



American Planning Association
Nevada Chapter

Fact Sheet-2020-05

Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Nevada's Planning Community from COVID-19

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Introduction

During the 2020 Annual Conference of the Nevada Chapter of the American Planning Association, the authors of this fact sheet presented an overview of a multi-faceted assessment of the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has had and continued to have on Nevada's planning community and the wider planning profession.

This fact sheet presents a general summary of the findings presented by the authors during the conference as well as several main points summarized in a University Center for Economic Development technical report, UCED Technical Report 2020/21-10 *Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Nevada's Planning Community from COVID-19*.

These lessons learned and best practices were derived from a series of online educational luncheons hosted by the Northern Section of the Nevada Chapter of the American Planning Association between May 2020 and August 2020 as

well as from a special roundtable discussion hosted by the Northern Section on August 19, 2020.

Five separate major themes and four paths forward from these educational luncheons and the special roundtable discussion were eventually identified. The five separate major themes pertaining to the lessons learned and best practices for Nevada's planning community from COVID-19 include (1) the impacts associated with the closure of public offices and the disruption of normal organizational processes and functions, (2) the economic cost and the impacts on local businesses, (3) the exposure of weaknesses and shortcomings in Nevada's fiscal system, (4) the personal cost and the impacts COVID-19 has had on people, and (5) the importance of master plans and the planning process during times of crisis.

The four 'paths forward' for Nevada's planning community, in anticipation of future disruptive 'wicked problem'¹ or 'black swan'² events include (1) the importance of early adoption of new technologies, new

¹ Defined by Don Kettl, in his 2006 article *Is The Worst Yet to Come*, a 'wicked problem' is a public policy deliema that defies proper definition, defies attempts to

solve, and is perpetuated due to depleted intellectual capital in public administrative agencies.

² Defined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, 'black swan' events are high-profile, difficult to predict, and infrequently

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processes, and new ways of thinking and doing, (2) the importance of adopting a multi-organizational, multi-stakeholder perspective in addressing the multi-faceted impacts of future wicked problems and black swan events, (3) guarding against the societal and individual human cost of future wicked problems and black swan events, and (4) investment in contingency and resiliency planning.

Major Themes

This section summarizes each of the five major themes identified during the various online educational luncheons and the special roundtable discussion hosted by the Northern Section of the Nevada Chapter of the American Planning Association between May 2020 and August 2020, and as presented during the 2020 Annual Conference of the Nevada Chapter of the American Planning Association.

Major Theme No. 1: The Closure of Public Offices and the Disruption of Normal Organizational Processes and Functions

The closure of public offices, including municipal and county governments, in the Spring of 2020 forced planning agencies to shift from providing services typically offered in-person to various online platforms. Permit application and review, virtual conferences and meetings, and employees working remotely exposed significant disparities in the capabilities of making this transition between different public agencies and organizations. Over time, as individual agencies and organizations were able to develop and

implement new technologies and technical capabilities, additional flexibility, a willingness to adapt, and improvements in internal and external communication were critical for public agencies and organizations to successfully make the transition from in-person to virtual service provision.

Major Theme No. 2: The Economic Cost and the Impacts on Local Businesses

State mandated closures, issued during the Spring of 2020, clearly impacted non-essential businesses across almost every industry and occupation sector in Nevada. Small businesses, which are those businesses that typically employ less than 100 employees, were identified as particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the state mandated closures. Increased flexibility and adaptability has been key in weathering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Major Theme No. 3: The Exposure of Weaknesses and Shortcomings in Nevada's Fiscal System

Nevada's state fiscal system has proven to be highly dependent on a few major revenue streams which have further proven to be highly susceptible to economic shocks. In Fiscal Year 2020, six separate revenue streams, including sales and use taxes, gaming percentage fees, the Modified Business Tax, the Insurance Premium Tax, the Commerce Tax, and the Cigarette Tax, account for approximately 81.0 percent of all government revenue collected by the State of Nevada. All of these revenue streams were adversely

occurring events that have a disproportionate role and impact on the shaping, implementation, and administration of public policy.

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affected by COVID-19 related business closures and restrictions.

An even higher degree of vulnerability to unforeseen and dramatic economic shocks at the local government level in Nevada has been observed as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Building contingency and resiliency planning into economic and fiscal policies at the state and local government level, combined with longer-term reform to Nevada's overall fiscal system as a way of reducing fiscal dependency on a few at-risk revenue streams, will be needed to insulate the revenue streams of state and local governments throughout Nevada to future unforeseen and dramatic economic shocks.

Major Theme No. 4: The Personal Cost and the Impacts on People

It is, regrettably, easy to forget the personal cost and impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on individuals including the people who work for different public agencies and organizations, and on the people that these agencies and organizations serve. At-risk populations, including those with underlying health issues and those individuals, families, and households in poverty, are particularly vulnerable to the physical, emotional, and mental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of their individualized response to the COVID-19 pandemic, several public agencies and organizations throughout Nevada have expanded existing or created new mental health services and incorporated counseling and flex-time into the reorganization of agency and organizational operations. Improved employee morale, increased organizational and individual productivity levels, and across-the-board improvements in overall efficiency are a few of the primary benefits

that have already been realized as a result of paying attention and deliberability responding to the personal cost and the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic have had on individuals.

Major Theme No. 5: The Importance of Master Plans and the Planning Process During Times of Crisis

A master plan has always been considered as the comprehensive outline of a community's and an organization's long-term direction and aspirations. In the unfolding aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, those communities and organizations that included a series of robust and comprehensive sustainability and resiliency policy elements within the individual required elements and across the other elements of their master plan have been able to better weather the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic, expanded engagement with various internal and external stakeholders, including the public, will be needed to review and revise existing master plans based on the subsequent and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving forward, future master plan policies should be designed in ways necessary to achieve the desired levels of resiliency, sustainability, and flexibility needed to better address future 'wicked problem' and 'black swan' disruptive events. Interactive roundtable discussions, focus group meetings, and one-on-one personal meetings may all take additional time with a master plan process but ultimately yield better policies and provide the critical buy-in and commitment needed for future goals to be fully realized.

Paths Forward

This section summarizes each of the 'paths forward' for Nevada's planning community and the planning profession that were identified and discussed during the various online educational luncheons and the special roundtable discussion hosted by the Northern Section of the Nevada Chapter of the American Planning Association between May 2020 and August 2020 and as presented during the 2020 Annual Conference of the Nevada Chapter of the American Planning Association.

Path Forward No. 1: An Early Adoption of New Technologies, New Processes, and New Ways of Thinking and Doing

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting public agency and organization office closures that occurred in the Spring of 2020 in Nevada underscored the importance of developing the internal capabilities and capacities to support virtual meetings, electronic application submittals, electronic or digital outreach and engagement, and distance or remote working environments. While a return to in-person service delivery is likely once restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic are lifted, public agencies and organizations need to be better able at questioning traditional paradigms and also need to become more nimble when unforeseen disruptive events, like a global pandemic, threatens the ability of public agencies and organizations to serve the public's interest. Public agencies and organizations should consider having built-in temporary flexibility from existing regulations when the situation requires and should routinely explore their own internal capacity to respond to unforeseen

disruptive events that will likely occur in the future.

Path Forward No. 2: Adopting a Multi-Organizational, Multi-Stakeholder Perspective in Addressing the Multi-Faceted Impacts of Wicked Problems and Black Swan Events

A 'wicked problem' or 'black swan' event are defined as events that are high-profile, hard to predict, are rare and occur infrequently, and have a disproportionate role and impact on the shaping, implementation, and administration of public policy. By this very definition, a single public agency or organization is powerless to successfully address the size, scale, and scope of disruptive 'wicked problem' or 'black swan' event. Yet the very structure of how public policy and planning decisions are made, implemented, and administered force agencies and organizations into predefined silos. Working across these silos are critical in amassing the capabilities and resources needed to combat disruptive events like a global pandemic when they arise. It is also important to avoid the temptation to limit focus to just government or public sector resources and, in planning for the next major 'wicked problem' or 'black swan' event, planners and public administrators must begin the process of engaging a wider set of both internal and external stakeholders now in order to plan for these future disruptive events.

Path Forward No. 3: Guarding Against the Societal and Individual Human Cost of Future Wicked Problems and Black Swan Events

Expansion of the methods and frequency of communication between various public

agencies and organizations and their internal and external stakeholders coupled with a conscious acknowledgement of the personal toll that these major disruptive events, like a global pandemic, can have on real people by leading with empathy must be the cornerstones of how public agencies and organizations prepare for future 'wicked problem' or 'black swan' events. A coordinated approach with multiple stakeholders that successfully provides a roadmap to address an event in its initial stages, throughout the event, and during recovery is also critically important to how successful public agencies and organizations in Nevada will be in the future in dealing with unforeseen future disruptive events. At the heart of these efforts must also be an organizational commitment to proper contingency and resiliency planning so that the work of public agencies and organizations can continue even during future 'wicked problem' or 'black swan' events.

*Path Forward No. 4: Investment in
Contingency and Resiliency Planning*

Program management, planning, implementation, testing and exercise, and program improvement are a few of the critical steps needed for any public agency or organization engaged in a comprehensive contingency and resiliency planning effort. A successful contingency and resiliency plan has the qualities of being flexible, inclusive, integrated, redundant, reflective, resourceful, and robust. Any contingency and resiliency plan should also contain the following elements, including an economic benefit-cost assessment, harmony with existing agency and organizational activity and operations, an identification of high risk and vulnerable operations within the agency or

organization (to include how to protect or insulate those operations), investment strategies to encourage overall innovation within the organization, a focus on creating a long-term and lasting impact, social equity, and overall technical soundness. Ultimately, public agencies and organizations that engage in future contingency and resiliency planning must attempt to plan for both the inevitable and the unforeseen.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic, and its associated impacts on the functions and operations of Nevada's public agencies and organizations have been devastating. With little doubt, these impacts will likely be felt for years to come. And while the COVID-19 global pandemic has had both existential and real and tangible impacts on organizations and individuals alike, the lessons learned and paths forward outlined in this fact sheet can hopefully help public agencies and organizations prepare for the next 'wicked problem' or 'black swan' event. By looking forward, by governing effectively, by thinking both vertically and horizontally across organizational boundaries, by reforming existing internal policies and operational functions, and by making effective governance the central focus of future efforts, public agencies and organizations in Nevada will be better prepared to deal with the next disruptive event.

References

Steinmann, F. A., and J. D. Borchardt, & C. R. Webb. 2020. *Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Nevada's Planning*

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