

New eCard program helps support Lafayette businesses

By M.D. Jones

Shopping locally can be the lifeblood for small businesses, especially during a pandemic. After allocating \$30,000 of federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds from the federal government for the purpose of stimulating the local economy, the city of Lafayette recently launched the Shop Local Lafayette eCard program. The program, which is in partnership with Yiftee, matches, dollar for dollar, purchases made at participating businesses.

For a limited time, when an eCard is purchased, an equal value bonus eCard is given to the purchaser. The original eCard never expires (but starts to decrease in value by \$3 per month after a year) and the bonus "Twice as Nice" eCard has an expiration date of 90 days. The cards are sold in increments of \$10, \$25, \$50 or \$100, with a limit of two bonus cards per person. That means that if a person buys two gift cards for \$100 each, they could get up to two free bonus cards from the city of \$100 each – doubling their spending power

from \$200 to \$400.

Since becoming a participating business in the Shop Local Lafayette program, Lamorinda Music owner Colleen McCormick says, "We've had at least one person so far and it went great. My husband John is with the Chamber of Commerce and he worked a lot on it with Thomas Myers [Lafayette's Economic Development Manager spearheading the program] and we hope the word spreads because it's a great program. It essentially doubles your money and it drives people to small businesses in Lafayette." John McCormick, her husband and co-owner of Lamorinda Music, added, "It's a win-win between merchants and the citizens of Lafayette and it is an excellent use of the ARPA funding because the money goes directly to small businesses in Lafayette."

Lafayette's Administrative Services Director Tracy Robinson noted that shopping local not only supports local business owners but helps

the overall community, since a portion of the sales tax collected on purchases is used to pay for local needs like police, safety and road repairs.

According to MarketWatch.com, a 2018 study showed that U.S. consumers spend an average of \$59 more than the value of their gift card and a U.K. study showed that gift cards cause 34% of people to visit stores they normally would not have visited.

Kimberly Pinto, manager at Lafayette Park Bistro & Bar, said, "We just started taking [eCards] this week and we're excited for the program."

The program is free to participating businesses and according to information about the program on the Yiftee website, "The card recipient and merchant receive the full value for the card, providing maximum benefit to local businesses."

Information, a list of participating business, and a link to purchase the cards can be found at www.lovelafayette.com/eCard

<https://app.yiftee.com/gift-card/lafayette--ca>

Council discusses Lafayette's American Rescue Plan Act fund distribution

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Myers then prioritized in his presentation two additional recommendations: immediately reallocating \$350,000 from preciously allocated ARPA funds to General Fund Revenue Recovery and on April 1 making payment in that amount to the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce for actions to assist in the recovery efforts for Lafayette's small business sector.

Other items included in the report included allocating \$56,500 to Lafayette Partners In Education to make more mental health services available to Lafayette students who attend public high schools in the Acalanes Union High School District that are outside the Lafayette city limits. Another action, framed by Myers as a "transfer," would shift \$100,000 from ARPA funds allocated for Business District marketing back to the General Fund. The funds would be used to hire an outside consultant to develop a comprehensive business marketing website to spur economic growth and recovery of the local business community.

A fourth recommendation suggested suspending the city's Business Assistant Program (BAP) due to the low volume of calls now that most of the state and federal funds have been dispersed. Myers said the city would remain in contact with Townsend Public Affairs, the company en-

gaged to support local businesses, while it wraps up its work with local businesses and until such time as new funding becomes available. The subcommittee recommended that \$22,500 of ARPA money that had been designated for BAP (if Townsend's oversight was to continue beyond March) be transferred to the "undesignated" category.

A final item requiring no money transfers or reallocations, but one that must receive formal approvals from the council to be fully enacted, was to initiate a one-year pilot program that extends current pandemic-related arrangements offered to downtown businesses. Under the existing agreement, the city allows restaurants to use on-street parking, private parking lots, and sidewalks for outdoor dining and retail sales as long as there is adequate space for pedestrian traffic. Additionally, sign and parking ordinances would continue to allow A-frames, banners, and the use of private lots for outdoor activities. The subcommittee recommended these policies be extended until March 31, 2023.

Asked about moving ARPA funds to the General Fund and the bookkeeping responsibilities that would then be taken on by the city (instead of by ARPA), Myers said reporting on how the funds are used would have to be done regardless and the greater flexibility offered by

the shift of money to the General Fund was worthwhile. Dawson emphasized that having the allocations within the General Fund would also streamline the process for sub-recipients to which funds are given when they are reporting back to the city.

In public comments, Lafayette resident Grace Dixon describe the city's approach to the distribution of funds as "humble and out-of-the-box," but encouraged the council to "take a hard look at the past and present history with parks." She said downtown families had been without a play park for years and suggested ARPA funds might seed small, walkable parks and recapture public land access for Lafayette residents. Other comments supported funding accessible parks and public paths that would make the city more welcoming and suggestions for improved signage for restaurants and other businesses that do not have frontage on the city's primary downtown streets.

Ending his presentation on a positive note, Myers said the gift card program launched last week that supports local businesses has been well-received and to date has used just slightly more than \$9,000 of the total \$30,000 allocation (see related story, Page A9).

The council unanimously approved the subcommittee's five recommended allocations of the ARPA funds.

Town approves funding for its businesses still struggling from COVID setbacks

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The town council rejected the \$5,000 request for funding a Gift Card Program. The concept was that for every \$20 spent in town, customers would receive a \$20 voucher that could be spent at a participating Moraga business. If and when the \$5,000 fund became depleted, the chamber would ask for a replenishment from the town. While Bidstrup reported that the concept was a hit in Lafayette and Concord, council mem-

bers voted 3-2 against the Gift Card Program (Mayor Renata Sos, Council Member Teresa Onoda and Council Member Sona Makker in favor of putting that \$5,000 in the hands of struggling retailers).

With regards to the Chamber's request for \$10,000 in funding to help boost its operational needs due to lack of membership participation resulting from business interruptions during COVID mandates, the town agreed to provide the full monetary request with

an additional \$10,000 in funding during July for any future needs.

In total, the town council gave staff direction of preliminary approval for up to \$187,000 in ARPA funds to support Moraga's business community. Final approval is expected during the next town council meeting on April 13. The Chamber, in the meantime, will continue to assess small business needs in order to report back any results or suggestions to the town council at a future date.

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