



Village of Libertyville

Business Listening Sessions: Summary of Responses

September 2022

INTRODUCTION

The Village of Libertyville held a series of small-group meetings with Libertyville business owners and managers during the month of February to learn more about the challenges and successes they are facing, in order to better understand their circumstances and local business climate. Due to the positive response to the program, a Fall 2022 series was scheduled. Three approximately 60-minute sessions were completed on September 20 and 21, 2022, using the GoToMeeting platform. Eleven businesses participated in the discussion. Sessions were moderated by a member of the Village Board and a member of the Economic Development Commission using a predetermined series of questions, though moderators adjusted the questions based on the nature of the conversation. Industries represented in the discussion included the following:

Industries Represented

- Retail/Salon (3)
- Medical/Healthcare (1)
- Fitness (2)
- Restaurant (1)
- Office/Service (4)

To promote the sessions, a dedicated project webpage was developed at www.Libertyville.com/ListeningSessions, coming soon notices were placed in the Village Views newsletter and e-news, a press release went to local media, a news piece was placed on the Village website home page, four registration notices were included in the e-News, emails were sent to business with an e-mail on file, Main Street and the GLMV Chamber shared program details with memberships, and social media posts were done on several occasions using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and NextDoor.

The following pages contain responses to the questions posed during the various sessions. Business and participant names have been removed for confidentiality.

NEXT STEPS

This summary document is intended to gather data from comments received during the small group discussions. The information obtained from this process will be used by the Economic Development Commission (EDC) towards economic development and promotional program development and refinement. The Commission will make recommendations to the Village Board and Staff for consideration and action. The EDC will review the program format and responses and will make a recommendation to the Board related to scheduling additional Listening Sessions.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS SUMMARY

Business Basics

What do you most appreciate about having your business in Libertyville?

- The Village keeps me well updated
- Commercial spaces are kept full
- Loyalty of customers/residents to local businesses
- Tight-knit community/sense of community
- Schools and other resources are a great advantage
- Word of mouth referrals
- Support from Village officials and staff
- Good communication from the Village and interest of Village in doing programs like the Listening Sessions. Businesses in my networking groups don't have this level of support from their communities.

What are some of the struggles facing your business today?

- Labor market/workforce: attraction/retention, qualified labor, and cost of labor
- Would a local job fair be a possibility? [discussion followed on whether there could be success in bringing necessary volume of participants/applicants to such an event]
- Inventory reduction
- Inflation/cost of goods (inventory, supplies, gas, etc)
- Speed and reliability of internet
- State and federal COVID regulations on healthcare and childcare
- Customer foot traffic downtown. Getting customers to walk to businesses on farther ends. Sidewalks are dark which doesn't encourage walkability.
- Cost of needed technology (for sales, marketing, security, etc.), there's a lot of programs that would make processes more efficient, but we're just waiting.

In the last 24 months, what changes in operating methods or new technology have you implemented that have helped your business to become stronger?

- More customer options like virtual fitness classes that wouldn't have happened before COVID, this gives us more depth.
- Converted an underutilized office for smaller or solo classes
- Built a Shopify store for products which brings business from outside the store, it also syncs with Klaviyo, Instagram and blogs
- Inventory control technology
- Updated POS systems which offer marketing, inventory, online sales, website integration, and other advanced tools, and can be adjusted on the fly or remotely.
- New services and monthly passes now offered
- QR codes for marketing and communication
- Offering Zoom/Facetime communications for senior residents to out-of-town family members
- Adding additional cybersecurity feature
- Regular use of virtual meeting platforms
- Expanded use of online employment tools

*What is the current geography of your customer base? How does this differ from pre-pandemic?
[question only asked at first session]*

- Seeing more customers coming in groups of friends/family, making us a destination.

Discussion of Village communications/preferred method to receive information:

- Email is preferred method [This was noted by majority of attendees, though no attendees indicated they were registered for weekly Village e-news and weren't aware it was available.]
- Village website
- Several check social media but not for Village information
- Information must be short quick updates
- A weekly video from the Village could be interesting
- Text message updates would be great
- Could use reminders in various places about resources/upcoming programs, sometimes I forget or miss things

Employment

What, if any, are the impediments to sustaining a stable employment base at your firm?

- Labor availability and retention (low supply, not reliable to show up, poaching from other businesses, etc).
- Qualified labor
- Cost of labor
- Competition on our labor force isn't just local, corporations are tapping our local labor force for professional and IT position from large distances away if they allow people to work from home.

What methods are you utilizing to grow or sustain your labor force?

- Staffing agencies
- Recruit through existing employees and customers
- Hiring home-based workers from nationwide geographies, helps expand the supply and can tap into less expensive labor markets.
- Hire My Mom/The Mom Project
- Increased wages
- Social media: Facebook local community group pages (Libertyville Mom's, etc.)
- Indeed (must do paid posts to get visibility)
- Word of mouth

What percentage of your workforce is home-based? What do you anticipate your employee in-office presence to look like in 6 or 18 months?

- The majority of businesses participating indicated they were service based and couldn't rely on a home-based workforce.
- My team is 100% remote, we do virtual meetings, we don't have a physical office and don't want one.
- Most consulting jobs in our field are going fully remote and will likely stay that way.

Business Climate

What is one (or two) thing(s) the Village of Libertyville could do to help your business?

- Job fair
- Help bring more foot traffic to retail stores
- Downtown directories
- Increase the Village's business marketing budget. Market more for retail and service businesses.
- The Village is doing a great job in a lot of areas
- Pedestrian bridge over Milwaukee Ave in downtown
- Efforts to control motorized bike/scooters downtown so customers don't get injured
- Encourage use of Church St Parking Garage
- Warning flashing light by train to indicate to traffic pedestrians are crossing
- Use of parks or other affordable interesting public spaces to hold fitness classes
- More meeting places for home based or small business, like restaurants or the Office Clubhouse in Mundelein
- Faster, more reliable internet connection options throughout community
- Natural gas cooperatives (like electric)
- Alley behind O'tooles/Petraneks should be reversed or one-way, so vehicles aren't hitting Black Cat Yoga building
- Small grocer/market in the downtown
- Police/Fire participation in youth programs at my business
- Additional stop light needed on Peterson to slow traffic and help with access
- Help address theft/break-ins
- Increase the support local business campaign, remind customers to shop local instead of Amazon
- Gas price reduction
- Additional transportation options and accessibility improvements for bikes, pedestrians, scooters. This would allow me to get rid of a car. Some of the ADA improvements at intersections are helpful.
- Use of QR codes for marketing community businesses

Specific to your business how would you project and characterize the next 12-24 months: growing/thriving or recovering/stabilizing?

- Recovering, stabilizing, encouraged, expect some customer pullback possible
- Labor market is key to our stabilization
- Growing, concerned with cashflow, expenses and profitability
- Recovery
- Growing
- Growing, the stay-at-home workforce is consistent with what we do
- Recovering and stabilizing
- Stabilizing
- Recovery depends on what happens with COVID

Based on never ending press on the topic of the economy, consumers and residents form a variety of opinions on the state of local business. Is there one misconception related to your business that you think could be better understood?

- Ransomware and viruses are a lot easier to prevent than fix
- Gas stations don't control the price of gas, with the taxes and such the gas isn't profitable, what helps is the amenities/products offered
- A lot of people don't understand what a small business is, your business can be doing well but can be impacted quickly when something dramatic happens, so you need to have a lot of [customer] support. Customers might find things a few pennies cheaper here or there, but if they want the store relationship, those aren't built on the backs of Amazon.
- People think we're part of a big corporation, we're not, we're family owned. We're not doing great because we're competing with brand-new buildings with fancy bells and whistles, so we can just provide the best service we can.
- The risk we take on as a small business
- Families are keeping their loved ones home longer. Many of the workers we would normally have access to are now doing home health or other similar operations. In some respects, this is good, but it does change the senior care model for us.

Additional Comments

- The book Talent Emergency by Nicole Martin was referenced as a good source to understand the current and future job market
- Question was asked by moderator "what is one business you'd like to see in the downtown", respondents suggested a small grocer/market and bookstore. One commented they'd like this but didn't know who would operate it or how it would be profitable.
- Don't tear down the theater and put in something like condos that will take a long time to fill. It would be good as a market because it has parking there.
- GLMV does a lot to promote us
- Over next 15 months businesses without or who have exhausted discretionary income may have trouble
- Heather's a great business resource even in the non-profit space. And the Village is super responsive. But it's all about continuing to grow and become more excellent.
- The coworking public process is an example of how little people show up, maybe there's ways to get people to attend public meeting or ways to share information about things happening before people turn to beef [complain] on Facebook.
- Maybe there's a way to get more people to receive the Main Street e-news from surrounding communities since it already promotes stores, their products, and events to a lot of people regularly.
- First Friday brings customers, but it isn't an event to go to if all the businesses make their own event hours.