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We Can “Emerge Even Stronger”!

Kudos to the Ravalli County Economic Development Association (RCEDA) for taking the bull by the horns and writing a report on the impact of Covid-19 on our local Ravalli County economy and how our businesses have been impacted by this economic shutdown. The RCEDA made a smart move to have our Representatives present this plan to the Governor’s Advisory Council to make them aware of our needs as the State finalizes the rules governing the distribution of the 1.25 Billion in CARES Act funding. This information, along with close to 1500 additional comments from businesses and organizations across the state, will help develop guidelines for the statewide distribution of the funding. For some reason, the May 31st Ravalli Republic’s article “County asks governor to consider economic plan” pointed out the Governor is a Democrat and our Representatives are Republican. Let’s hope we keep our recovery strategy independent of partisan politics so we can take full advantage of the funding.

The proposal for Ravalli County is titled “COVID-19 Emerge Strong Plan”. Considering the fact that this pandemic isn’t over, it only makes sense to keep updating the plan to make sure it fits the recommendations that have recently been released in the “Governors Coronavirus Relief Fund Advisory Council Recommendation Report”. For example, one area of special interest is specific to the tourism, hospitality, and entertainment industry. Fortunately the Ravalli County Tourism Business Improvement District (RC-TBID) recently contracted to collect data on the impacts of Covid-19 to Bitterroot tourism service providers and is summarized in a May 2020 report: “Bitterroot Valley Tourism Survey: Covid-19 Impact”. Considering that Ravalli County’s Tourism industry generated over \$100 million in economic activity in 2018, it is clearly an important contributor to our recovery. Is our tourism industry in Ravalli County ready to step up to meet the Governor’s criteria and take full advantage of the funding?

Ravalli County’s COVID-19 Emerge Strong Plan lays out the immediate assistance existing businesses need to recover and regain the momentum we had going into the pandemic. I hope we continue to strategize how we can prepare for any subsequent program and project funding that would help us transition to a more diversified and stable economy. Instead of pointing to our outdated timber economy as a reference, why not use the strength of our most recent pre-pandemic growth as the new baseline for recovery? The Covid-19 shut-down has given us the opportunity to assess what parts of our economy worked well and what parts did not. We can purposefully target future investments based on

the results. For example, where are the holes in our internet services that could be fixed to encourage more stay at home businesses? Which businesses need greater capacity to remain competitive or to attract new high tech companies to our valley? What new educational opportunities might be needed? What new or upgraded infrastructure is necessary? How do we fund necessary health care services and how do we increase capacity or technology in anticipation of the next pandemic?

Answers to these and similar questions would help identify new and exciting paths for a post pandemic future in Ravalli County that is “Even Stronger”.

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