Town.

- ARPA funds could be used to provide “seed money” to get projects which could benefit the citizens of the Town started, and to stimulate economic growth.
- ARPA funds could be directed to infrastructure improvements that help private projects, if they will benefit the Town. One example is a existing proposal to develop a mixed-use project in the “Freightyard Way” area, including housing/possibly a day-care center/possibly a small grocery store and other amenities—the Town could use ARPA funds to pay for water and sewer lines to that area.
- The funds can be used as “grant match” funds, to meet the requirement for 1:1 matches for grants received, for example the grants we have gotten for trail improvements, bike paths, etc.

Joan Davidson asked for clarification on who makes the actual decision on spending the money: Jeff, Merry, Julie and Lydia confirmed that the Selectboard will make these decisions. They will be considering the input from the meetings like this one from the spring, plus more starting in September, plus responses from the online survey (www.surveymonkey.com/KSDYYV5). The ARPA public input committee will submit a final report in October, 2022.

Ray Pelletier, who is Northfield representative for CV Fiber, requested that the Town contribute to CV Fiber's work to connect homes which have been previously unconnected to high-speed broadband. He reported that there are about 550 homes in Northfield not currently connected; the cost for CVF to connect them will be about \$800,000, since these are generally the ones which are the most difficult and expensive to reach with cable. He asked Northfield to contribute 5% of this cost (approx. \$40,000), saying that VT Community Broadband will match contributions 1:1, for a total contribution of \$80,000. Lydia Petty asked what the timeline needs to be for the Town to commit the money—Ray says by Sept. 15th. Ray also pointed out that early contributions to CVF's project will reduce the amount needed to be borrowed. The interest or “debt service” cost for their projects can be substantial. He gave the example of EC Fiber, another community broadband provider, which has a base rate of \$72/month for its subscribers—of this, 39% (or \$28.00) goes for debt service. CVF is getting grants from a variety of sources, including Federal ARPA money through the State, but every dollar that reduces the need to borrow will help to reduce bills for broadband service.

Other meeting attendees seemed generally supportive of improving broadband in the discussions; Britta Eberle mentioned this in particular as an important use.

A few people brought up childcare as a major need in Northfield, important as we try to attract young families to the Town. Merry said that this is something that could be supported with seed money and infrastructure improvements, as mentioned above, but it would require someone to propose a specific idea for the money to be dispensed—the Town does not want to set up and run a childcare center, but could encourage and support it with some of this money. Jeff Schulz also mentioned that a new revolving loan fund to support public benefits like this is being set up right now, which could also be a source of financing. He also pointed out that the legislature has voted for tax credits to help offset childcare costs as another way to increase availability and affordability of childcare.

Another area that received broad support is increasing housing, particularly affordable housing for young and lower income families. John Wall said that Matt Sullivan, director of Green Mountain Health Clinic is concerned about finding housing for staff he needs to hire. Lynn Doney supports this idea, and strongly recommends that congregate housing be considered, including an on-site manager to monitor how the building(s) are being used.

Lynn Doney also recommended money be spent for a variety of recreation area improvements,

including various areas of Memorial Park and the pool—baseball dugouts, stands, pool and bathhouse repairs and improvements, etc. He also mentioned replacing a metal arched sign over the entrance to the Memorial Park area as a nice improvement. He feels that improving these sorts of existing Town amenities will help to attract families to visit and move to Northfield, and recommends this sort of repair and maintenance work before building new facilities. He has specific ideas about ways to involve parents, Northfield schools and NU students in volunteer work days to make some of these repairs. Merry commented that seed money from the ARPA funds could potentially be used to help fund this sort of work-day event.

Joan Davidson asked if seed money could help attract an Uber or Lyft car service to this area, as a way of providing transportation alternatives to Northfield residents. This seemed to get a positive reception. We also discussed the existing bus service which is run by Green Mountain Transit, and uses the new bus kiosk which was built on the west side of Depot Square, next to the Community Bank drive-up. Note—this was a project of the Northfield Energy Committee as a way to encourage mass-transit alternatives to driving individual cars, and was financed with grants and donations, not town money. Design and construction was done by NU students. Note: information about Green Mountain Transit schedules, connections to buses to Burlington, Barre and other locations can be found at: <https://ridegmt.com/>.

Joan also expressed disappointment at the closing of Arts, Etc. as a downtown business attraction. This fit with a concern about vacant storefronts and “eyesores” in the downtown expressed by Britta. She is also glad that the trash-hauler whose collection center was recently removed from near Depot Square, but still expressed concern about the site as an example of unattractive areas around the downtown area. She also mentioned that the pedestrian bridge is rotting—I believe that this is the one on Vine St, over the railroad tracks.

The discussion of the closing of Arts, Etc. brought up a brief discussion at the end of the evening about the lack of many “community center” facilities where groups can meet—currently the only one we know about is the Community Room. Merry noted that this was the result of a “visionary idea” for just such a meeting place, which was combined with the expansion of the Brown Library and making the building connect with the Northfield Historical Society building. This is an example of how funds can be leveraged for long-term benefit.

The meeting closed about 7:30, with people agreeing that many ideas had been brought up, as well as sharing of information about projects and past improvements.