Revere mayor responds to soaring unemployment in his city
Reliance on the hospitality industry has hobbled the city's economy

By Jon Chesto Globe Staff, Updated June 29, 2020, 8:19 p.m.

The COVID-19 pandemic has slammed the brakes on the Revere Renaissance.

In 2019, the city’s fortunes were on the rise. Amazon agreed to lease the former Necco candy factory, where it still plans to hire hundreds for a new “delivery station.” Residents found plentiful hospitality jobs, as the hotel and restaurant businesses boomed in Greater Boston and Wynn Resorts opened a giant casino in nearby Everett. Revere’s
unemployment rate was 3 percent, essentially matching the state average. Nearly anyone who wanted a job could get one.

Then the coronavirus hit. Amazon is moving ahead, but much of Revere’s economy is falling behind. Many of the region’s hospitality jobs are gone, and some won’t be coming back. The latest figures show Revere now has the second highest unemployment rate of any city in the state. Its jobless rate of 25.6 percent puts it behind only Lawrence.

Mayor Brian Arrigo faces an unfortunate turnabout. Once, his workforce development efforts were aimed more at meeting the needs of employers. Now, he’s more worried about making sure his residents can land the skills to find new careers.

The Arrigo administration plans to start this week to market the “Revere Works” coalition of city leaders and nonprofit partners. The group has been meeting since last year, but is pivoting to address a new need now that the city’s unemployment rate is soaring. The focus in the coming weeks will be on promoting the jobs at the Amazon facility as well as on training offered through The Neighborhood Developers, a local community development corporation. Arrigo said he has cobbled together nearly $1.5 million in funding, mostly from state and federal sources, for the coalition’s efforts.
Economic development has been an increasingly pressing need in Revere, particularly after the Wonderland greyhound track and the Suffolk Downs horse track closed down. Necco was once an economic engine as well, as hundreds showed up every day to churn out Sky Bars and Sweethearts for the world. Then, Necco shuttered, too. The city’s largest employers are now rival grocery stores, Market Basket and Stop & Shop (at least until Amazon opens). Most of the recent development on the waterfront has been residential. The vast majority of Revere residents leave the city limits to go to work.

Amazon once eyed Suffolk Downs as a candidate for its second headquarters. Revere didn’t win that one, but got a notable consolation prize: Amazon decided to invest tens of millions to convert that plant for its own use. City officials said they expect it will open next month. But there are still thousands of Revere residents without a steady paycheck.

Part of the problem, city officials say, is the preponderance of restaurant and hotel workers who live in Revere. The lodging and food services sector is the number two employer of Revere residents. But it’s also one of the sectors suffering the most from the pandemic. On Monday, more bad news arrived: Wynn’s decision to furlough 3,000 workers, the bulk of the workforce at the Encore Boston Harbor casino.

The wreckage in the hospitality sector frustrates people like Rafael Mares, executive director of The Neighborhood Developers, a Chelsea-based organization that helps develop affordable housing and job skills in the area. Training Revere residents for restaurant, hotel, and casino jobs sure seemed smart a year ago. Maybe not anymore.

COVID-19 has set everybody back. But Mares said the context in Revere is unique, given the makeup of the city’s workforce. Universal skills such as writing a resume and handling a job interview remain important. But Mares knows the Revere Works coalition will need to step up its game when it comes to teaching computer skills.

Revere’s ethnic diversity and proximity to Boston remain strengths that will help in the long run. But it sure feels like COVID-19 has put the city back to square one, he said.
long run. But it sure feels like COVID-19 has put the city back to square one, he said, underscoring the fragility of the city’s economy.

Amazon will end up hiring several hundred people at Necco, but Arrigo has even bigger hopes for commercial development at the former racetracks. Infrastructure work has begun at Suffolk Downs, where HYM Investment Group plans a massive mixed-use project that will straddle the Boston-Revere line. Wonderland remains a blank canvas for now.

City officials say they expect more than 22,000 jobs will be added in Revere over the next two decades, most of them at a redeveloped Suffolk Downs. COVID-19 hasn’t changed that long-term projection.

Those jobs can’t come soon enough for Arrigo — or for the thousands of constituents who might soon need to find a new career.

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