



By Dan Marks, AICP, May 12, 2020



As we move through the second month of “shelter in place” in California, I think back to other cataclysms during my 35-plus years as a planner for how this may affect our work over the next months and years. While this particular disaster is unique, and prognostications about the future are likely to be full of error and caveats, it’s not too early to start hoping for something positive to come from this situation, and to consider setting in motion some of the actions needed to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes.

My focus here is on the practice of local government planning. Our work until now has always been subject to the boom and bust cycles of land development. As we enter the “COVID-19 recession,” we can expect a steep decline in development activity. Despite the Bay Area’s tech-based economy, it’s hard to imagine that our strong housing market will be immune from the impacts of unemployment levels not seen since the Great Depression, or that investment in commercial development will not pause.

In addition to the downturn in development activity, local governments will be taking a major hit to their revenue. The State, facing similar financial strains, will not be of much help. Because most planning and development departments are funded by development fees and/or the general fund, our profession is in for a rough ride for the next few years. As we consider what positive change may be possible or needed for our cities and towns, it is important to recognize that the next few years will be a period of significant fiscal constraint.



How might all of this affect city planning operations? The impact can be divided into four time frames:

- **Reaction to the pandemic.** Local governments are in the midst of trying to deal with the unprecedented impact the pandemic is having on our daily lives.
- **Initial recovery.** Local governments are beginning to plan for how to increase functionality while continuing to address the continuing threat of COVID-19 until there are vaccines, treatments, or “herd immunity.”
- **Post-pandemic/continuing recession.** At some point in the next year or two, we will be through the pandemic but not the economic fallout from it, and especially the decline in local government revenue.
- **“New normal.”** In three to five years, the pandemic and the recession will have mostly passed, but some of the economic impacts, changes in behaviors, and accommodations we will have made will continue on as a “new normal.”

As I look at these four time-frames, my focus is not so much on what we are doing now in reaction to the pandemic, but on the implications those reactions have for the long term. What can we take away from the response to COVID-19 to date that has the potential to leave us in better shape after this time than when we entered into it?

1. Pandemic reaction

I have not undertaken a survey of what all planning departments are doing in response to COVID-19, but my limited conversations and discussions with some indicate these patterns:

- **Working from home.** Most planners are working wholly or partially at home, and the good news is that a lot of what we do can be done from home.
- **Significantly increased reliance on technology.** Zoom and its competitors are providing some of what is needed for teamwork and collaboration. In cities where the appropriate software is in place (and assuming security issues have been addressed), planners should be able to access the tools needed to do their jobs, including permit tracking systems, digital plan submittals, and document management software.
- **Flexible work hours.** To the degree offices are still open, some staff are splitting schedules, allowing people to be in the office, while limiting exposure and maintaining physical distancing.
- **Closed public counters.** Direct public service, if it’s happening at all, is by appointment.
- **Online public hearings.** Public hearings and other public meetings, to the degree they are occurring, have moved almost entirely onto Zoom. The experience with this form of public meeting has been quite mixed, depending on the subject matter and intensity of public feeling.



The above is a partial list of accommodations now being made. Many of these changes are precursors of what could be more permanent changes to how we do the public's business.

2. Initial recovery

As local governments move from reaction to a more considered accommodation of the impact of COVID-19, they will need, in addition to regularizing most of the practices described above, to consider these key issues:

- **Ensuring employee safety.**
- **Defining essential services.** As budgets shrink, cities will increasingly have to determine what is essential and what can be reduced or eliminated. In planning, the processing of development applications is essential — not only because of state requirements, but because development is key to economic recovery. On the other hand, at least initially, much long-range planning is likely to be put on hold as budgets shrink. Other activities likely to receive less attention are those involving sustainability and resilience, and potentially economic development. Code enforcement is likely to be reduced to addressing serious life-safety issues.
- **Implementing technology.** It will be urgent for cities that do not have or are not yet using technology to the fullest extent to move quickly to adopt it. Permit tracking software, document management systems, and software to handle financial transactions are essential for accountability and for maintaining social (actually physical) distancing.
- **Increasing job flexibility.** The job flexibility we are already experiencing is likely to be institutionalized. In addition to adopting policies related to working from home, cities will be looking at creative ways to retain staff through the coming budget crisis, including providing for part-time staff, job sharing, and reductions in hours. Cities will also be asking labor associations for more flexibility in job descriptions so that staff can more easily be slotted into the jobs that remain.

3. Post-pandemic/continuing recession

This will be the most challenging and most significant period, as we move from addressing what is a short-term disaster into building a “new normal” with very limited resources. It's during this time that our professional engagement and leadership will be essential so that we retain changes originally implemented to address the crisis, but which have long term value.

- **Streamlining work through the more effective use of technology.** Some cities are already up to speed on the use of technology, but many are not. As noted earlier, implementing appropriate technology is essential.
- **Job flexibility.** This can involve institutionalizing doing at least some of our work



remotely, and having less rigid job classifications so that planners can gain new skills and have more options for sharing jobs and modifying work schedules.

- **Appointments rather than counter-hours.** We have a unique opportunity to change this inefficient practice since most local government customers are now being required to make appointments for service.
- **Streamlining regulations and increasing staff authority to make decisions.** Why assign a reduced staff to prepare long staff reports on minor requests?
- **Adopting more streamlined public review procedures.** This will involve considering the role of every commission and every public hearing requirement.
- **More effective team engagement** through technology (e.g., Zoom), including engaging with off-site agencies (e.g., external water or sewer agencies) and consultant teams, allowing for more seamless development review.
- **CEQA reform.** We know it's broken; here's an opportunity to work with the legislature to fix it.
- **Updating** regulations, forms, and public information and getting it all online.

Accomplishing even part of this list will be challenging at a time when staff resources are likely to be limited. The key is to build on what we will already have done in accommodating COVID-19 to retain the changes that have added value.

4. The “new normal”

If we're successful in institutionalizing some of the changes in our practices “forced on us” by the pandemic/recession, we will have arrived at a new normal that will allow us to focus on what's important: increased quality and reduced quantity; more effective public engagement in guiding development, less time on nit-picking variances; more time providing guidance to applicants, less time responding to questions about the status of an application; more time doing community planning and addressing climate change, less time processing pointless Negative Declarations and bloated EIRs.

By 2025, by taking advantage of the unprecedented opportunity COVID-19 gives us to embrace significant changes in past practice, we can:

- Make more decisions at the staff level;
- Work in more flexible and efficient environments;
- Meet with applicants and members of the public by appointment;
- Work under flexible job descriptions that will let us learn new skills and advance through the profession;
- Update application materials, regulations, and procedures for easier use by the public;
- Use online meeting tools to effectively engage with off-site team members, consultants, and the public;
- Decrease the number of public development review meetings while increasing their



focus;

- Make more information available online;
- Reform CEQA to streamline the preparation, production, and review of documents.

At a time when so many people are suffering and we are reeling from the most dramatic and sudden change in our society that any of us have ever experienced, it's hard to see our way through to the other side, or to think that anything good can come of it. But something can. As former Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel said this past March, "when Barack Obama named me his first chief of staff, and in those dark days, I uttered a phrase that's followed me ever since: 'Never allow a good crisis go to waste. It's an opportunity to do the things you once thought were impossible.' "

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