

A BOOST FOR BUSINESSES

MassDevelopment TDI grants helped 'keep the lights on' in Fall River during pandemic

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FALL RIVER — Twenty-three years ago when Todd Salpietro opened TJ's Music at 347 South Main St. he knew being a downtown business owner wouldn't necessarily be easy.

But the thought of an economically crippling coronavirus pandemic never crept into his imagination.

Salpietro, like countless other business owners, late last March had to close his music store until Gov. Charlie Baker eventually issued an order allowing many non-essential businesses to reopen with social-distancing measures in place.

"We were closed two and a half



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Patti Rego, content curator and "chief cheerleader" for We Love Fall River, is seen here, from left, with MassDevelopment TDI Fellow Jim McKeag and local business and property owner John Varao.

months," he said.

Last month, Salpietro, 48, got a financial assist in the form of a \$5,000 grant courtesy of MassDevelopment's

Transformative Development Initiative, or TDI for short.

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Todd Salpietro, owner of TJ's Music, is seen here in the basement area of his Fall River store where students take private music lessons in practice rooms.

GRANTS

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The Fall River TDI grant program had offered up to \$5,000 to qualifying individual businesses or organizations located within what's called the South Main Street Revitalization District.

Salpietro said he's used the money to pay bills and the salaries of his five nearly full-time employees.

"We wanted to continue to work," he explained.

The quasi-public MassDevelopment, originally known as Massachusetts Development Finance Agency, created the TDI program in 2014 — as a means of enabling "Gateway cities" like Fall River to stimulate economic development and investment in development projects.

Gateway cities in Massachusetts are defined as "midsize urban centers" with "stubborn social and economic challenges" as well as "many assets with unrealized potential."

MassDevelopment said it had a grant pool of \$90,000 to cover three rounds of pandemic emergency funding, from April to September, for qualifying candidates who applied for the first round of Fall River TDI grants.

Of the 28 downtown businesses submitting applications 22 qualified for the grants, according to Jim McKeag, who runs and oversees the Fall River TDI from an office inside the One SouthCoast Chamber of Commerce building on Pocasset Street.

McKeag says individual grants handed out to qualifying candidates ranged from around \$750 to the maximum \$5,000.

Other downtown business grant recipients, McKeag said, included Harry's Restaurant, JavaHouse Chew & Brew and the adjacent Drewbi's Salon.

He said that One SouthCoast Chamber of Commerce — with offices in Fall River and New Bedford and a membership encompassing 19 municipalities, including Tiverton and Warren, Rhode Island — has allowed MassDevelopment, at no cost, to utilize space for the city's TDI program inside the chamber's Fall River building.

McKeag, 50, also says that the Fall River TDI in recent months has been afforded, at no charge, the use of a storefront space at 333 South Main for what's called the VIVA Fall River Pop-Up.

That space, located near the corner of South Main and Columbia streets, sits between Facchiano's Shoe Repair and TJ's Music.

The VIVA Fall River Pop-Up, which took its name from a 1983 song by Portuguese singer and songwriter Jorge Ferreira called "Viva Fall River," is used for occasional meetings of downtown business owners to exchange ideas and strategies to advance business development and revitalization.

The building is owned by John Varao, owner and operator of the adjacent Tax Consultants Inc. at 435 Columbia St.

"I'd like them to be successful," Varao, 64, said. "That's what we need downtown, some kind of promotion for local business."

Fall River native Patti Rego, who does marketing and communications for the nonprofit Marion Institute, says the Fall River TDI has had the support of a number of partners — among them the city of Fall River, local

and regional banks and nonprofit organizations and downtown businesses, including Alexandra's Boutique and Fall River Pawnbrokers.

McKeag says the city's Redevelopment Authority previously contributed \$20,000 to the Fall River TDI grant program.

Rego, 42, also refers to herself as the "chief city cheerleader and content curator" of We Love Fall River — which is described as "a social movement showcasing positive stories about economic development, community initiatives and arts and culture" within the city.

Rego says the VIVA Fall River website "will become the central website devoted to promoting Fall River's small businesses, as well as providing resources to these small businesses in the form of education and connection to consumers."

The website includes a short video featuring the co-owner of JavaHouse Chew & Brew, who says his sales plummeted 95 percent shortly after COVID-19 became known as a national and international health threat.

He also describes how TDI, Marion Institute and VIVA Fall River put him in touch with downtown food relief programs, so that he could provide free meals to disabled and senior citizens despite his own financial hardship.

Rego urges businesses within the South Main Street corridor — that now stretches from City Hall to Union Street — to apply for future TDI grants.

She credits MassDevelopment for what she says was its quick action in response to the pandemic.

"They showed great alacrity, to keep the lights on and help people," Rego said.