

Karyn Polito meets with Lowell small business owners to discuss American Rescue Plan recovery



Lt. Gov.

Karyn Polito tours several businesses on Merrimack Street in Lowell on Wednesday, July 15, 2021.

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LOWELL — Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito sat down with a half-dozen Lowell business owners on Wednesday morning to open a discussion about the best ways the state can use \$450 million of American Rescue Plan Act funds to jumpstart economic recovery across Massachusetts.

The event marked her first stop on a statewide tour of small businesses and downtown areas, which will continue throughout the summer and will include visits to about two dozen city and town centers.

“Today is a way for us to get into the community and touch base to try to figure out what the next steps are,” Polito told the Sun. “We’ve put a lot of federal dollars into

play to help these businesses stay afloat over the course of this past year, and now we want to make sure that they rebound and continue to be successful."

In June, the Baker-Polito administration filed a plan to promptly spend \$2.9 billion of the state's ARPA funds on existing, proven programs to support key recovery priorities, including housing and homeownership, economic development and local downtowns, job training and workforce development, health care and infrastructure. The proposal expressly targets support for lower-wage workers and communities of color.

Included in the plan is \$450 million for economic development, \$100 million of which will be used specifically for downtown development, \$250 million of which will support "investments and regional collaboration" aimed at invigorating downtowns and the final \$100 million will be designated for supporting cultural facilities and tourism assets.

"We want to make sure that we are allocating the resources that we have authorized both in our economic development bill and the federal funds to make sure that we are reaching small, micro-businesses, minority-owned businesses, female-owned businesses, downtown businesses, so that we can continue to see them succeed," Polito said. "It's really important that they continue to be operational, because they are part of the fabric of the community."

Wednesday's round-table discussion was held at Olympia Restaurant, where the owners of businesses including Lowell Culinary, Humanity Boutique and Cobblestones of Lowell highlighted what they see as the biggest challenges that stand in the way of a thriving Lowell economy: affordable housing, a lack of on-the-job training and, particularly, workforce shortages.





Left to right, Rep. Thomas Golden, City Manager Eileen Donoghue, Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito and Housing and Economic Development Secretary Mike Kennealy.



(Left) Fred Faust, president of Lowell real estate company the Edge Group, discusses the best ways he thinks the state can use \$450 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to jumpstart economic recovery across Massachusetts

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"We've had four managers leave — two of them went to FedEx, one went to Amazon, and another is just trying to figure out what they want to do — so I think a lot of people are taking the time to re-evaluate what they want to do, and it leaves us struggling with, 'where is our workforce going to come from?' That's the big question," said Kathleen Plath, co-owner of Cobblestones of Lowell.

"We need to go from crisis mode to vision mode," added Fred Faust, president of the local real estate company the Edge Group.

With Wednesday's discussion being a jumping off point for the Baker administration, no concrete solutions to the issues mentioned were uncovered, however the business owners and city officials told Polito that they were grateful that she and Baker are keeping them in mind.

"Your visit today reaffirms the support that the administration has given us during the pandemic, and we look forward to working to get more relief and more support, so that we can make the wonderful lifetime investments that are going to benefit small businesses and the community.