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This Isn't What We Planned For

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Facing a future that's still taking shape, planners adapt to a new way of living and working.



A masked pedestrian stands near the New York City AIDS Memorial, looking back toward the Lenox Health Greenwich Village hospital. Photo by Todd Heisler/*The New York Times*.

By Linda McIntyre, AICP

The creeping sense of dread began in earnest for me on Monday, March 9. I went to work (I'm a planner in New York City) anticipating a busy day, including a community board meeting that night. Later that morning, I found out the meeting, like all others the board had scheduled for March, was canceled because of concerns about COVID-19. The first case of the virus in New York had been confirmed on March 1, though at this point it was already ravaging Seattle, and California Gov. Gavin Newsom had declared a state of emergency.

Every day over the next two weeks, life for me and my fellow New Yorkers changed, often dramatically, as the number of confirmed cases surged. The life drained out of Manhattan's streets as stores, restaurants, and bars closed.

By the end of the following week, most New Yorkers were required to work from home and discouraged from leaving except to buy groceries or medicine, or to catch a few minutes of socially distant fresh air and exercise. These trips became increasingly fraught as protocols constantly evolved.

DEEP DIVE

Planning's Response to Social Changes

From the beginning, the planning profession has met society's challenges with innovative ideas.

By the time I started working on this article in mid-April, amid virtual happy hours, birthday parties, and Passover and Easter celebrations — as well as budget cuts, suspended projects, and massive layoffs in large swaths of the economy — New Yorkers, and citizens nationwide, still didn't know when the "new normal" would begin, let alone what it would look like.

It's a tough place for planners to be. We focus on the future — envisioning, projecting, forecasting, *planning* — but rarely, in recent years, have most of us faced so much uncertainty about tomorrow, next week, or this fall, let alone the time horizon of a comprehensive plan.

Learning curves

As stay-at-home orders and mandatory closures of nonessential business and government functions proliferated nationwide, planners have been forced to adapt, seemingly overnight in some locales.

Fortunately for Norfolk, Virginia, which has long had a resilience focus, leaders and staff had a framework for shifting to remote work thanks to an existing plan for continuing government operations in the event of severe flooding and storms. It fit the situation perfectly, though the transition has not been without challenges.

"Planning has been 100 percent on telework for two weeks now and we're getting better at it each day," Norfolk planning director George Home-wood, FAICP, told me in April. "I keep telling my staff that we are building the bicycle while learning to ride it." Early challenges included continued demands for construction site inspections even in the face of a statewide stay-at-home order. "We quickly developed a remote inspection protocol using pictures, videos, two-way video calling, Zoom, and the like."

Planners in other places were moving through the same learning curve. The ease with which they did this was often determined by luck and timing. In Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington D.C., Zoning Administrator Arlova Vonhm, AICP, says the county made a "very smart decision in hindsight" when they recently replaced employees' desktop computers with laptops. Some wondered why this made sense for frontline people who usually deal with customers face-to-face, but there was no cost difference — and the decision has paid off. "Everyone is still working, and there has been virtually no change in service," says Vonhm.

Koren Manning, planning administrator in Tucson, Arizona's Planning and Development Services Department, says the city had already begun to move a lot more of its processes and services online before the crisis. "Since we already had so much of it in place, it was easier to ramp up our capability," she says.

"People are realizing there are going to be months more of some form of distancing. We're trying to do [outreach] online, but we have concerns about how accessible that will be."

— *Koren Manning, Planning Administrator, Tucson, Arizona*

Adjusting to a totally remote environment is not seamless, though, for agencies or the people they serve. "It has been a challenge to figure out how best to allocate available resources, but everyone is working together to come up with workarounds and patches," says Homewood. "We're issuing permits and reviewing site plans pretty much at the same pace."

It's been a challenge in Arlington too. "I think the staff having the hardest time are doing plan review — they're used to having a large screen or two screens," says Vonhm. Virtual government also requires adjustment from residents. Some applicants might have limited access to digital materials. Others may have resisted their community's shift to online permitting years ago, but now they don't have the choice.

Stop and go

Providing services remotely, however challenging, is doable. But can planning, or even projects in progress, go forward when everything changes nearly every day? In some cases, it can. Wendy Moeller, FAICP, says that her firm, Compass Point Planning, outside Cincinnati, has so far been able to carry on pretty much as usual throughout April, despite Ohio's early restrictions. "I don't have any projects right at their beginning, so I'm not struggling with big kickoff meetings." And as a sole practitioner, she doesn't have a lot of overhead or employees to consider as she rides out the crisis.

Virtual meetings with project partners have kept many projects on schedule, but Moeller says some nearly finished projects were temporarily halted. One municipal client could have held a hearing, but held off adopting its sign code as a stay-at-home order was put in place, fearing the perception of implementing new regulations with minimal scrutiny.

Craig Coronato, a capital projects supervisor at Denver's Department of Parks and Recreation, says ongoing projects that were already contracted or in the pipeline for design were relatively unscathed. "We have had some minor delays due to consultants moving to a work-from-home environment, but most are staying on schedule," he says. "In the meantime, we're identifying future projects that can be deferred so resources can be directed to other city needs."

Longer-term planning in the area — Coronato is also a planning commissioner in nearby Littleton, where he lives — is also still moving. Littleton's downtown area rezoning process "hasn't missed a beat," he says.

But holding public meetings — and advancing the planning and land-use actions that depend on them — at a time of social distancing and bans on large gatherings can be tricky. Many jurisdictions scrambled to figure out how to meet remotely in a manner consistent with open meeting laws. Moeller says she heard from colleagues in Kentucky, just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, that some county attorneys had been too concerned about due process to allow any virtual public meetings to take place.

Manning says Tucson officials struggled with the same issues. "For neighborhood and community planning, we're not sure yet how to move forward with outreach," she says. "There's so much disruption and uncertainty, and people are realizing there are going to be months more of some form of distancing. We're trying to do it online, but we have concerns about how accessible that will be."

Uncertain future

The medium-term impact on planning was hard to predict during those early weeks, but as municipal revenues plummeted, it was hard not to worry. In Arlington, application fees generate revenue for Vonhm's department through a development fund and pay for their expenses. In mid-April, the county's revised budget had not yet addressed this fund.

"These three months are generally the busiest for us, so it's hard to know today what the impacts will be in a few months," she says. "That said, the county manager was transparent very early about not cutting staff, which gave people comfort. There would be no raises, but they were not proposing cuts."

The outlook was similar for public-sector planners in some other parts of the country — at least those with full-time positions. Nathan Goldberg, AICP, chair of APA Nevada, says he heard reports that various agencies were looking at layoffs for part-time staff, but not full-time staff.

But Manning says that her department, which is funded almost entirely through sales taxes, had to let most of their contract staff go. Tucson, she adds, was hit hard and then recovered slowly from the last recession. "We're trying to think about economic recovery and put some incentives in place like targeted permit fee relief, updating impact fees, and accelerating our adaptive reuse program," says Manning. "But when we're understaffed, it's harder to serve the city. How can we make sure the city is in a good place for when things start to come back?"

Adapting to new normal

It was hard to believe in April, when I spoke with most planners in this story, but at some point we will be back at work. And our experiences now will likely inform what that work will look like in the future.



Essential workers in Detroit continue to ride city buses to their jobs despite potentially putting themselves in harm's way. Photo by Emily Rose Bennett/*The New York Times*.

At the individual scale, we've had a vivid reminder to expect the unexpected with respect to our jobs, both their content and their existence. Regarding the former, Coronato notes that "our operations and recreation staff have stepped up big time to support essential and critical city functions — from enforcing park rules to transporting city jail prisoners to health facilities." Regarding the latter, not every jurisdiction or firm has been able to avoid layoffs.

Daniel Ashworth Jr., AICP, was in the unfortunate position of winding down his role at one firm and preparing to start at a new one when his offer was rescinded owing to the early impact of the pandemic. His old firm was unable to take him back for the same reason. "With everyone else having hiring freezes or even starting layoffs, my wife, Tonya, and I decided this was the best time to try to start something on our own. We literally spent two weeks doing our LLP paperwork and starting our branding and website when another firm came calling because they saw my post on LinkedIn" — he had shared the news on the social media site — "and because they have been looking for landscape architecture leadership in their Florida market for a while."

Ashworth was lucky, but he was also prepared. "I have had the benefit of a nearly 20-year career at five different firms in three different cities and states, which has allowed me to build a wide and varied network," he says.

For planners facing uncertainty or worse, "my advice would be, as easy as it is to freak out, be patient, work through your networks, and don't be afraid to put it out there that you are out of a job and weighing other plans due to the current circumstances, even on social media," Ashworth says. Being adaptable and open to learning new project and practice types helps too.

Looking to the future

While this issue of *Planning* was being put together, strong restrictions on travel and gathering were in place, and it was impossible to predict what the coming months would hold. Maybe it still is. At the same time, it was possible to see some emerging bright spots for planning in a post-COVID-19 world, some small — "finally, we can stop managing paper!" says Vonhm — and some big.

There has been talk of a possible infrastructure government stimulus program, which could create more work for planners — planners with our minds focused in a new and different way. While nobody expects another New Deal, we

could again see opportunities to rebuild — integrating not just lessons from the pandemic, but all the many other insights and innovations developed in the decades since much of our significant original infrastructure was built.

Even absent major intervention by the federal government, the public view of the built environment was changing in April, as people in many places wrestled with social distancing on narrow sidewalks next to mostly empty streets. The Oakland, California, city government, for example, announced, and in short order expanded, a "Slow Streets" program, closing a significant portion of its roads to car traffic to provide more space for safe walking and cycling. And, as Coronato notes, the restrictions heightened the need for, and use of, parks in many cities.

"Although people's memories tend to be short, we think that the importance of parks, especially in our most urban and densely populated areas, will be looked on favorably, along with support for quantity and quality in future funding," he says.

Many planners believe that online platforms and other tools we're relying on during the quarantine will enhance public outreach, even after in-person meetings resume. "We can think creatively about how they can complement each other," says Manning. "Evening meetings don't work for everyone, and we can also use these tools to collaborate better within departments, with other departments, consultants, and applicants." The suite of virtual tools can also translate into other languages and do closed captioning, broadening participation among previously marginalized groups.

After five weeks on hiatus, New York City's city council held its first-ever remote meeting on April 22, streamlining its usual procedures to approve, among other items, supportive and affordable housing measures. City agencies and community groups had started to adapt to virtual activities too. Many projects have been put on hold, but some have begun inching forward again. A conference call about a grading plan offered me sweet relief from news updates, a step toward a future.

That future will look different than the one we had planned for. But, working together from our apartments, picking up tips from the webinars and blog posts we now have time to watch and read, sharing ideas on our laptop screens, we're starting to plan for a new future, one built on a foundation of lessons learned the hard way.

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Browse [APA's COVID-19 Resources](#) for more from our growing collection of trusted, timely resources to help you and your community navigate the coronavirus pandemic.

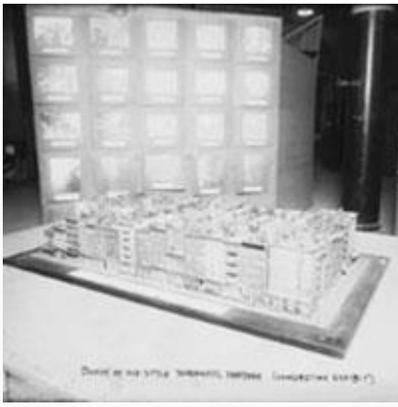
The Long View

PLANNING'S RESPONSE TO SOCIAL CHANGES

By Nick Ammerman

From the beginning, the planning profession has met society's challenges with innovative ideas.

1903



Overcrowding, poverty, disease, and lack of housing inspire early planning movements from the **New York Congestion Exhibition** to Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities and Le Corbusier's Radiant City.

1909



As cities struggle with escalating populations, urban planning as a standardized professional field emerges in response. Many prominent urbanists attend the first **National Conference on City Planning** in 1909, and the American City Planning Institute is founded in 1917.

1916



The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911, the 1915 construction of the light-blocking Equitable Building, and other events lead New York City to adopt the **1916 Zoning Resolution**, considered the first citywide zoning code.

1933



In response to the Great Depression, the **National Planning Board** is established to promote planning in public works and infrastructure, as well as push for comprehensive regional plans.

1958



After World War II veterans come home, new housing developments create urban sprawl. Lexington, Kentucky, develops the **first urban growth boundary**.

1961



Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of Great American Cities* shines a light on planners' overreliance on renewal and impersonal planning. Planners respond by developing new philosophies that better appreciate existing structures and street patterns.

1962



Silent Spring by Rachel Carson popularizes the concept that human beings can damage the environment. In planning, the concepts of **sustainable development** and **smart growth** develop.

1964



With the social upheaval of the 1960s, planners push the profession toward social reform and work more actively to counter racial discrimination, poverty, and oppression. **Community design centers** involve residents in the planning, design, and development of low-and moderate-income communities.

1970s



Changing federal farm policies and loss of farmland spur the **local food movement**. Planners help communities embrace urban agriculture, urban livestock, and agritourism.

1971–1972

High crime rates in the 1960s and '70s inspire planners to develop theories about defensible space and **crime prevention through environmental design**, focusing on environmental traits such as natural surveillance, access control, and territorial reinforcement.

1990



The **Americans With Disabilities Act** is passed, followed by the planning concepts of accessibility and universal design pushing for public facilities and buildings that are accessible to everyone.

2005



Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and other severe weather events lead planners to work to improve **local resilience to coastal storms and flooding**, as well as address how disasters can disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

2007–2008



The **Great Recession**, sparked by the subprime mortgage crisis, leads to new trends — such as the shared economy and tiny homes — and planners work to integrate (and regulate) these disruptive tools.

2015



The **Paris Agreement** prescribes a mixture of mitigation and adaptation to counteract the impacts of climate change. Planners shift from planning for sustainable communities to planning for resilient communities.

Nick Ammerman is APA's library and taxonomy manager. He oversaw the creation of the [Planning History Timeline](#), a more expansive look at the history of planning in the 20th century.