

It's time for a new New Deal

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) June 25, 2020



The May jobs report for the nation provided the slightest glimmer of hope for the country's economy, now suffering the deepest job losses in nearly a century. There were almost 21 million unemployed persons (an unemployment rate of 13.3 percent) compared to 23.1 million unemployed (14.7 percent) the previous month.

Shortly after the release of this news, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell indicated that the central bank foresees an unemployment rate of 9.3 percent at the end of this year.

Maryland is faring slightly better than the nation. According to the preliminary survey data, about one in 10 Marylanders were unemployed in May, about the same as the month before.

The hope is that, as more business activity is allowed to return to the pre-pandemic levels of operation, the economy will gradually, or even at a more accelerated pace, return to a strong position. What if that hope is not realized? What if a skittish public, in the absence of widespread availability of treatment or an effective vaccine, is reluctant to access retail spaces or to gather in venues such as movie theaters, concert halls or sports stadiums?

If unemployment levels were to linger in double-digit territory, would the country be willing to do something more aggressive to jump-start the economy? To imagine a very robust response, there might be some value in turning to history and reviewing some of the features of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s.

Those who disparage the New Deal might often refer to its many components as an "alphabet soup" of programs with their many acronyms: WPA (Works Progress Administration), PWA (Public Works Administration), CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), not to mention the many measures relating to monetary and banking reform.

The WPA contributed to many iconic projects across the country that serve us to this day, including the approach to San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and New York's LaGuardia Airport.

The most impactful and largest single venture was the Tennessee Valley Authority, which created dams and other critical infrastructure to bring electrification and flood control to the poverty-stricken Tennessee Valley. (A 21st century version of this initiative might be the expansion of broadband service to far-flung rural areas and bypassed urban poverty pockets.)

The CCC and WPA were used in combination to bring about a project not far from here that most of us have heard about but have never seen. That is Camp David, the presidential retreat in the Catoctin Mountain Park near Thurmont in Frederick County. The CCC was also instrumental in the development of the Skyline Drive that winds its way through Shenandoah National Park in Virginia.

Another still appealing development is the town of Greenbelt in Prince George's County, with its marvelous art deco town center. Greenbelt was one of three greenbelt communities (the others were Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wisconsin) developed under the leadership of FDR's New Deal lieutenant Rexford Tugwell.

Impact in Maryland

Even closer to home, New Deal programs were responsible for projects large and small. In Baltimore alone, they included the former Eastern High School for Girls, the former Southern High School, the Fifth Regiment Armory, Baltimore National Cemetery and the restorations of both Preston Gardens and the Flag House.

Some New Deal initiatives were derided by critics as "make work." This included those programs that provided support for unemployed artists, performers, and writers. Writers like Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison and photographers, including Dorothea Lange, were sent around the country to document the hardships being endured in the Great Depression.

Other artists left their mark in wonderful murals for post office interiors, a fine example of which can be found in Bethesda.

One enduring outcome of the Federal Writers Project was the American Guide Series that produced guidebooks for every state containing descriptions of towns, waterways, historic sites, and other amenities. One volume is "Maryland: a Guide to the Old Line State," published by Oxford University Press in 1940, still of value in documenting the many communities of the state in the early part of the 20th century.

Would we today have the imagination to devise programs that would employ idled workers in the many commercial and nonprofit arts organizations, many of which could close their doors forever, and keep these organizations afloat until the national economy stabilizes?

All of this speculation might be seen as fanciful under the current political alignment in Washington. How many "Infrastructure Weeks" have been rolled out without any resulting substance? I've lost count.

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