

the review

September / October 2020

the official magazine of the  michigan municipal league

FIGHTING TOGETHER THE KEY TO SCORING VICTORY IN A CRISIS



RENEWED FOCUS ON RACIAL EQUITY & INCLUSION

the review

The official magazine of the Michigan Municipal League

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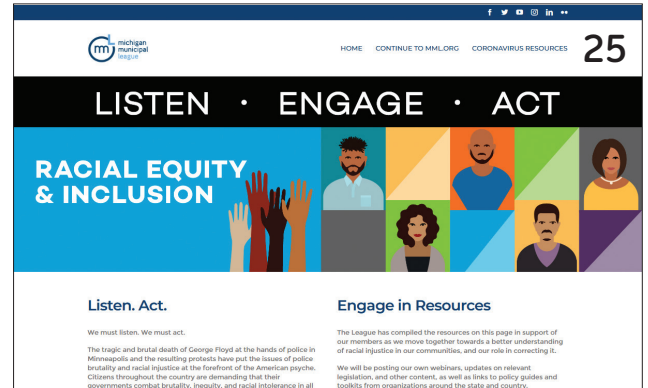
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Grand Rapids Mayor
Rosalynn Bliss joins
community members
volunteering at the
Boys and Girls Club.
Photo by Bud Kibby.



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the review

The official magazine of the Michigan Municipal League

Volume 93, Number 5

We love where you live.

The Michigan Municipal League is dedicated to making Michigan's communities better by thoughtfully innovating programs, energetically connecting ideas and people, actively serving members with resources and services, and passionately inspiring positive change for Michigan's greatest centers of potential: its communities.

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Striving to Emerge Better Than Before

Many unknowns lie ahead as the pandemic marches on. This public health crisis has caused an economic fallout not seen since the Great Depression in the 1930s. It has turned our world order upside down, putting a disproportionate burden on people of color and low-income communities, with devastating results. Moreover, the circumstances surrounding the tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis have once again laid bare the racial injustice that exists in this country, demanding an immediate call to action. Specific to Michigan, the failure of two dams unable to withstand heavy rains in Midland caused major flooding, the displacement of thousands, and property damage in the millions—once again illustrating our lack of investment in infrastructure.

The impact of these events has only begun to reveal the full weight of its consequences. How we all respond to these large-scale tragedies will define this country for decades to come. Uncertain of what a recovery will look like, this is a watershed moment for local leaders to pave a new way for their communities. It is all about strength in leadership and the ability to carve out a resilient community that can endure future catastrophic events and be stronger for it. As I wrote in my last column, the status quo is not our goal here. We do not want to go back to the way things were before the pandemic. We need to move forward with innovation and thoughtful ideas—to rethink business models; the use of our public spaces; how we deliver services; and most importantly, address racial inequities and reevaluate our safety nets that will serve all our residents to be better prepared for future crises. In a toxic political environment, this is the time to set aside political differences and listen to all voices in our communities—particularly the more vulnerable and marginalized ones—and respond and act strategically with compassion and understanding. We all have a role in shaping our future.

For some years now, the League has made the issue of diversity, equity, and inclusion one of its central tenets. We began with making several internal adjustments. Recent events and the national uprising against racial injustice have spurred an even greater sense of urgency. The Michigan Municipal League Board of Trustees strongly affirms that Black Lives Matter and reasserts its commitment to model and teach diversity and inclusive behavior. We are moving forward with enhanced programming and studying other communities around the country that have stand-out practices in these areas, which we will be able to share with you. We know that the best communities are those that are welcoming to everyone and provide for the safety and equality of all who live and visit there.

A piece of good news that will provide more funding for our communities: Governor Whitmer and legislative leaders reached an agreement to help address the financial fallout from the pandemic. It calls for eliminating the August statutory revenue sharing payments, but then fully replacing it, plus an additional 50 percent. The replacement funding will come from federal CARES Act dollars. I appreciate all the hard work that our advocacy staff and members did to help make this happen. You can find more information on our website, mml.org.

I would like to end with how deeply inspired I am with how our community leaders have responded during these incredibly challenging times. This makes me hopeful for the future and confident that we will not waste this opportunity to make real change for the better. The League will always be steadfast in supporting our communities and members as we navigate together during these extraordinary times.

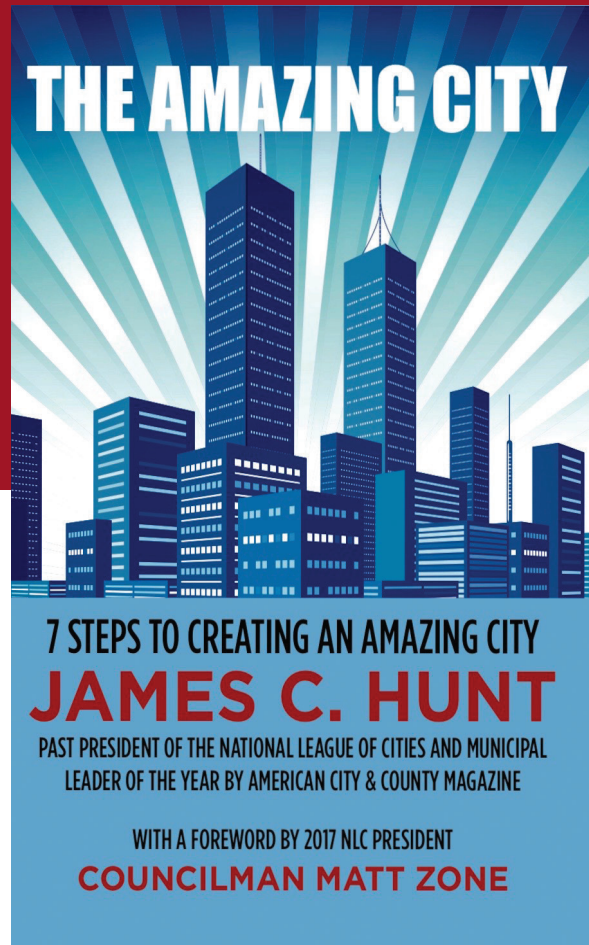


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FORGED BY CRISIS

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



By Jim Hunt

Over my 27-year career as mayor and city councilmember in my hometown of Clarksburg, West Virginia, I learned that dealing with crisis seemed to be a regular occurrence in local government and often, more than one of them at a time. My first year in office saw a 100-year flood devastate our state and community, with 62 deaths and over \$1.4 billion in damages. The next year brought the closure of our city's largest employer, followed by support businesses closing and the exodus of hundreds of our citizens. We had a rally by the Ku Klux Klan following the election of our first African-American mayor, followed by an FBI sting of a militia group, which included one of our city firefighters. Seeing a string of satellite trucks from CNN and other major news networks parked in front of city hall seemed a normal occurrence.

The current COVID-19 global pandemic points out the need for every city to be prepared to deal with crisis. Local mayors, city managers, and councilmembers are on the front lines of this crisis and are being called upon to guide their citizens through a maze of complicated issues. Often, cities and towns are left to enforce vague regulations that ask for

“voluntary compliance” or put officials in conflict with local health authorities. Popular facilities, like swimming pools and entertainment venues, become political battles as citizens get irritated with local officials over their decisions on closure or operating regulations. Never in history have cities and towns been in such a pivotal position to impact the lives of their citizens.

In looking for some lessons learned from previous crises, I think there are some guiding principles that may be helpful to today's local leaders. While the list is not exhaustive, it provides some simple ideas that apply to whatever type of crisis impacts a community.

A Crisis is Not Predictable or Singular

Local leaders must realize that they will need to be flexible and ready to adapt to local conditions. Information flows at odd hours and decisions cannot wait until regularly scheduled meetings. Likewise, it is important that the city not be so focused on the crisis at hand that they are blindsided by another critical situation. The reactions to the George Floyd killing in Minneapolis caught many unprepared but proved the point that a crisis can come at any time and regardless of whatever else the city is facing.

Lead, But Don't Micromanage

Your administrative and department heads have extensive training and preparation in crisis management. The detail and depth of their knowledge allows them to deploy their resources in a logical and targeted manner. Attempting to micromanage or “reengineer” the detailed knowledge of these professionals can have a demoralizing effect and sow confusion among the public. Leaders need to empower their team and focus on budget and other resource needs. Differences in opinion should be ironed out through discussions before debating solutions in public sessions.

Follow the Chain of Command

In regional, statewide, and national crisis events, there are often competing priorities and protocols that can cause dissension and confusion on the part of the public. With social media and 24-hour news cycles, anyone with a title can be thrust on a stage, seeking their opinion. It is important for city leaders to determine their spokesperson and how media requests should be handled. It is often a good use of time to employ a media specialist to assist officeholders and other leaders to “stay in their lane” and recognize how to effectively use their voice. My good friend, Beaumont, Texas Councilman Audwin Samuel has used his Facebook Live feed to provide valuable information to his citizens during weather events, in a responsible way, without stepping on other's toes.

Former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer and Jim Hunt exchange ideas on improving cities.



“While a crisis is never welcome, cities and towns are uniquely prepared to deal with whatever crisis comes their way.”



Jim Hunt speaks up at a National League of Cities press conference.



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Former First Lady Laura Bush shares a laugh with Jim Hunt.


Look Beyond the Crisis

In times of crisis, decisions are sometimes made that are counter to the goals and plans of the city. City leaders need to look beyond the crisis and make sure that the need for timely response does not create greater problems in the future. Stacking tons of flood debris on prime development property can solve a short-term problem but create a long-term liability that may be overlooked after FEMA or other agencies leave. In the COVID-19 crisis, decisions on business closings, mask wearing, and public assembly have been made without the usual review and public input. While this may be necessary in the time of a global pandemic, it is always good to review the process used and how these items would be handled outside of the crisis.

Innovate When Feasible

While a crisis might not be the best time to innovate, many cities have learned valuable lessons under the heat of a crisis. With businesses in turmoil under the COVID-19 crisis, cities have shown remarkable innovation in assisting businesses under these daunting conditions. Cities as diverse as Los Angeles, California and Morgantown, West Virginia have allowed restaurants to use parking spaces to create outdoor dining areas for their patrons. Cities have quickly shredded red tape and allowed businesses to innovate in ways that might prove feasible after the crisis has ended. For instance, the proliferation of Zoom meetings and other online broadcast venues have brought government into the homes of citizens in a way that might have taken years for the wheels of government to adopt. Even smaller cities and towns have quickly adapted to online meetings and provided a link to government for their citizens.

While a crisis is never welcome, cities and towns are uniquely prepared to deal with whatever crisis comes their way. As I look over the past 35 years dealing with local governments, rarely have I been disappointed in city leaders who have been tested by crisis. I believe that the COVID-19 crisis will change the way we look at our lives, but I also

believe that cities and towns will play a large role in leading us out of the current crisis and preparing for the next. 

Jim Hunt is an author, speaker, and podcast host of the "Amazing Cities and Towns Podcast." He served as president of the National League of Cities in 2006 and was selected as the 2006 "Municipal Leader of the Year" by "American City & County Magazine." Hunt's book, "The Amazing City-7 Steps to Creating an Amazing City," is used by hundreds of cities as a guide to local governance. For more information, visit: www.amazingcities.org. You may contact him at jimhunt@amazingcities.org.

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Holland Mayor Nathan Bocks has been keeping his community informed and motivated during the pandemic.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP DURING A CRISIS

By Marianne Manderfield

Communication is Key

March 10, 2020—The State of Michigan confirms its first two COVID-19 cases.

March 13, 2020—Governor Gretchen Whitmer closes all public and private K-12 schools.

March 23, 2020—The governor issues an executive order to “Stay Home—Stay Safe.” All non-essential workers are to stay home.

The state went into lockdown, entering uncharted territory for most, if not all people. The COVID-19 pandemic was sweeping across the country, altering the way municipalities, large and small, operate. While Holland’s City Hall closed to the public, the city itself did not close as essential services remained open and operational. Many city employees shifted to remote work. The community was asked to “do business with” the city via phone, email, or the website. The normalcy of daily life came to an abrupt halt and left city leaders in a position to do what they do best—lead.



“Every resident of Holland should be proud of our dedicated city leaders and staff. They are smart, capable, and care deeply about the city we all love.”

Mayor Bocks' video chats were recorded in all kinds of weather.

In times of crisis, a community will look to their leadership for cues, answers to their questions, help understanding what may come next, easing their fear of the unknown, and assurance that their community will stand strong. The City of Holland's leaders rallied quickly, very quickly. There was an urgency to reassure the community that their leaders were working to keep Holland going and not shut down.

Putting a Modern Spin on an Old Tradition

Gleaning from a bygone time when the country was in crisis—The Great Depression—city leadership had the idea to resurrect the idea of President Roosevelt's fireside chats. The city would create a series of chats to the community and incorporate video to modernize them for today's society. Just months into his position as mayor of Holland, Nathan Bocks stepped up to be the voice of the city through the videos. He spoke to the people of Holland with confidence, compassion, and a commitment that Holland would get through this together. He wanted to talk to the community as their mayor and fellow neighbor, to reassure people that their leaders were working to keep their city running, keep people safe, and bring the community together to help one another. He stated in several videos, “The City of Holland does not close.”

The first video was recorded, produced and released on the city's website and social media pages on March 16—a full week before the “Stay Home-Stay Safe” order was officially in place, refuting the idea that government operates slowly and lacks the ability to be nimble. The video series maintained a cadence of two videos produced each week. Twenty-two videos later, the final one was posted on June 19.

Team Effort

The videos were a collective effort by several city staff. Prior to each recording, Mayor Bocks, City Manager Keith Van Beek, Assistant City Manager Matt VanDyken, and other members of the city's leadership team discussed what the topic should be—what was top of mind for community members. The idea of the videos being “fireside” changed shortly to “on location” to match the subject of the video. The themes ranged from collaboration with community service organizations, highlighting essential city services, a call to support local businesses, and the importance of taking care of yourself and your family. The videos carried a tone of reassurance and safety, and underscored that the city does not close. Staff were working tirelessly to keep essential services going—everything from fire and police, utility, trash and recycling services to street repairs and keeping parks maintained and clean.

“Every resident of Holland should be proud of our dedicated city leaders and staff. They are smart, capable, and care deeply about the city we all love,” said Mayor Bocks. “The people of Holland are resilient, and we are strong. We are working together to overcome whatever may come our way. We are Holland. One Holland. And we get to live here.”

The team aspect of the series also involved Esther Fifelski, director of human relations, to translate the text of each video into Spanish as Holland's population is 24 percent Latino/Hispanic. Once the video was produced, it was posted on the city's website and social media pages including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (IGTV) and Nextdoor. All the videos were embedded with closed captioning as well.



It helps to have a good cameraman!

Each video was turnkey, with the majority of them being produced and posted to social media the same day they were recorded.


The City of Holland is uniquely positioned to produce high quality videos without any additional cost. The staff and equipment are funded through Public Educational and Governmental (PEG) Access Channel franchise fees. Years ago, the city contracted with nonprofit organizations to provide the content for the programming. The city has since changed the model and brought it all in-house. Today, the city provides the content. Producing high-quality videos with a quick turnaround time is second nature for the city's multimedia specialists, Eric Bruskotter and Kevin Lee. The city owns an array of professional equipment including video cameras, two drones, editing software, microphones, a teleprompter, and lighting. Their final product is always top-notch, and it should be, Bruskotter and Lee have a Michigan EMMY® behind their names.

A Warm Reception

The community embraced the videos, posting positive comments of thanks and praise for the efforts by the mayor and city. Even when the subject was difficult, such as on May 5 when the city should have been celebrating Cinco de Mayo and Tulip Time, Mayor Bocks was there empathizing with the community. In that video, he encouraged them to “celebrate our history, the community we have today, the small joys of daily life, and our faith and hope for the future.” As the weather turned warm, Mayor Bocks challenged the people

of Holland to be a “good model for social distancing” and not to let down their guard. He stated it’s “our job to stay healthy so Holland will bloom again.” This was one of his many ways of asking residents to work together to get through this crisis.

The video series was well received for the mayor’s ability to add a genuine and consistent voice of strength that was needed during this unprecedented time of change around us. The city provided communication, leadership and the commitment of a dependable presence with actionable ways the community could be engaged for themselves and fellow Holland residents. In keeping with the concluding message in all of Mayor Bocks’ videos; “Wash Your Hands Again.”

You may view this series of videos on the City of Holland’s YouTube page under the “COVID-19 Updates” playlist. 

Marianne Manderfield is the public Information coordinator for the City of Holland. You may contact her at 616.355.1315 or m.manderfield@cityofholland.com.



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10 Tasks for Cities Responding to the Pandemic

By Chuck Marohn



It seems unlikely that we are going to return to pre-coronavirus America anytime soon. This global pandemic feels like a switch that has released long-standing tensions within our society, revealing deep dysfunction and fragility in the critical systems we depend on.

Whether it's food supply, housing, health care, transportation, or just basic community commerce, local communities are waking up to just how fragile we are.

Community leaders are going to have to address these problems in real time, under stress, with limited outside assistance. And with financial resources stretched, they won't have the option to simply throw money at these problems.

To prepare the ground for recovery, we are now forced to innovate. We must find ways to do much more with what is likely to be much less. That's what local leadership now requires.

Recently we published *Nine Things Local Government Needs to Do Right Now in Response to the Pandemic*, a guide for the first sixty days. Following that initial phase, local leaders must continue the mental shift they started by recognizing that:

- **Recovery will not mean restoration.** You are leading your community through a transition to something new. Mentally focus on the positives of what lies ahead, not on trying to reclaim what is perceived to have been lost. It is okay to acknowledge the pain of this transition, but your community's energy and vision must be directed towards a positive future.
- **You must work towards community self-sufficiency,** fully knowing you won't get all the way there. Nearly every community could produce the food needed to feed themselves, but none do. This acceptance of dependency crosses nearly every domain of essential need. There are many jobs to be created by recognizing that self-sufficiency is a community value of greater urgency than mere economic efficiency. We won't get all the way there, but that doesn't mean it's not important to work towards it.



The Local Leader's Toolkit: A Strong Towns Response to the Pandemic

A great source of short-term, mid-term, and long-term responses to the pandemic. Available for download at strongtowns.org/toolkit.

- **There is a trade-off between growth and stability.**

The pre-coronavirus answer to economic stress at the local level was economic growth, even when that growth made the community fragile. You must now respond to economic stress by emphasizing community stability, even if that means foregoing opportunities for growth. Without stability, you will be thwarted in your response to every other challenge you face.

Preparing for Recovery

With the community stabilized, it's now time to shift to preparing for a recovery. Here is a list of ten things to work on once you're ready:

1. **Waive Home Occupation Restrictions.** With shelter-in-place orders, suddenly all neighborhoods are mixed-use, with commercial activity happening even in places zoned exclusively residential. Allow this obvious fact to be a catalyst for legalizing the recovery.
2. **Legalize Neighborhood Essential Services.** In a pandemic, obtaining daily essentials shouldn't require everyone to travel to the same big box store. Along with legalizing home occupations, allowing neighborhood-scale commercial activities—things like small grocery stores, pharmacies, hair salons, and other quintessentially neighborhood-focused businesses—to open in residential neighborhoods creates room for innovators to respond to the crisis.



“To prepare the ground for recovery, we are now forced to innovate. We must find ways to do much more with what is likely to be much less. That’s what local leadership now requires.”

3. **Kickstart Entrepreneurs.** Many commercial buildings are going to be stuck in a type of financialized purgatory, one where they can’t fill vacant space at current lease rates but they also can’t lower the rent due to financing agreements. Particularly in strategic locations (ones that fill street scape gaps and connect places), use pop-up commercial spaces to seed the next generation of entrepreneurs.
4. **Legalize Housing Adaptations.** Your community is going to have people searching for affordable housing. Your community is also going to have people needing more income to avoid foreclosure and stay in their home. Match these two quickly by legalizing accessory dwelling units and duplex conversions.
5. **Make Quick and Lean Investments in Walking and Biking.** The quickest way to free up private capital within the community is to make it possible for individuals and families to not have to own and operate a motor vehicle. A family that can shift from two vehicles to one saves thousands each year, money they can redirect to more urgent needs. Have city staff utilize the Strong Towns 4-Step Approach to Making Capital Investments to identify and address the most urgent barriers to walking and biking.
6. **End Parking Requirements.** Don’t burden the recovery with requiring any additional parking. With an approach based on building strong neighborhoods, more parking is not only unnecessary, it’s an impediment to future success.
7. **Start Growing Food.** People are already responding to potential food shortages by starting to grow their own food. At a minimum, stay out of their way by removing restrictions on gardening, greenhouses, chickens, and other small-scale food production activities. Be proactive by allocating unused public land for community farming. Empower volunteers in the community to organize and lead these activities.
8. **Thicken Civic Infrastructure.** Private-Public Partnerships should not be reserved for only commercial transactions. There are many amazing non-profit organizations—some secular and some religious—serving the needs of people within the community. Allow them to lead in the areas where they are experts. Use city resources to coordinate, connect, and promote these efforts.
9. **Begin Reorienting Bureaucracies.** Most cities have a large number of staff whose job is oriented around pursuing or facilitating growth projects. This personnel should be redirected to working on the Strong Towns 4-Step Approach to Making Capital Investments. Start creating a culture that rewards acts of service/support to groups or individuals within a neighborhood and away from rewards for simply completing transactions or even for finding outside sources of capital for new projects.
10. **Change How You Measure Success.** We measure what we value and we improve what we measure. As an indicator of progress, most cities track and publicly report on transactions, such as the number of permits issued. Transactions are not well correlated to successful outcomes. Create a community dashboard to publicly track and report on your desired outcomes. Use it as a North Star to guide and interpret collective action. (The Studer Community Institute has developed a model you can customize. It’s online at www.studer.org/community-dashboard.)

State and Federal “Assistance”

It is likely that local governments will be offered some form of recovery assistance from the state and/or federal governments. In advance of these funds being offered, be proactive in having a discussion about how to respond.

In 2009, most local government recovery aid came in the form of infrastructure money targeting “shovel ready” projects. While some of these projects were beneficial, many of them were projects that had been put on the shelf for good reasons. They were not high priority investments. Few of these projects responded to the immediate urgency experienced within the community.


Infrastructure spending is popular for state and federal officials because it creates immediate jobs and the potential for long-term growth. For local governments, new infrastructure has some of those same benefits, but also the additional long-term liability of now having to service and maintain that infrastructure. Over time, these hasty transactions rarely work out well for local communities, most of which are already burdened by years of deferred maintenance.

If you are asked or have a chance to influence deliberations, tell your state and federal officials that cities would benefit more from cash assistance than aid channeled through a narrow infrastructure funnel. Local government officials are more influential than they may think, so know that your recommendation could be impactful.

If the only form of assistance provided to local government ends up being an infrastructure appropriation, take steps to focus those funds. You want to select projects with the most upside benefit and the least additional long-term commitment. When considering projects:

- Prioritize maintenance over new capacity. With such a massive backlog of basic maintenance needs, it's irresponsible to build additional capacity. If you can use assistance dollars to fix critical infrastructure, make that the priority.
- Prioritize below-ground infrastructure over above-ground. Many of our sewer and water systems are approaching 100 years old. When these core pipes fail, the problems cascade throughout the system. It's possible market shifts or even technology may dramatically change how we use roads and streets, but water and sewer will still flow through pipes as it has for thousands of years. If given the chance, target your assistance spending underground.

- Prioritize neighborhoods that are more than 75 years old. The firm Urban3 has modeled hundreds of cities across the country. In every one, the neighborhoods with the highest financial productivity are the ones that existed before World War II, even when they are occupied by the poorest people within the community. These are traditional neighborhoods but today they still have the greatest capacity to adapt to new realities. Investments in stabilizing these neighborhoods have the greatest potential to pay off.

When making infrastructure investments, the more you can let a neighborhood assessment of urgent needs guide your priorities, the more effective your efforts will be. Ground yourself in your people and places. The less time you spend chasing the shiny object or projecting theoretical new growth opportunities, the more likely your investments will help the community prosper. 

Chuck Marohn is the founder and president of Strong Towns and the author of "Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity." You may contact him at marohn@strongtowns.org.

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“TRY SOMETHING. IF THAT DOESN’T WORK, TRY SOMETHING ELSE.”

—President Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression

Reprinted with permission from Phil Power’s April 9 column of the same name on bridgemi.com.

That’s a sensible piece of advice, especially now when we’re in the middle of the worst crisis since the 1930s. It speaks to President Roosevelt’s willingness to experiment without getting hung up on precedent or ideology. And makes the point that great national challenges often call forth innovative and far-reaching solutions.

New York Times columnist David Brooks made a similar point recently, writing about COVID-19, the “plague demands that we address our problems in ways we weren’t forced to do before. The plague brings forth our creativity. It’s during economic or social depressions that the great organizations of the future are spawned.”

Think about it.

The great national safety net of Social Security was a creative response to the Great Depression. Millions of people couldn’t find work. No job, no income. No income, no way to feed your family. In response, federal works programs like the Tennessee Valley Authority Act and the Rural Electrification Administration brought electricity to vast swaths of the country.

Some called it socialism. But millions of families (including mine) managed to survive on Social Security. Today, the \$2 trillion federal rescue package calls for per capita payments to many American families in desperate need right now.

Some might call it a government give-away, but when those checks hit mailboxes not many will turn them down, and they infuse cash back into the temporarily cratered economy.

Adaptive Government and Health Care

Years ago, in an easier and less partisan time, I ran a congressional office in Washington. It was a complicated enough endeavor back then. And there isn’t a lot of societal


mercy for members of Congress. But I can’t help but consider how challenging it is to govern now. Social distancing rules out much communication routine or any sense of normal policy deliberation. Despite those hurdles, I won’t be surprised to see more creative problem-solving, including in the Capitols in Washington and Lansing, as this crisis unfolds. Our society is certainly crying for innovations now.

Considering our medical system is buckling at the sheer, horrific weight of COVID-19 case volumes, vital equipment

shortages, and dangers to health care workers in a pandemic it seems few, if any, health systems or government agencies clearly recognized or could have prepared for this in advance. Yet telemedicine is connecting conventionally sick people to doctors and counselors, nurses are providing some kinds of urgent care typically reserved for doctors alone, public spaces are being converted to field hospitals, and support groups are springing up to provide much needed help to heroic and

exhausted first responders. The roots of the crisis, and the responses of governments and institutions will be studied and debated for years, from Washington to New York, to New Orleans to Detroit, to Lansing and so many other places far and wide across the country and globe.

Beyond predictable and petty partisan mudslinging, deeper and deliberative analysis will surely till ground for innovation, reforms, and new ways of protecting public health and economic prosperity.

Under the stimulus of our present crisis, soon might well be a good time for a long-term, serious-minded re-think of how our governments and institutions can be re-engineered to work better. 

Phil Power is founder and chairman of The Center for Michigan. You may contact him at ppower@thecenterformichigan.net.

FROM CORONAVIRUS CRISIS, INNOVATION MAY SPROUT

By Phil Power





“Under the stimulus of our present crisis, soon might well be a good time for a long-term, serious-minded re-think of how our governments and institutions can be re-engineered to work better.”



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EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT DURING & AFTER COVID-19

FIVE TAKEAWAYS

By Nate Storrington

“Project for Public Spaces convened a panel of leaders in equitable development to discuss the barriers that face communities of color in retail, real estate, and public space—which have only been magnified by the pandemic—and how to begin breaking down these barriers.”

“As we live through this unprecedented time, we’re learning that each of us is facing a different pandemic depending on our social, cultural, and economic backgrounds and identities.”

That’s how Nidhi Gulati, Senior Director of Programs & Projects at Project for Public Spaces, opened *Don’t Look Back: Equity and Recovery in Public Space During COVID-19*, a webinar in May on the topic of equitable development that happened shortly after the killing of George Floyd that sparked protests for racial justice across the country.

While COVID-19 continues to spread quietly in the United States, these protests have prompted organizations and individuals to take action, acknowledge their blind spots, and the roles they have played in perpetuating inequities, in order to address the pandemic of racism that has been with us for far longer. While ending police violence may be one of the most urgent needs, systemic racism infects our society in many ways, from our governmental policies to our systems of investment to our workplaces to the ways our public spaces are distributed, designed, and operated.

In this context, Project for Public Spaces convened a panel of leaders in equitable development to discuss the barriers that face communities of color in retail, real estate, and public space—which have only been magnified by the pandemic—and how to begin breaking down these barriers. Below, we have summarized five big takeaways from their conversation.

1. Safety and comfort in public space are foundational, and their meaning is deeply personal.

As another round of Black Lives Matter protests across the nation reminds us, police violence always hangs over the safety of Black Americans to walk through the streets. Black Americans also face other kinds of racist attacks, both verbal and physical, and similar threats also disproportionately affect other people of color, people with disabilities, indigenous people, LGBTQ+ people, and women. While public space can provide many benefits to health and wellbeing, those benefits cannot be accessed without ensuring personal safety and a sense of comfort for everyone. As Nidhi Gulati put it, “Walls are not always made out of concrete or water or brick and mortar. They can be very invisible little things. We can break them down if we care enough to ask.”

However, comfort and safety can mean different things to different people. It is also multifaceted, requiring coordination between design, management, policymaking, transportation planning, policing, arts and culture, and other factors that affect the experience of public space. “The perception of safety isn’t always based on design,” said Maggie Parker. “A lot of times, it’s based on the neighborhood you’re in, the background that you have.” Things that may make one person or community feel safe, like security officers or the beloved urbanist idea of “eyes on the street,” may make others feel unsafe and unwelcome. To illustrate this point, Bobby Boone asked the audience, “If you close your eyes, and I say the word ‘loitering’, what do you imagine? When I say ‘lingering’ what do you imagine?” Black and brown people are often policed for the exact same behaviors that are celebrated by urbanists when done by white people.

THE PANELISTS (Left to Right)

- Bobby Boone, Founder and Chief Strategist, &Access (Washington, DC)
- Madison Morine, Analyst, HR&A Advisors (Dallas, TX)
- Maggie Parker, Founder, Innovan Neighborhoods (Dallas, TX)
- Moderator: Nidhi Gulati, Senior Director of Programs & Projects, Project for Public Spaces (New York, NY)



Likewise, Madison Morine told a story about a Latinx organization he has been working with in West Dallas. When he asked the group about parks that they like to spend time in, they responded that they did not feel comfortable in parks “east of the tollway,” going as far as to say they didn’t feel “allowed” to go there. Meanwhile, public spaces in districts where people of color live and feel more comfortable have often not seen proper maintenance or significant investment in years. “If public spaces are supposed to be this equitable avenue where everyone can have access to it,” continued Madison, “then why does it feel like some public spaces are built better or meant to hold people better than other public spaces?”

This challenge is particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. “If everyone has different thoughts of how bad the pandemic is, or how you get the pandemic, or how you can heal from the pandemic, then people are abiding by different social rules,” observed Maggie Parker. Without a clear and common understanding and appreciation of strategies like physical distancing and mask wearing, we not only risk a resurgence of the virus, but also make our public places feel less safe and comfortable for many people. In this context more than ever, as Madison put it, “People have to feel like you care for them in order for them to feel like they can be comfortable.”

2. Real community engagement means real power, real choice, and meeting people where they are. When asked by Nidhi what cities should prioritize right now in terms of the design and programming of public space, all three panelists agreed that effective and genuine

community engagement should be a top priority. “Engagement is huge,” said Maggie. “We need more people that are involved in providing input around what public space looks like in their community.”

But in a time when community engagement is often a matter of ticking a checkbox for many people who shape our public spaces, Madison emphasized that engagement requires a close examination and redistribution of power. “Who has the power right now?” he asked. “Where does the power lie? How can that power be divided out to people who don’t typically have that power?”

Bobby agreed, pointing out that exercising power requires genuine choices. For example, often planners or others come into a community already having decided which park or other public space they want to improve. When the community gets to select the locations of improvements, as well as the design and programming, it often results in a greater diversity of public spaces—alleys, parking lot transformations, parklets, park improvements, and so on, each with their own personality and purpose. These “smaller bites” of investment throughout a neighborhood demonstrate a higher level of care and investment. Business Improvement Districts and Main Street programs often do this kind of work, but many communities of color do not qualify or do not have the resources to support these kinds of organizations, demanding new models for place management. The flip side, however, is that while everyone deserves a voice in the placemaking process, not everyone has the time, money, or confidence to participate in depth. As Maggie put it, “Y’all

get frustrated because the same priorities that you have and you spend your life's work on are not the same priorities for other people because we are privileged to be talking about these issues."

"Everyday people are thinking about how do they feed their kids, how do they pay their rent, right? The fact that there's a park down the street—they have no idea how it got there. They may not even have time to go to the community meeting to give input on what it looks like."

That's why inclusive engagement techniques, such as compensating participants, pop-up engagement in everyday places, building cultural competency, and meeting people where they are physically, socially, and mentally is extremely important.

3. While open street policies could help businesses, permitting and implementation remain major barriers—especially in communities of color.

While many cities have implemented open streets programs since the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, these programs are often limited to walking, biking, and outdoor dining, and sometimes only reach downtowns and affluent neighborhoods. What's more, these quick-build plans were often made without the direct input of the Black and brown communities that have been hit hardest by the virus and the recession.

Even where these policies are more equitably distributed, Madison argued that one major roadblock for business owners to take advantage of them is the need to navigate draconian municipal permitting processes. More should be done to simplify the process, take the responsibility off of busy business owners, or remove the need for a permit entirely.

4. Supporting street vending not only reduces health risks right now, it supports entrepreneurship in the long term.

Even after COVID-19 is no longer a risk, a more open policy about street vending could lower the barriers to starting a business in US cities. Building off of Madison's point on permitting, Bobby argued that while it has become popular for cities to claim to support entrepreneurship these days, so often zoning, permitting, and other policies require people to go from selling nothing in person to paying rent in a brick-and-mortar shop at \$50 per square foot. "That's not a strong business strategy," said Bobby.

Operating in public space can help bridge this perilous gap for entrepreneurs that do not have access to bank loans or substantial money from friends and family. If municipalities include street vendors, minority business owners, and public market vendors in crafting their response to COVID-19, the reforms they come up with could make meaningful gains in encouraging and diversifying entrepreneurship in the long term.

5. As public budgets shrink and businesses struggle, space may be our most valuable asset.

Madison described the effect of the virus on public budgets as "astronomical." Budget cuts and layoffs have already begun, and at the moment, there is no end in sight. "To ask them to provide more would be difficult," said Madison, "And at the same time, it would be difficult to ask businesses to provide more, too, because everyone seems to be struggling."

For struggling governments, businesses, and district management organizations alike, Madison encourages decisionmakers to think carefully at what kinds of capital they already have. "What's happening to vacant spaces right now, and how are they being used?" he asks. "Is there some sort of shift that could take place there?" This may require working closely with landowners to repurpose underused parking lots or other private open spaces.

"At this point, patios and sidewalks are prime real estate," observes Maggie. "That's how you can start to make additional money, whether that be a dining area, whether that's a place where you can now sell your merchandise that is a little safer for people, that allows a little more social distancing." This turns usual rules of real estate on its head where open space is often considered a liability, as it reduces the footprint of leasable space. Bobby agrees, wondering what businesses could learn from porches. "You know, the Black community, we have the porch historically: staying on the porch because we may not have the best air conditioning, once those things came out," says Bobby. "That's where you intersect with your community, that's the public space... How do we integrate some of those things into current thinking?"

However, as has happened in past crises, hard times also frequently open up a real estate bonanza in Black and brown neighborhoods. "Vulture funds" swoop in to buy land cheap and flip it during the recovery, gentrifying the neighborhood in the process. Members of the community, including Black and brown developers, are often locked out of these wealth-building tactics by unfair policies and procedures, further exacerbating intergenerational inequality. However, Maggie and others are already thinking ahead on this front, planning to start their own vulture funds to preserve property for use by the existing community.

You can watch the full video of *Don't Look Back: Equity and Recovery in Public Space During COVID-19*, as well as other past webinars, on Project for Public Spaces' Events page at pps.org/events. 

Nate Storrington is the director of communications for Project for Public Spaces. You may contact him at nstorrington@pps.org.

The Michigan Municipal League Board of Trustees released this statement on June 8 in response to the tragic and brutal death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police and the resulting protests.

By Michigan Municipal League Board of Trustees

Listen. Act.

We must listen.
We must act.

The tragic and brutal death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis and the resulting protests have put the issues of police brutality and racial injustice at the forefront of the American psyche. Citizens throughout the country are demanding that their governments combat brutality, inequity and racial intolerance in all their forms. Local officials must seize this moment. The Michigan Municipal League Board of Trustees affirms that Black Lives Matter and reasserts its commitment to model and teach diversity and inclusive behavior. The best communities are those that are welcoming to everyone and provide for the safety of all who live and visit there.

It is our responsibility as community leaders to respond to our residents through systematic change. To foster real progress, we must combat the problem of police brutality and work to eliminate it in every community of every size and demographic makeup. The change we create must be strategic and done with compassion and understanding.

As community leaders, we serve our citizens best when we understand their experiences—the good and the bad.

As we move forward, it is time to hear the voices of everyone in our communities. These conversations can be difficult and uncomfortable, but they are long overdue.

The time to act is now.

The League has compiled the resources on this page in support of our members as we move together towards a better understanding of racial injustice in our communities, and our role in correcting it.



mml.org/racial-equity

LISTEN · ENGAGE · ACT

By Herasanna Richards

Helping Michigan Communities Achieve Racial Equity


The Michigan Municipal League is excited to launch our Racial Equity and Inclusion Resource Page. It's designed to assist our members in their efforts to promote and ensure racial equity in their communities.

In June, the League Board of Trustees issued their statement to membership in response to the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of police and the subsequent protests we have experienced throughout our communities. Our board gives us the direction to meaningfully listen to the diverse needs and experiences of our members and, as community leaders, use that understanding to make efforts to eliminate systemic racism and its effects in our communities.

Initiating a dialogue on race can be daunting. Much like heated discussions on religion or even politics, most of us shy away from discussing race. Many anticipate a discussion that will quickly turn uncomfortable. Racism is an uncomfortable topic, but we must engage. We can't just take racism at face-value. The pervasiveness of racism is deep within our society. Housing access, education, economic development, and the

overall culture of a community can suffer. In acknowledging that, we have listened to the questions that members have sent our way and observed as our members have taken innovative and intentional steps to directly address racism and inequities in their municipalities. The result is our new racial equity page.

This page will be the home for a wide variety of resources for local governments. Our members will find direct links to resources from the National League of Cities, Government Alliance on Race and Equity, and the Michigan Department of Civil Rights. We'll have "encouraged reading" on topics such as initiating a dialogue on race, how to contract more equitably with vendors and businesses in your community, and guides for local governments on steps they can take to improve local policing. You can also find several examples of ordinances, resolutions, community police advisory boards, Letters to Community, and messaging and communication resources that you can utilize for your own needs. This new hub will also host links to past webinars and be the home for our blog, where we'll discuss and unpack concepts like #DefundThePolice, the impacts of the criminal justice system, and how racism affects public health. The blog will also share stories and best practices from Michigan communities.

Racism is a crisis but working collectively we can learn and achieve progress. We hope that the Racial Equity and Inclusion page serves as a valuable resource for you as you continue to make Michigan an exciting, vibrant and inclusive place to live. We welcome any suggestions and recommendations from our members on how we can better support you in this endeavor. Remember, we serve our citizens best when we understand their experiences—the good and the bad. The most difficult conversations can bring forward the most beneficial change, and the League is here to support as you lead boldly. 

Herasanna Richards is a legislative associate for the League. You may contact her at hrichards@mml.org.





FIGHTING TOGETHER

The Key to Scoring Victory in a Crisis

By Rosalynn Bliss



Grand Rapids Mayor Rosalynn Bliss lends a helping hand at the Boys and Girls Clubs. Photo by Bud Kibby.



"Just as the virus spreads exponentially, we understand working together to fight the challenge multiplies the positive results exponentially."

-JUAN GANUM, CITY MANAGER, BRIDGMAN

Five months after Governor Whitmer declared a State of Emergency, the coronavirus continues to ravage the economy and social fabric of Grand Rapids and local communities across Michigan. But we're resolved to come back stronger, more united, and more equitable than we were before. We will achieve that ambitious and entirely necessary goal locally by working together—just as we're fighting the virus—to support individuals, families, and businesses.

I was at City Hall that cloudy brisk March day when we heard the news: Michigan would shutter much of its economy as the virus grabbed a hold in our communities. Grand Rapids City Manager Mark Washington and I took a walk around downtown, meeting and talking with small business owners and workers.

We sat and watched in one restaurant as they literally closed their doors. Talking with the servers was an intense and emotional moment, as they shared their anxiety about the immediate future and what to do next. When we stepped out on to the sidewalk, our typically bustling downtown felt like a ghost town. A surreal moment. The sinking feeling didn't last long, as our community immediately came together to evaluate needs, design options, and push out effective solutions.

Rapid Response

Our United Way chapter, for example, joined forces with local foundations, corporations, and funders to help establish a fund focused on strengthening social services agencies and meeting the basic needs of our community. Working together, they rallied millions of dollars of support for food, shelter, childcare, and other assistance in just a matter of days.

Grand Rapids Public Schools, families, and volunteers wasted no time coming together to organize "grab and go" meal sites at locations across the city. The united effort continues to feed thousands of out-of-school students even beyond the GRPS system.

Our Kent County Health Department worked closely with our city's Emergency Operations Team and our health care providers to ensure up-to-date and accurate information related to mitigating the spread of COVID-19, testing, and medical care. We were all reminded of the importance of emergency preparedness, continuity of operations, and the value of a strong supply chain.

A whole spectrum of economic development agencies teamed up to marshal a series of tools to support business relief and recovery efforts. The West Michigan COVID-19 Business Coalition united and quickly launched a web portal to streamline critical information for business owners. LoveLocalGR.com came online to empower consumers with a new way to help local businesses survive the pandemic from the comfort of their own homes. A Rapid Response Fund was established to provide short-term financial assistance to small business. Our partners at Kent County recently enhanced this effort with CARES Act funding that will strengthen our economic recovery.

When COVID-19 hit, our community rallied—collectively. Just as the virus spreads exponentially, we understand working together to fight the challenge multiplies the positive results exponentially.

Future Action Plan

While efforts to stabilize amidst the current crisis continues to command a great deal of time and attention, we're also intentionally focusing our collaborative efforts around designing a mid- and long-term community recovery plan of action. At the City of Grand Rapids, we're organizing our near-term recovery around building resident and neighborhood resilience and reactivating our business districts to support reopening our businesses.

One critical short-term path involves rethinking legacy governmental regulations to provide social and economic relief. We recently began deploying "social zone" interventions, for example, across several neighborhoods to make it easier for people to spread out on public property and businesses to safely serve customers. We slashed some red tape and now Grand Rapidians can reasonably enjoy a beer in a park along the Grand River. We'll continue to seek out more opportunities to remove outdated restrictions—the complexity and inequities of city vendor registrations, commercial requirements and other needless barriers—toward the goal of accelerating our recovery and city building movement.

We're also working to identify an initial set of projects that can help kickstart recovery—particularly as we optimistically anticipate new federal funds to help rebuild the nation, states, and local communities.

Tackling Inequities


While we rebuild to address the widespread damage wrought by the pandemic, we also aspire to seize the opportunity to confront the social and economic inequities that have come into sharp view the past several months. Racial disparities have been amplified by COVID-19, along with disparities that are evident in other systems, including criminal justice, education and the economy.

Our community initiative to restore and revitalize the Grand River corridor, as one example, will be a pillar of our economic recovery and our long-term shared prosperity. The project involves removing several small dams through our urban core, putting the "rapids" back in Grand Rapids, and expanding parks and trails to substantially increase an already exceptional quality of life.

Among other benefits, these smart investments will create business and employment opportunities—particularly for marginalized communities—increase access to recreational amenities that help build up public health resilience, and strengthen our ability to withstand extreme flooding in the future. By pursuing these types of multi-benefit infrastructure programs, we create new opportunities to empower historically underserved residents and build more resilient and competitive communities.

In Grand Rapids, we're doing it by working together—combining philanthropic and public funds in a way that builds interest and confidence among private philanthropists and investors.

Michigan communities offer a tremendous value proposition as Americans—particularly those living in the largest cities—rethink their post-pandemic way of life. We offer residents and employers a safe, high quality, rewarding lifestyle at a significant financial savings compared to Chicago, New York City, and other large metropolitan areas. That's a highly attractive option in a world managing through sweeping economic turmoil and an affordability crisis, among other generational calamities.


Divided and fighting amongst ourselves we risk delaying our recovery and wasting the opportunity to build stronger, more livable and inclusive communities. Working together—in a way that unites a plurality of people and organizations from all walks of life to solve problems and seize opportunities—is a critical key to our success. 

Rosalynn Bliss is the mayor of Grand Rapids and former president of the Michigan Municipal League Board of Trustees. You may contact her at rbliss@grand-rapids.mi.us.



A window display featuring a large collection of colorful balloons in shades of orange, pink, red, green, blue, and purple. The balloons are arranged in a way that they appear to be floating. Overlaid on the balloons is a large, white, stylized text message. The background of the window shows a reflection of a city street with buildings and trees.

There is a
rainbow
of hope at the
end of every storm

A small, rectangular chalkboard sign with a light-colored wooden frame. The sign is placed on a surface, and its background is decorated with colorful, abstract paintings. The text on the sign is written in white, uppercase letters. The sign is slightly tilted to the right.

TAKE CARE OF
EACH OTHER
GRAND RAPIDS

WE'RE WITH
YOU!



CITY OF FLINT AMONG THE FIRST IN MICHIGAN TO DECLARE JUNETEENTH AN OFFICIAL CITY HOLIDAY

By Marjory Raymer

Juneteenth is now an official holiday in the City of Flint.

"For too long, this country has failed to acknowledge the ills of its past and has overlooked the contributions made by people of color. In declaring Juneteenth a holiday, we are recognizing that the fight for equity and justice continues today while also celebrating the achievements made by African-Americans in our community and in our country," Mayor Sheldon Neeley said.

Flint is among the first in Michigan to establish the holiday, according to the Michigan Municipal League.

Juneteenth is celebrated on June 19 to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States. It marks the day in 1865 when the Union Army arrived in Galveston, Texas, to declare that slavery had been abolished more than two years prior by the Emancipation Proclamation.

Mayor Neeley announced his plan to make Juneteenth a City of Flint holiday as part of this year's celebrations. The resolution passed city council with a vote of 7-1-1 with support from councilmembers Maurice Davis, Santino Guerra, Kate Fields, Jerri Winfrey-Carter, Herbert Winfrey, Allan Griggs, and Eva Worthing. Council President Monica Galloway voted no and Councilman Eric Mays abstained.


While Juneteenth is recognized by the State of Michigan and some other communities nationwide, few have moved to make the celebration an official paid holiday.

As an official holiday, Flint City Hall will be closed on June 19 and it will be a paid day off for employees beginning in 2021.

While in the State House, Mayor Neeley successfully championed a measure for the State of Michigan to declare June 19, 2019, as Juneteenth Independence Day. The Michigan Legislature in 2005 also declared every third Saturday in June as Juneteenth National Freedom Day. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer also issued a proclamation declaring June 19, 2020, as Juneteenth Celebration Day.

Other cities also announced plans during this year's Juneteenth celebrations to make the day a holiday. New York Mayor Bill de Blasio made national headlines with his declaration last week. Ferndale City Council also passed a resolution declaring the holiday on Monday, but it is unclear if it will be a paid holiday. Mayor Derek Dobies in Jackson also is pursuing a city holiday there.

The resolution passed by city council also calls on state officials to make Juneteenth an official holiday.

Texas was the first state to make Juneteenth an official paid holiday in 1980. 

Marjory Raymer is the director of communications for the City of Flint. You may contact her at 810.237.2041 or mraymer@cityofflint.com.



Flint Mayor Sheldon Neeley (in suit) talks with residents during the Juneteenth celebration.

“For too long, this country has failed to acknowledge the ills of its past and has overlooked the contributions made by people of color.”

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MICHAEL A. GUIDO LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD



Created in memory of Dearborn Mayor Michael Guido. Nominees must be a current chief elected official from a League member community who has demonstrated excellence in leadership and shown perseverance in making a difference in his/her community for a sustained period of time.

JIM SINCLAIR EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE AWARD



Created in memory of Rogers City Councilmember Jim Sinclair. Nominees must be affiliated with the League in the capacity of a municipal official, municipal staff, a League staff member, or an active participant in the League's mission; and be active in furthering the cause of educating elected officials so that communities may benefit from the education and experience that their elected officials have gained.

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How Does the Headlee Amendment Affect School Funding and State Mandates?

FACTS:

Taxpayer-plaintiffs filed suit to enforce § 30 of the Headlee Amendment to the Michigan Constitution. Section 30 prohibits the State of Michigan from reducing the total of state spending paid to all units of local government, taken as a whole, below that proportion in effect in fiscal year 1978-1979. The parties agree that the proportion of state spending to be paid to local governments is 48.97 percent. The parties disagree, however, as to what categories of state spending are to be considered for purposes of § 30.

The plaintiffs assert that accounting practices of the State have resulted in underfunding of the § 30 revenue sharing obligations by classifying as state spending paid to local government 1) monies paid to school districts and charter schools pursuant to Proposal A and 2) monies paid to local governments for new state mandates. On reconsideration of its earlier opinion dated July 30, 2019, the Court of Appeals addressed several issues.

ISSUE #1:

Does the inclusion of Proposal A funds in § 30 spending trigger a tax shift to local units of government in violation of section 25 of the Headlee Amendment?

ANSWER:

NO. The Court of Appeals noted that when construing Michigan's Constitution, a Court should identify the original meaning that its ratifiers attributed to the words at issue. The Court pointed out that the term "Local Government" is defined in § 33 of the Headlee Amendment and includes school districts, authorities created by the state, and authorities created by other units of local government.

Section 11 of Article 9 of the Michigan Constitution, otherwise known as Proposal A, was adopted in 1994. Proposal A radically changed the method by which schools are funded but essentially shifted the funding from local units of government to the state. The plaintiffs asserted that Proposal A funds should not be included in the Headlee Amendment formula. The Court held that § 30 provides "[t]he proportion of total state spending paid to all units of Local Government, taken as a group, shall not be reduced below that proportion in effect in fiscal year 1978-79."

The Court held that the State is free from time to time to rebalance how § 30 revenue sharing is distributed among all units of Local Government, "taken as a group" and that the inclusion of Proposal A funds "reflects a constitutionally-rebalancing of the distribution of that revenue sharing." The Plaintiffs have appealed.

ISSUE #2:

Does state aid to public school academies, otherwise known as charter schools, fall within the scope of § 30 funding?

ANSWER:

YES. The Court noted that PSAs are defined as school districts for purposes of receiving state aid and that those funds should be counted as payments to local government under the Headlee Amendment. The Plaintiffs have appealed.

ISSUE #3:

Should state spending to fund state-mandated local services and activities as required by § 29 of the Headlee Amendment be included in the state's calculation of the proportion of total state spending paid to units of local government, taken as a group, under § 30?

ANSWER:

NO. The Court examined the drafters' notes to §§ 29 and 30 which make a distinction between then-existing activities and those "additional or expanded activities" mandated by the state. As a result, the Court stated that "it evinces an intent that state-funding obligations arising from new § 29 obligations are to be paid in addition to § 30 revenue sharing." The State of Michigan has appealed.

Taxpayers for Michigan Constitutional Government v State of Michigan, No. 334663 (Court of Appeals) (October 29, 2019).

The appeals of the parties have been filed with the Michigan Supreme Court. The Michigan Municipal League, the Government Law Section of the State Bar of Michigan, the Michigan Townships Association, and the Michigan Association of Counties by their attorney Thomas R. Schultz (President of the Michigan Association of Municipal Attorneys) filed a brief amicus curiae on February 11, 2020. (Michigan Supreme Court, No. 160660).

Planning for Reduced Operating Expenses

By Eric Walcott & Shu Wang



Reprinted with permission from the Local Government COVID-19 Fiscal Strategy and Resource Guide, Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy, Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan

Local governments may be looking at ways to cut costs in some areas as they face current or anticipated revenue decreases and cost increases related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before making cost-cutting decisions, local governments should ensure that they clearly understand their financial situation and clearly articulate their goal. That goal could be something very specific like “Find \$50,000 that can be re-allocated for emergency response operations.” It could also be something broader such as “Reduce total spending in the short-term by 10% to increase reserves if emergency response is necessary” or “Plan for 10% reduction in spending to adjust for decreased revenues in coming months.” Strategies to enhance liquidity are outlined in further detail in a companion paper.

Governments should also examine their rainy-day fund. A healthy rainy-day fund could cover increased costs or fill gaps in revenue in the short term. Under normal circumstances, the Government Finance Officers Association recommends maintaining an unreserved general fund balance that is equal to about 15 to 20% of general fund revenues, and many local governments maintain fund balances well in excess of this threshold. This approach must also be paired with a medium or long-term plan to reduce spending so that reserves aren’t completely drawn down before local budgets regain stability after the pandemic. For those with a healthy fund balance, using cash reserves can be considered as a first step to mitigate painful budget cuts. Those with less healthy reserves should immediately focus on reducing costs where possible to preserve cash.

In general, governments should consider reducing spending in areas where any short- or long-term impact is minimal, and where the decision is easily reversible if conditions are not as bad as expected.

Possible Process to Guide Decision-Making

Whatever cuts are considered, it is important to make decisions with as much information as possible. The more detailed information local governments have about programs and services provided, the better they can make decisions related to these programs. The following steps may help determine how to ensure essential services continue, and identify where some cost savings may be found:

- Identify all programs through a program inventory
- Identify essential vs non-essential programs
- Evaluate savings (or potential costs) of performing or not performing each program or service
- Assess which employees support essential vs non-essential programs (and which programs need back-up support if an employee gets sick)
- Determine the mandate, reliance, and partnership opportunities for each program

Proven Strategies

While the current pandemic is unlike anything previously experienced in many ways, prior experience with local government fiscal crises does offer some guidelines on strategies that have proven effective in mitigating crisis situations. For example, Ammons and Fleck (2010) examined the cost-cutting strategies local governments used during the 2008 great recession that can provide useful insights for today. Governments should consider these principles to guide decisions as they navigate this crisis:


- Cut quickly; avoid delay—an early, deep cut, produces better results and is less harmful to morale than a steady stream of smaller cuts. This also allows cuts to be restored if the crisis is not as bad as feared. Good surprises are better than bad ones.

- Take a long-term view—Does the proposed reduction create increased costs in the future?
- Focus on core mission purpose, and highest priorities
- Emphasize innovation—empower departments and staff to come up with creative solutions to cut costs while maintaining services.
- Manage revenues as carefully as expenditures.
- Examine and improve organizational design and processes.
- Foster stewardship—be creative about encouraging all departments to engage in cost savings. Think about what might be done to incent departments to reduce spending.
- Look for areas of consistent surplus in prior budgets—reallocating these funds doesn't reduce costs but frees up funds for high-priority use.
- Create a sense of mission, responsibility, and sacrifice, devise a workable schedule, stick with it.
- Commit to communicating with all stakeholders (Miller and Svava 2009).

If cuts are going to be made, useful questions to consider include:

- Is the proposed reduction a one-time reduction, or an ongoing reduction?
- Is this a true reduction in spending or a deferment?
- If it's a deferment, what is the plan to pay for it in the future?
- When is the greatest benefit related to this cut realized? Short term or long-term?
- What is our plan for this post-pandemic? Restore funding? Restructure?

This memo is part of a series of memos in the Local Government COVID-19 Fiscal Strategy and Resource Guide, available at closup.umich.edu/COVID-19. CLOSUP has partnered with public finance experts from universities, consulting firms, and research institutions from around the state to provide local governments up-to-date information as well as a set of ideas and tools that will help them strategically navigate the new fiscal landscape.

Have additional questions or issues you'd like to see addressed? Email: localgov-COVID-19@umich.edu 

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Key Points

- Consider long-term impacts of spending cuts such as reducing capital spending and hiring freezes.
- Avoid across-the-board cuts that take funds away from higher priority programs and services.
- Prioritize cuts that have a short time-to-benefit, are not complex, and are easily reversible.



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Residents Share Manistee's Approach to Racial Justice, Inclusion, and Diversity

By Thad Taylor, Roger Zielinski, Charles Dumanois, MD, and Richard Albee

Reprinted with permission from an article by the same title that appeared on April 1, 2020 on abc10up.com.



The City of Manistee has long valued racial justice, inclusion, and diversity in their community. This spring, the city decided to formalize their stance by way of a resolution. The process began when members of the Manistee Area Racial Justice & Diversity Initiative presented a draft resolution to city council. Through several work sessions, the council and the citizens' group arrived at a version that met everyone's needs. "We worked together quite smoothly," said Thad Taylor, Manistee city manager.

After the resolution passed, the following letter to the editor was published in the *Manistee News Advocate* on June 24.

TO THE EDITOR:

On May 6, just 19 days before the murder of George Floyd, the City of Manistee passed a resolution affirming a positive approach and attitude in the Manistee community for Racial Justice, Inclusion and Diversity for the leadership, departments and employees of the city. The City of Manistee recognizes the value of this declaration in establishing and announcing this equality standard for our community.

It is hoped that all residents embrace this declaration as a positive affirmation and a model for the Manistee community.

There was broad support among Manistee citizens for this resolution. It makes them proud of the community and hopeful that Manistee can/will be viewed in Michigan and around the country, as a welcoming city. Manistee's positive approach to racial justice and civil rights will be a significant and important



Manistee businesses proudly display diversity welcome signs.

element in bringing new people into our community. It will make the Manistee community stronger, a better place to live, work and visit.

Many positive comments about this resolution have been received from individuals living in neighboring towns. It would be a significant benefit to the Northwest Michigan region if all communities would adopt a similar resolution. The City of Manistee is committed to making the values expressed in this resolution real in the day-to-day lives of all in our community.



Members of the Manistee community stand in front of a framed copy of the Resolution for Racial Justice, Inclusion and Diversity at City Hall.

The wording of the resolution is as follows:

Resolution for Racial Justice, Inclusion and Diversity

WHEREAS, we are proud of the City of Manistee's diversity. We recognize that in our city to grow and thrive, we must continue to attract and welcome new and diverse talent to our community; and

WHEREAS, we recognize that people of all backgrounds contribute to our city's democracy, culture and economy; and

WHEREAS, we recognize that the city of Manistee exists within the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabe people, and the contributions, culture and identity of our Native American community are an important part of our City's vitality; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, the city of Manistee affirms that Manistee is a welcoming city for all and that all segments of our City respect all of our diverse community.

The city of Manistee will not support attacks on, harassment of, or intimidation of, individuals that are based on race, color, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, immigration or refugee status, sexual orientation or identity, special physical or mental needs, familial status, economic status, or other social identities.

The city of Manistee will advance the basic principles upon which the United States was founded, affirming the equality and dignity of all people regardless of their background.

This Resolution is not intended to infringe on individual constitutional rights or federal immigration law.

Further Sayeth Not This Resolution.

Signed by Mayor Roger Zielinski

Charles Dumanois, MD, and Richard Albee

Citizens for Racial Justice, Inclusion and Diversity
Manistee

For more information, see the Manistee Area Racial Justice & Diversity Initiative's Facebook page under facebook.com/groups. 

Thad Taylor is the city manager of Manistee. You may contact him at ttaylor@manisteemi.gov.

Roger Zielinski is the mayor of Manistee. You may contact him at RZielinski@manisteemi.gov.

Charles Dumanois, MD is a member of the Manistee Area Racial Justice & Diversity Initiative. You may contact him at mdumanois@charter.net.

Richard Albee is a member of the Manistee Area Racial Justice & Diversity Initiative. You may contact him at 231.723.0032 or Dandlalbee@gmail.com.



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Effective Remote Engagement

By Melissa Milton-Pung

Remote meetings continue to be the best method for public discourse. Civic leaders have become de facto experts in Open Meetings Act noticing with the use of remote meeting technologies. Some groups are even thriving in these conditions, focusing on how remote meetings have unlocked new possibilities for meaningful work and connection to residents. In the world of virtual everything, what distinguishes a basic public meeting from a high-functioning discussion?



CORONAVIRUS RESOURCES FOR LOCAL MUNICIPAL LEADERS

For information on executive orders and best practices related to remote meetings, please see our Coronavirus for Local Municipal Leaders page at mml.org/coronavirus.

Here are a few tips.

Planning

Choose a platform that can be accessed with minimal hassle. "Consider mobile optimized tools that transition nimbly from a desktop interface to mobile phone or tablet," says Kathleen Duffy, AICP, associate planner at SmithGroup. "Ask yourself, is this simple enough for your tech-adverse relative to figure this out on their own?" Platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, and GoToMeeting offer free or low-cost accounts with calendaring functions and one-click external video and call invitations for participants. "I think our board members and commissioners are surprised at how well remote meetings work. We've even been surprised in some communities that the most effective

meeting for them is actually just a conference call," says Jill Bahm, AICP, Partner at Giffels Webster. "We've had really productive commission meetings via phone lately, because participants aren't distracted by video."

Create an intentional agenda with time blocks and a designated individual for each topic. Circulate the meeting packet in advance. Be proactive against "Zoom-bombing" and designate a host to be vigilant to technology needs throughout the meeting. Utilize best practices in facilitation by clearly delineating discussion parameters and inviting less talkative participants to offer their thoughts before moving to the next item on the agenda.

Professionalism

Gone are the early days of the pandemic, when it was acceptable to join a video call with dirty dishes in the background, poor lighting, and a cat on your lap while munching from a bag of extra crunchy tortilla chips. If you're working with a group of people who do not frequently use the software, using informal icebreakers—such as asking people to describe their superpower or name their favorite television show—is an easy way to identify everyone on the call. They also give transition time for people to configure their camera and screen, identify the chat function, and find the all-important mute button.

In the case of a recurring set of meetings, such as a board or commission, establish ground rules with the expectation that participants set aside time to be mentally present for the meeting. Consider including a few links to articles with tips for aing the remote meeting or looking your best on a video call. As with in-person meetings, always approach the interaction with the potential to give grace to someone who is having an off day.

Personal Connections

Fostering community on the screen can happen with a few simple hacks. Create micro pockets of time for building genuine rapport. Make it a practice to log on a bit early and carry on small talk with early arrivals. Take time at the start of the agenda to acknowledge the ongoing effects of extraordinary stress and extenuating circumstances that may be faced at home.

For recurring meetings with occasional guests, build mechanisms into the agenda for welcoming everyone into the meeting space. Use prompts for introductions such as “name, organization, and one thing that has given you joy this week.” These brief constructs will keep people interested in the conversation and yield higher value conversations when you dig into the work of the meeting.

Once a public body has mastered these basics of remote meeting etiquette, it's time to go from good to great.

Get Creative


Spice up your meetings with features that go beyond the standard video call. Avail yourself of screen sharing for slide decks or using a map to illustrate the geography being discussed. Wrap up debates with a polling function. For larger gatherings, do breakout room discussions of no more than five or six people, each with a countdown timer to foster a smaller-group sense of interaction. Utilize a second collaboration platform, such as Mural, to allow people to more broadly express their thoughts on a whiteboard or collect a shower of sticky notes to capture comments in real-time.

Think About the Benefits


More fully realized community plans will take shape if everyone is invited to participate in their creation. “We cannot replicate



the energy of an in-person workshop or discussion, but we might actually engage more and different people if we get to them through their existing social networks,” says Duffy. “This is critically important as we see a disproportionate impact of the coronavirus in many Michigan neighborhoods we're trying to serve. They are younger or elderly, very urban or very rural, and many with lower incomes.”

“We realized that it's easy to miss a lot of people because they lack Internet access or because they have only smartphones,” Duffy said. “We changed our methods and it worked. Our numbers are showing that we are getting better at finding ways to reach more diverse audiences,”

In conducting community engagement, civic leaders need to bring their best emotional intelligence to authentically meet their residents where they are. “We shop online, we work remotely, and now we need to adapt local government,” said Bahm. The pandemic's disruption to our everyday lives has gifted leaders with the opportunity to not only pause and reevaluate how we have always done this work, but also presented the challenge to build better community conversations in the long run. 

Melissa Milton-Pung is a policy research labs program manager for the League. You may contact her at 734.669.6328 or mmiltonpung@mml.org



Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many changes in the workplace: working from home, Zoom meetings, social distancing when returning. All of this while you still need to provide communication to your staff and residents. During this time, Abilita—MML's endorsed communications technology consulting partner—may be able to help. They can advise on your remote options for voice, chat, and video collaboration with co-workers. In addition, they will find ways to reduce your telecom spending while freeing up staff time.

If you need help with short or long term transitions, reach out to Abilita to see how they can help you.

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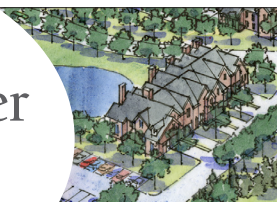
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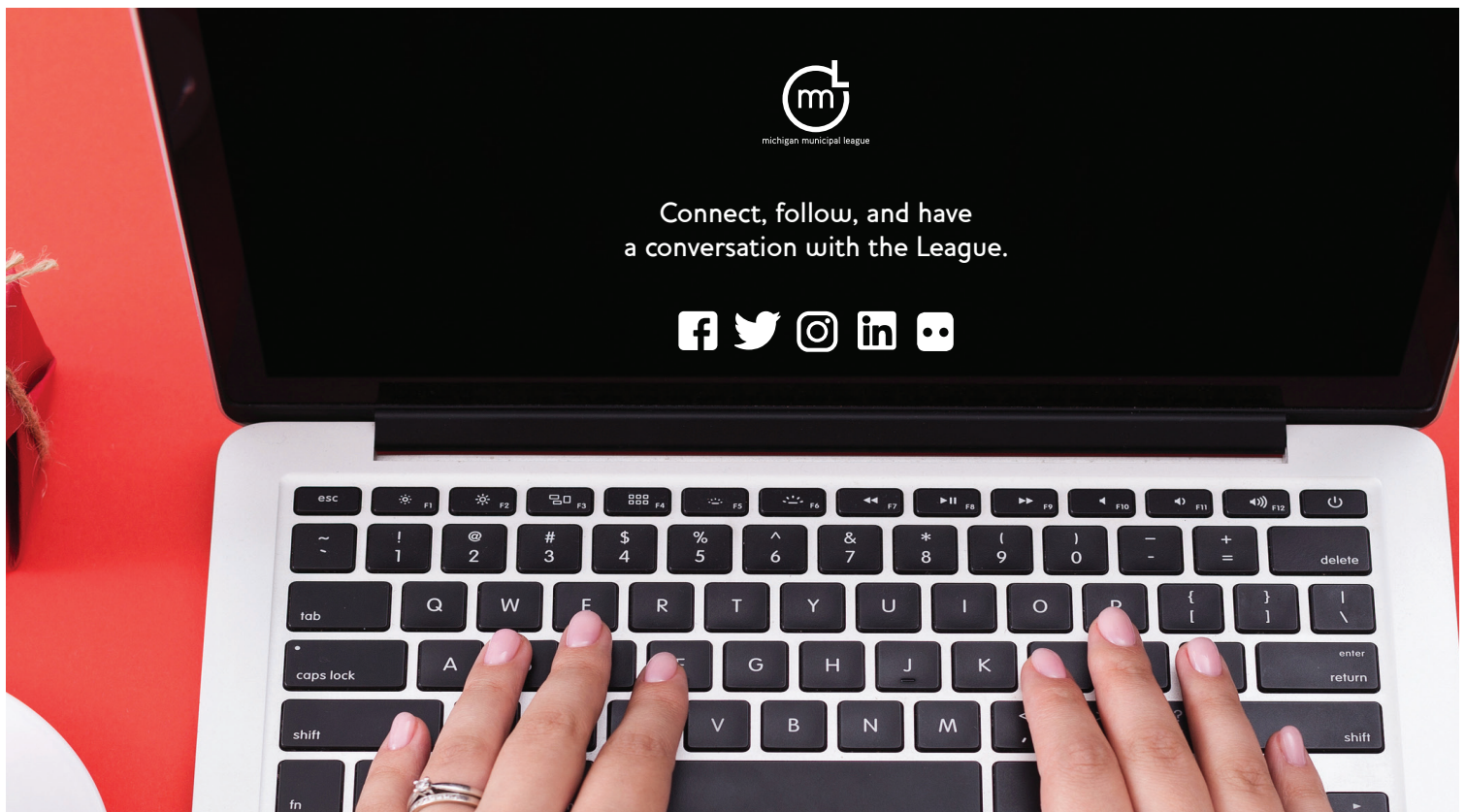
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Q. Since the state is looking at a significant revenue shortage this year and next, we're sure we'll lose revenue sharing. As a result, the discussion has come up about increasing our millage rate.

With Headlee and Prop A, how does a city go about raising property taxes? We are below our Headlee cap. Is a vote of the people required or can city council have a public hearing and then vote to approve? Someone told us that a vote of the people is required for any millage increase.

A. City council can increase the millage to the limit set by the Headlee Amendment. The city must hold a budget/truth in taxation hearing (see Fact Sheet: *Adopting the Budget for Truth in Taxation requirements*). However, if you need to increase the millage above the Headlee cap, a vote of the people is required. Consult your municipal attorney for legal requirements. See our Fact Sheets (www.mml.org): *Adopting the Budget*, and *Headlee Rollback and Override*.

Q. Is there any way that we can hold an informational meeting, where no action will be taken, of two of our city boards and not allow public attendance? A quorum would be present. Maybe a special dinner and information session? Or would we be required to have less than a quorum of each body present for such a meeting? If we were allowed to do this, what would the posting requirement be? Out of curiosity, how are we able to have a quorum of our council and planning commission both attend a Michigan Municipal League event?

A. To answer your last question first, the Open Meetings Act (MCL 15.263 (10)) states: "This act does not apply to a meeting that is a social or chance gathering or conference not designed to avoid this act." This provision specifically permits attendance at conferences, such as the MML Convention.

However, a scheduled meeting of either the council or the planning commission—including a joint meeting of the two—would be a violation of the Open Meetings Act if it were not properly noticed, minutes taken, public speaking time allowed, etc.

You might consider a joint workshop between the two bodies. However, a workshop must be treated as a public meeting and the public must be allowed to address the public bodies. The posting requirements for a work session are the same as for any special meeting—18-hours' notice.

See our Fact Sheets (www.mml.org) *Work Sessions—Use by Legislative Bodies and Open Meetings Act: Posting Requirements*.


Q. As a general law village, do we have to publish our village council meeting minutes in a newspaper? Or can they be posted at village hall and the library and on our website?

A. The requirements for publishing minutes are found in the **General Law Village Act (MCL 65.5 (3))**: Within 15 days after a meeting of the council, a synopsis or the entirety of the proceedings, including the vote of the members, prepared by the clerk and approved by the president showing the substance of each separate decision of the council shall be published in a newspaper of general circulation in the village or posted in three public places in the village.

You may also post the minutes on your village website but it does not take the place of the three public places to be posted. Several years ago, legislation was introduced at the state level to allow posting on a municipal website to replace a requirement to publish legal notices in a newspaper, but the legislation did not become law.

Q. Can we change a regularly scheduled meeting of the commission? It appears we will not have a quorum present at our next meeting.

A. The Open Meetings Act requires that any change in the schedule for regular meetings must be posted within three days of the meeting at which the change is made (MCL 15.265(3)). In addition, notice for the rescheduled meeting stating the date, time, and place of the meeting must be posted at least 18 hours before the meeting. The notice must be posted in a prominent and conspicuous place at both the public body's principal office and, if the public body directly or indirectly maintains an official internet presence that includes monthly or more frequent updates of public meeting agendas or minutes, on a portion of the website that is fully accessible to the public. The public notice on the website shall be included on either the homepage or on a separate webpage dedicated to public notices for non-regularly scheduled public meetings and accessible via a prominent and conspicuous link on the website's homepage that clearly describes its purpose for public notification of those non-regularly scheduled public meetings (MCL 15.265(4)).

Last of all, check your charter and council rules of procedure to make certain there are no additional requirements contained in either. And as always, it's a good idea to check with your municipal attorney. 

The League's Information Service provides member officials with answers to questions on a vast array of municipal topics. Call 1.800.653.2483 or email info@mml.org or inquiry@mml.org.

Communities must listen. Communities must act.

By Kelly Warren



michigan municipal league

The League Board of Trustees released a statement in June affirming that Black Lives Matter and reasserting its commitment to model and teach diversity and inclusive behavior. The statement urges League communities to listen to the tough conversations surrounding race, inequities, police brutality, and disparities, and act out of compassion and understanding to make systematic change.

Communities have started to have the tough discussions. Many have passed resolutions condemning racism or declaring racism a public health crisis. One example of active listening taking place is in the City of Sterling Heights, where they've created an African American Coalition to begin the conversation in their community. We recognize many of our members have previously been involved in this work. Several communities like Jackson and East Lansing have hired equity officers in recent years and Grand Rapids has a racial equity plan in place.

Racial equity work isn't new for the League. Over the years, we've intentionally brought in diverse conference speakers, written articles, dedicated issues of our magazine to the topic, and partnered with organizations to provide training. We take great pride in knowing that we have built a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our organization, but we also recognize the need to continue evaluating and improving our efforts to create an even stronger culture. We also know that we need to be a valuable resource for our members in this area.

Member Resources

For the first time in the League's history, we will have a virtual Convention this year. The event will take place Sept. 30–Oct. 2. This will allow League members to come together as a family, network and receive valuable information, including several sessions on bias and race.

Recently, we unveiled our website dedicated to racial equity resources www.mml.org/racial-equity. I'd like to highlight some of the resources that you'll find on the page.

- **Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)—racialequityalliance.org**

GARE is a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. It is a joint project of the new Race Forward and the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society. Check out our resource page for a copy of their toolkit, *Racial Equity: Getting to Results*.

- **Kellogg Foundation Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT)—healourcommunities.org**

TRHT is a comprehensive, national and community-based process to plan for and bring about transformational and sustainable change, and to address the historic and contemporary effects of racism. Representatives from the TRHT initiative have presented at a League Convention and contributed to magazine articles. See the resource page to access their publication *Restoring to Wholeness: Racial Healing for Ourselves, Our Relationships, and Our Communities*.

- **Michigan Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials (MBC-LEO)—mbc-leo.org**

MBC-LEO, an affiliate organization of the League, was created as a forum for its members to collaborate, network, coach, mentor, share information, and provide support to one another in the state of Michigan. The Caucus works in cooperation with the League.

In 2015, in the wake of high-profile cases of police incidents involving Black men and women, the group began offering Race and Law Enforcement forums statewide. The goal has always been to explore the causes and offer some solutions to improving the relationship between law enforcement and the African-American community.

Visit the League resource page for a membership application and a link to resources from the forums.

MBC-LEO is currently working on creating a racial equity playbook, and during our virtual Convention MBC-LEO will



(l. to r.) Robert Stevenson, Executive Director, Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police; Joseph Person, a Southfield resident, and Timothy Evans, Member Engagement Manager, National League of Cities, came together for a day of learning presented by the Michigan Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials.

show the film *WALKING WHILE BLACK: L.O.V.E. Is The Answer*, a film by A.J. Ali. The movie has a goal of bridging the gap between peace officers and the rest of the community.


- **Michigan Department of Civil Rights (MDCR)**
—www.michigan.gov/mdcr

In 2017, the League began a relationship with the Michigan Department of Civil Rights when a representative presented about Advocates and Leaders for Police and Community Trust (ALPACT) during a Convention workshop. Soon after, League staff members collaborated with the department on a cultural competency pilot program in Southwest Michigan. The League is also an active participant on the department's Council for Government and Education on Race and Equity.

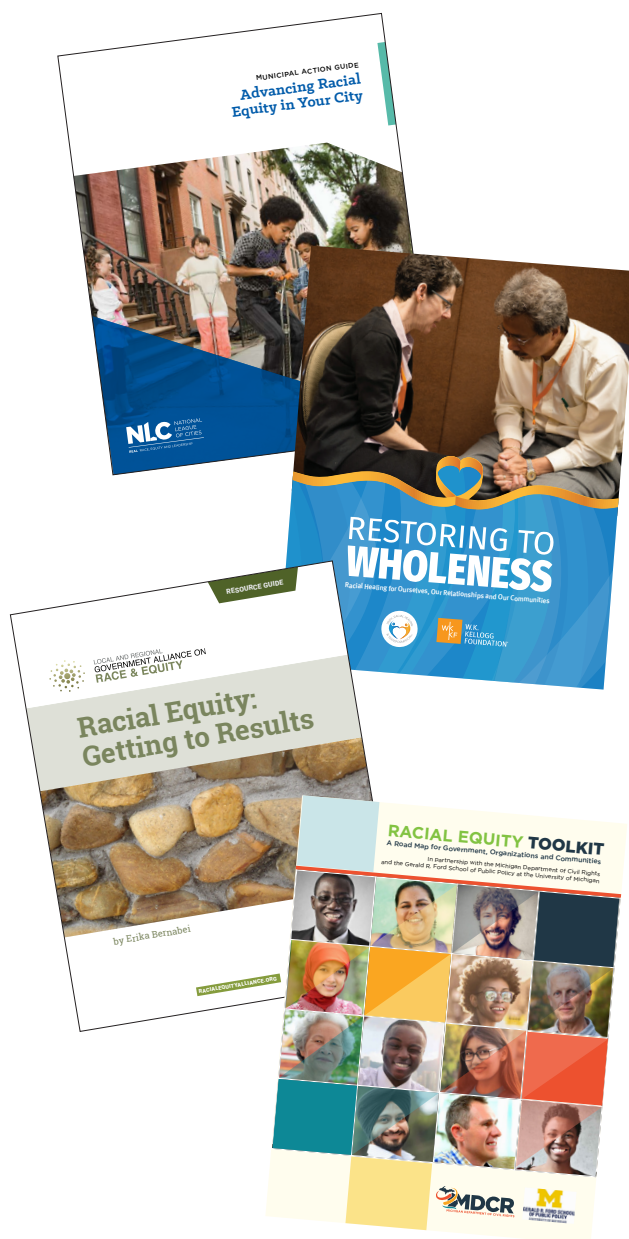
See the resource page to access their publication *Racial Equity Toolkit: A Road Map for Government, Organizations and Communities*.

- **Race, Equity and Leadership (REAL)**—nlc.org/program-initiative/race-equity-and-leadership-real

The National League of Cities' REAL initiative serves to strengthen local leaders' knowledge and capacity to eliminate racial disparities, heal racial divisions, and build more equitable communities. Representatives from REAL have presented at MBC-LEO Race and Law Enforcement Forums.

See the resource page to access the REAL publication *Advancing Racial Equity in Your City: A Municipal Action Guide*. 

Kelly Warren is the director of membership and affiliate engagement for the League. You may contact her at kwarren@mml.org.





michigan municipal league

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