



Michigan Chapter, American Planning Association

March 30, 2020

## Why Planning is Still Important

### Ten Things Planners Can Do Now

Even when faced with dire emergencies like the pandemic the world is experiencing today, the work of government must continue. In fact, it is more important than ever during these times, and planners can be leaders in implementing local emergency response efforts.

Step up and amplify how the skills and knowledge of community planners can improve municipal response to the emergency. Articulate activities and actions that should be occurring if they are not already. Integrate the best of planning into every government response possible. The emergency will last longer than any of us like, but if we emerge with better emergency response policies, innovative technologies, and an improved understanding of the role of planning, we will respond more comprehensively, resiliently and humanly to the next emergency.

Here are some ways to advance our work, improve government responses, and be better prepared for the next emergency.

1. **Essential Service versus Work from Home (WFH).** Remember that “essential service” does not mean you have to be physically in the community to do your work. Although much of our work does involve being in the community - engaging, interacting, gathering data and information, holding public meetings - as we will learn, much of this work can be done from home. Do not confuse “essential service” with WFH. Planners can do essential work from home.
2. **Remote Work.** If your municipality was unprepared to provide professional staff with remote work capabilities, you have most certainly made progress by now. Having systems in place for remote access will prepare us to work more effectively from home during the next emergency. Providing planners – and all non-essential municipal staff – with efficient and connected WFH options allows for “critical infrastructure workers” (defined in Michigan EO 2020 – 21) who... “sustain or protect life, or ... support those businesses and operations that are necessary to sustain or protect life” to conduct their critical functions in the field. Working from home will minimize the number of humans who are potentially exposed to the virus, allowing those who need to be in the field physically to do so. We all want to flatten the curve, but certain professions are front line and must be physically present to do their work.
3. **Hazard Mitigation Team.** Planners are often part of a municipality’s hazard mitigation or emergency response team. If you are not, now is the time to make the case to be included. The majority of communities that have a current hazard mitigation plan (they expire every 5 years)

require a committee to oversee it. If planners are not identified in the plan as one of the representative committee members, advocate to be included.

4. **Virtual Alternatives.** Given that much of our work is engagement and outreach, developing virtual alternatives – and sometimes replacements – for traditional public hearings and meetings is now necessary. Other face to face engagement techniques we use (open houses, focus groups, community meetings, etc) can be adapted using Zoom, Map.Social, GoToMeetings, WebEx, and many other platforms. Now is the time to educate yourself about the remote connection options that will work best for your community to engage residents and conduct public meetings. Become the remote meeting expert in your community. Do the research, test run public meetings with your elected body, and planning and zoning boards, and volunteer to help other municipal departments as needed.
5. **Economic Response and Recovery.** As construction grinds to a halt, planners must be enabled to continue to review and approve development proposals. We must provide the option for developers to submit development applications, site plans, and permits electronically, and the municipal development review team must be able to review, comment and advance through the approval process. Continuing this work is essential to having shovel ready projects queued up and set to go when the emergency is lifted.
6. **Repurpose Planning Staff.** Planners have research and data analytic skills that are indispensable at this juncture. Put those skills to use by working with municipal interdisciplinary research and analytical teams. Health, public safety, parks, solid waste, engineering, building and construction services, environmental, legal, housing, transportation and others have discreet responsibilities. Planners can track and collect data needed by other team members; direct members to existing, relevant local policy; and otherwise serve as the collaborators that we have been trained to be.
7. **Scenario Planning.** What better time than now to implement scenario planning skills.... or learn them. Planners can support emergency response teams by helping them to analyze how different actions may result in different outcomes. A basic concept in emergency management is the three-step risk assessment process: hazard identification, hazard analysis, and impact analysis. Scenario-based planning helps bridge the gap between hazard and impact analysis. This is where strategic scenario-based planning comes in, and where planners can lead.
8. **Messaging.** On Monday March 23, 2020, Michigan Governor Whitmer issued Executive Order 2020 – 21 [https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499\\_90705-522626--,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90705-522626--,00.html) temporarily suspending activities not necessary to sustain or protect health. Read and understand the Executive Order so that you can emphasize key points when communicating with residents, developers, municipal colleagues and others. Couch your explanations in terms of the language of the EO.
9. **Master Plan and Zoning Code Updates.** While much of our time in the coming weeks and months will be devoted to the emergency response actions noted above, there will be opportunities to take the time to consider the foundational work of planning that we are often challenged to accomplish. We may now have the chance to hunker down and create a work plan for starting that next master plan update; conduct background studies and data collection; prepare a community engagement strategy to be implemented later. We can prepare now to hit the ground running when the emergency orders are removed. And what planner isn't eager for some time and space to take on that zoning code challenge that has been languishing on your to do list.

10. **Fiscal Impact Analysis.** The economic fallout from the pandemic will be devastating, and will likely affect local municipal budgets and services. Planners can influence policy going forward to encourage fiscally responsible sustainable best practices; land conserving development policies; public transportation and transit investments; housing policy that prioritizes affordable units, density, access to public transportation and other support services; and strategies that intentionally integrate equity into all policies. And make the case for your value as a high level professional who can contribute to the financial rebounding of your municipality as we emerge from this crisis.

Prepared by the Michigan Chapter, APA.

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