



Betty Rivard: Relief money needs to go to right places

○ By Betty Rivard
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During two of my recent walks I have had the unexpected pleasure of seeing kids dressed up for proms with their families taking photographs. One time they were at Capitol Market in the rain and the other time on the south side of the Capitol in the warm sun.

There were few signs of the harrowing year that we are just finally starting to come out of. This year included not only the pandemic but also the loss to violence of one of our own here.

The kids I saw looked to be strong and healthy, with a promising future to move into wherever they choose to go next.

I could not help but wonder how much better this future could be if we as adults can give them all of the support that they need and otherwise stay out of their way.

It is really unbelievable to me how some of our state's leaders are determined to reduce the resources to our public schools and colleges and invest our scarce funds in our wealthiest citizens and in out-of-state corporations whose own kids are nowhere near here. To take money from those of their parents who are struggling due to losing jobs and cannot get the help they need to take care of kids or elders at home. To gut the basic supports and services that some of their families may depend on for the necessities of life.

I think too how our current national administration is providing us with new federal funds that can at least make some small difference by providing these kinds of necessary supports. Some of these funds are coming directly to individuals and families in the forms of stimulus checks and tax credits. Other funds are being funneled through the state or its counties and municipalities to plan for and decide where they will go.

I am especially focused right now on the funds for the counties and municipalities.

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., has been on a state tour, part of it virtual, to share information about these funds in meetings that cover each of the regional planning and development regions. This tour culminates in a Zoom session, open to us wherever we are, on May 24 at 6 p.m. Registration to attend is through the senator's website.

These are the two most important things, at least from my point of view, to know about these new federal funds.

The U.S. Treasury, in its Final Interim Rule, “urges state, territorial, tribal, and local governments to engage their constituents and communities in developing plans to use these payments, given the scale of funding and its potential to catalyze broader recovery and rebuilding.”

Each of us needs to find out how our state, county and municipal governments intend to involve us. We then need to express our ideas for the use of the funds both individually and with our allies who share similar perspectives. In some instances we may want to host our own town halls as a way to bring people together to develop a list of priorities that all of them agree on for presentation to the state, county or municipality to consider.

The other important thing is that these new federal funds are to be used to address those individuals, families, small businesses and other organizations that have been and continue to be most affected by the pandemic. A strong emphasis, backed up by some specific requirements, is put on using the funds to address the needs of underserved individuals and communities.

Populations with low incomes, minorities and in rural areas are directly targeted for funds that can make a difference in improving their situations.

People who are most affected by the pandemic are in the best position to speak up for what they most need. County commissions and city and town councils, in particular, need to reach out to listen to these people and involve them in decisions related to the use of these funds.

There is a very long list of the types of needs that the funds can be used for.

Although there is pressure to spend the funds quickly, the best decisions can be made as the result of a comprehensive planning process that puts everything on the table and then targets these funds to where they can make the most difference.

Towards the end of the document, the Interim Final Rule states the need for both near-term investments that can alleviate economic and other distress and also longterm investments in water and sewer and broadband infrastructure and in aid to families. We all know that our future lies in the hands of our children. Investing in aid to families now gives all of our children the best possible foundation for the rest of their lives.

This is where the rubber hits the road. Disinvesting in our state, like some of our leaders seem intent on doing, can only cost us more in the long term. They appear to want our state to continue to lose population and to weaken critical services and supports for those of us who choose to remain here.

We have right now, today, what may be an unprecedented opportunity to affect decisions on the use of new federal funds that will help to strengthen individuals, families, small businesses and

communities. Each of us can raise up our voices in support of priorities that will help to make the most difference in the future of our children and our state.

Betty Rivard, of Charleston, is a retired social worker and planner for the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources.