

# *Crain's Detroit Business*

December 31, 2020 06:32 AM updated 2 hours ago

## **Pontiac mayor on city's work to support businesses struggling during pandemic**

Mark S. Lee

### Reprints



Deirdre Waterman

The pandemic has hit every community over the last year and it's been well-documented that small businesses are being hit with a record numbers of closures. In Pontiac, a diverse city in Oakland County of a little more than 60,000 residents, it is no different.

Pontiac has a good mix of diverse businesses with approximately 914 small businesses, 21 businesses employing more than 100 employees — including two that employ more than 5,000 employees, and 42 food service/bar establishments. Additionally, it has health care and financial services, auto manufacturing and supply companies, an Amazon presence and is home to the largest wholesale mortgage company in the United States — United Wholesale Mortgage, formerly United Shore Mortgage.

Regarding economic development, there are 130 Building and Safety projects underway totaling \$113 million in construction costs.

An entrepreneur herself, New York-born and Detroit-raised, Dr. Deirdre Waterman, is the first woman mayor in Pontiac history. Now in her second term, Mayor Waterman governs the city in which she spent more than four decades of her career collaborating with others to solve some of the city's most challenging issues.

I recently talked to Mayor Waterman about the impact COVID-19 is having on Pontiac, its entrepreneurial community and how the city is supporting small businesses in need.



Mark S. Lee is founder, president and CEO of The Lee Group.

**Lee: What is the state of entrepreneurship in Pontiac? How has it impacted the small business ecosystem?**

**Waterman:** In Pontiac, our food service businesses are really struggling with the state's order to remain closed until Dec. 20. One example in an effort to support them and provide options is the creation of a Social District. The city of Pontiac City Council approved a Social District in downtown Pontiac, which allows for restaurants/bars to apply for licenses to serve alcoholic beverages in special cups to be taken and consumed in designated common areas.

During the pandemic, some of our businesses continue to thrive. For instance, Amazon and United Shore are two companies with development expansions. Amazon is developing over 4 million square feet on the old Silverdome site and United Shore Mortgage just completed the [longest pedestrian bridge](#) in the country right here in Pontiac.

The 130 development projects in our Building and Safety Department are a testament to business diversity. We are not dependent on one business sector for jobs and economic development.

**Lee: What types of relief support programs are being offered to entrepreneurs?**

**Waterman:** The city of Pontiac has collaborated with our partners to provide support and assistance to our business owners across all sectors. Some examples of programs and services to businesses impacted by COVID-19 are, for example:

- Providing more than 600 ReOpen Kits to Pontiac businesses.
- A COVID-19 hotline for Pontiac businesses and residents to contact City Hall directly for information and assistance with applying for resources.
- Conducting a Small Business Town Hall to present information on grants, loans and resources for COVID-19 relief to Pontiac businesses
- We continue outreach efforts to share resources and COVID-19 relief information on grants, loans and programs to Pontiac businesses and residents.
- Facilitating a grant program administered by the county and awarded grants to 40 small businesses in Pontiac.

- The executive order for outdoor seating allowed for food service businesses to expand onto public walkways.

**Lee: In addition to financial resources, what other entrepreneurial-specific support is available?**

**Waterman:** We offer a Help Desk Hot Line at (248) 758-3300, on-site assistance with grant applications, town hall for business owners to communicate information, expedited permits for development and expansion programs through our Planning and Building and Safety departments and working with downtown businesses to diminish parking issues through improved signage and enforcement of illegal overnight parking.

**Lee: It's been reported that 25 percent of small businesses have been shuttered across Oakland County. How are Pontiac and the county leveraging the business community to address business closure issues? And what additional support have you garnered from across Oakland County?**

**Waterman:** The CARES Act grants from Oakland County averaged \$4,000 for small business stabilization, the Saving Businesses, Saving Lives grant incentivized manufacturing companies and the county partnered with Automation Alley to bring advanced manufacturing technologies to small and medium-size businesses to improve the regions ability to respond to disruptions like the pandemic.

**Lee: It's my understanding a business roundtable is being launched. Please expound on expectations and potential deliverables.**

**Waterman:** The city of Pontiac is home to a creative and growing business community ranging from advanced technology startups to unique food and entertainment clusters, all surrounded by significant multinational corporations including Amazon, United Shore, Williams International, Fanuc and more. The Mayor's Business Roundtable seeks to draw from the executive leadership of that community and will launch in the first quarter of 2021. The roundtable will initially seek to build upon the rapid growth within Pontiac and the more than 40 active investments currently in development in the city.

The roundtable will include financial and philanthropic partners along with the MEDC, the county and Oakland University to detail the resources and programs available and needed to keep the momentum of the past six years. The initial composition of the group will include key executive-level leaders in the Pontiac community who will be charged with segmenting the talents within Pontiac into working groups by size and industry.

Some deliverables are telling the positive story of Pontiac's current multiyear run of success, financial resources, training for talent, social media know-how, information on small business development support and incentives for current business expansion, retention and attraction, and significantly, how the leadership in Pontiac can better align and collaboratively grow.

**Lee: With the COVID-19 vaccine being rolled out, what are Pontiac's plans to distribute to residents and other key stakeholders?**

**Waterman:** The Oakland County Health Department's COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan has a Pontiac site at the fire station on South Boulevard. Appointments for vaccinations are being made through the Oakland County Nurse-on-Call according to a protocol outlined by the CDC with health care workers and elderly in extended-care facilities receiving the first allotment of doses.

Throughout this pandemic, our executive office has provided information and resources to encourage residents to follow safety protocols and those safeguards are adhered to in all city facilities. We have offered PSAs and other broadcasts through our social media platforms to assure people of accurate, reliable medical information from trusted sources. The availability now of effective vaccines is the "light at the end of the tunnel" that we've all eagerly been waiting for. It will be a mammoth job to complete distribution through all demographics.

In the meantime, we'll administratively still encourage people to hang in there together and be patient and still observe the safety protocols.

**Lee: What are your hopes and expectations for 2021 for small business owners?**

**Waterman:** We continue and are committed to identify resources, programs and initiatives to assist our business community and help them survive and grow.

Additionally, we are working to enhance our community in other ways such as increasing the number of minority technical/technology businesses, assisting developers with development projects by providing incentives, ease in acquiring permits and licenses in a timely manner, providing assistance and support to grow home-based businesses and moving the city to a "smart city" zone.

**Lee: Other thoughts?**

**Waterman:** Please go to [pontiac.mi.us](http://pontiac.mi.us) for information about the city of Pontiac's Master Plan, Pontiac Moving Forward, Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Congress of New Urbanism Legacy Charrette Plan and the recently-launched PontiaConnect! app.

*Mark S. Lee is founder, president and CEO of The Lee Group and can be heard on "In the Conference Room" at 11 a.m. Sundays on 910AM. He hosts the "Small Talk with Mark S. Lee" podcasts at [leegroupinnovation.com](http://leegroupinnovation.com).*