

Reimagining Lowell After the Pandemic – A Community Conversation About Lowell as a City of Learning

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic. It has killed hundreds of thousands, infected millions, and left national economies and the global economic system in ruins. Millions are without work and are in debt. Lowell, like so many cities has ground to a halt. The streets are empty, the schools are closed, and too many have been infected and many have died. The many small business that made Lowell so alive are in deep trouble. The festivals, art shows and music and event that make Lowell so vibrant have been cancelled. The many great non-profits that serve the community so well are stretched thin.

The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of many of the systems we rely on and revealed huge social inequalities and the inadequacy of our health care systems. It may take years to recover and may require a complete rethinking of how we work, learn, socialize, and protect citizens. We cannot go back to what was normal and are uncertain about what the “new normal” will be.

Considering these extraordinary events, we propose that the City of Learning Annual Festival focus on rethinking and re-imagining aspects of life in Lowell so that the city and region can rebound in new and sustainable ways. What have we learned from our collective COVID-19 experience? What can we make better? What is missing? How can we make our institutions function better? How can we build an economy worth having?

We do not have answers to these questions, but we propose that we draw on the strength, knowledge, and expertise of the whole community of Lowell by engaging in a weeklong conversation about aspects of life after the pandemic.

We seek to support and enable individuals, groups, and Lowell organizations to explore new ways of thinking and doing. The conversations should generate ideas, actions, and initiatives. This will be a 3-year effort that will exemplify Lowell as a city that learns from the past and embraces the future in new and exciting ways.

Year One: *Talking About what’s possible* September/October 2020

A 3-day Learning Festival with a series of virtual and, if possible, physical meetings and discussions that focus on reimagining a range of issues to embrace building a robust and sustainable life in Lowell.

For example:

How can Lowell continue to supports its vibrant arts and cultural activities if people are fearful of large gatherings?

How might K-12, higher and continuing education have to change in order to meet our changing needs?

How would health and care facilities have to change in order to protect our most vulnerable citizens?

What will sports and recreation look like?

What would it take to build an economy that is worth having?

How can we improve nutrition, food supply and food safety?

How would transportation and housing be different?

How could we better protect the environment and public health?

How could we improve involvement in our democracy and in governance?