May 9, 2020

Dear President Albright,

On behalf of the League of Women Voters of Newton, I am writing to request that you support the creation of a COVID-19 Emergency Housing Relief Program to assist Newton households which have been negatively impacted by the ongoing pandemic.

Program Overview: The intent of the program is to provide some assistance and stability for Newton’s at-risk households by providing short term assistance (up to three months). The program will pay 70% of a household’s monthly rent or mortgage payment, with a maximum amount of assistance per household per month of $2,500 ($7,500 max. for 3 months of assistance). The program is anticipated to assist at least 300 households. While the program is primarily focused on rental assistance, it may also provide mortgage assistance to households who own existing affordable deed-restricted units. The City has worked closely with Metro West Collaborative Development (MWCD) to develop this program based on best standards provided by the Community Preservation Coalition and Massachusetts Housing Partnership. The MWCD will administer the day to day running of the program, including developing the application process, verifying eligibility, and releasing monthly payments directly to landlords or mortgage servicing agencies.

LWVN Proposal Review: After having reviewed the proposal, submitted to the CPC for their May 4th meeting, we had the following questions which were sent to Lara Kritzer, Community Preservation Program Manager, on May 3, 2020 for submission to the CPC for their consideration.

1. Metro West Collaborative Development (MWCD) was selected as the program administrator. As not everyone is familiar with MWCD, we think that it is important the following questions/information be shared with the CPC and the public.

   a. In the proposal, there was no documentation as to how MW was identified as the best candidate for this role. Was there an RFP? If so, can you please share the document? If not, was there any documentation with the selection criteria that they had to meet, vs other organizations? If MW was sole-sourced how did you make that decision? What experience/capabilities made them the best choice?

   b. With 300 applications by the June 3rd lottery date, how will Metro West meet this demand over a very short period? For example, do they currently have sufficient staff or will they be hiring staff? If the latter, what will be the process for advertising/sourcing hires, etc.?
c. **In the budget there is a $187,500 Program Admin Fee. What documentation will MWCD be providing regarding their budget [pre/post program implementation] and how funds will be/were spent? In addition, how did MWCD arrive at the $500 per case figure?**

d. **According to the program timeline, the marketing and application processes are concurrent. Given that it will take time for eligible residents to learn about the program, complete the application, coordinate with their landlord/lender, how realistic is this timeline? Would you consider having two process deliverables: one for marketing and one for the application process?**

2. **What plans do you have for families who will need assistance beyond the 3 months?**

Response/Commentary:

- As a result of the May 4th meeting, we are comfortable with the selection of MWCD as the administrator of the Rental Assistance Program based on feedback from the Planning Department in that the following was taken into consideration:
  
  o Given the expedited process, there was insufficient time for an RFP. However, the Planning Department undertook a modified due diligence process.
  o Several other entities were considered and for a variety of reasons, the organizations were taken out of the process.
  o MWCD already operates a Ready Renter program and lotteries across the region
  o They were able to establish that they have staff, capabilities, and experience to run this type of program
  o They had already started to build the program by working with the Massachusetts Housing Partnership
  o They have established a strong relationship with Newton and are able to develop something specifically to meet Newton’s needs.

- Given the size of and importance of project, along with the aggressive timelines, we strongly recommend regular reporting, which does not compromise household/individual data privacy. This reporting will be on the progress and success of the program and how the CPA funds are being spent against established metrics and the overall project budget.

- Another critical area of concern was that the two-week marketing and application window was too short. We applaud the CPC’s amendment of adding an additional week for a total of three weeks [May 27th to June 3rd]. During the May 4th CPC meeting, it was highlighted that citizens who are blind may have challenges with the knowledge of the program and the application process. Therefore, we encourage MWCD and the Planning Department, as part of the reporting process, to monitor the number and type of applications being submitted and determine if additional time is needed for families to apply for assistance

- In response to our second question, the Planning Department is well-aware that the need may go beyond what this program is able to do and will make plans accordingly. We ask that you take the necessary steps through the Program & Services committee to monitor the process and future needs.

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The League of Women Voters encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.
Lastly and importantly, we support the following amendments reviewed and approved by the CPC and Planning & Development Board on May 4th:

- **Remove the following language from eligible renter household:** Households currently receiving assistance (e.g. Public Housing tenants, RAFT, Section 8, MRVP or other locally administered support) are not eligible for this program.
- **Remove the following language from eligible homeowner:** Households currently receiving mortgage assistance under RAFT are not eligible for this program.
- **Eligible applicants’ earnings are equal to or less than 80% AMI**
- **Staff to identify a process to ensure that applicants, at the lower end of the income range receive the most assistance.**

In closing, thank you for taking the League of Women Voters of Newton’s support and recommendations into consideration when deliberating on the creation of a COVID-19 Emergency Housing Relief Program.

Sincerely,

**Marcia Johnson**

President, League of Women Voters of Newton