



CHANCE SPARKS, AICP, CNU-A

Message from the President

I write this from somewhere I never expected to be: sharing a home office with my spouse and six-month-old as directed by my local stay home orders as the United States of America faces down the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm worrying about my family members on the front lines of this in the medical and grocery professions that didn't have these kinds of risks, or at least not as obviously, prior to COVID-19. We are watching history unfold before our eyes, at a scale that nearly all of us have not experienced in our lifetimes. The pandemic's impacts are broad and complex, ranging from obvious health issues to how we interact with one another to economic well-being and how businesses operate. The provision and performance of public service has and continues to change.

I felt the pain of canceling the National Planning Conference in Houston—not because of the decision, which was absolutely correct, but because I had seen personally the effort and passion the team of volunteers had poured into showing off the Bayou City. It hurt. My goal, which is a goal shared by the APA national organization, is to find ways to still tell the story of Houston and to show off the results of that volunteer effort. And I appreciate that APA President Kurt Christiansen's and APA CEO Joel Albizo's first comments to me following the cancellation was how appreciative they were of those volunteers.

I am an optimist at heart. Within this pandemic we can find inspiration. One thing that has become abundantly clear is that planners are being looked towards as part of the solution, both short-term acute issues and the long-term perspective. As I write this, planners have been called upon to find new ways to engage the public from afar, test new technologies, and develop programs that respond to the needs of small businesses and those now finding themselves without employment. We are mapping and tracking resources. We are finding creative opportunities to solve needs for social distancing by temporarily reallocating space in streets for pedestrians. We are working across agencies to address the needs of those without homes or at risk of becoming homeless. We are working with essential businesses to resolve regulatory issues so that services can be provided safely. We are discussing what pandemics mean in rural areas with limited access to healthcare, groceries and other important services. We are updating mass transit policies. We are documenting everything to be ready to transition from response to recovery. We are thinking about the importance of parks, public spaces, trails, sidewalks and the urban environment as critical outlets when faced with crises. It is impressive and inspiring.

And we are still carrying on the same work that was occurring when the world began to change.

This is a moment when our Code of Ethics goes beyond being a professional expectation & aspiration and becomes the stabilizing foundation to come back to as we face anxiety, uncertainty and new pressures. Our work calls us to solve complex multidisciplinary issues every day. Our work calls us to be conscious of the rights of others, showing special concern for the long-range consequences of present actions while remaining attentive to the interrelatedness of decisions. We are called upon to emphasize the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. An entire book could be written about these topics in light of what we are experiencing with this public health emergency.

Instead, I turn to we planners personally as individuals and organizational leaders. Your wellbeing, the wellbeing of your employees, and your collective loved ones must be the priority. For this, I turn to my counterpart, Kenneth Williams, President of the Texas City Managers Association:

In taking care of a city, the health and wellbeing of employees and their loved ones should be first and foremost. Make sure to minimize their risk to coronavirus. If this means working from home where possible, there are many ways to do so while providing needed city services. Employees are not effective if they worry about the wellbeing of an elderly parent, day care for their kids, or if their employee insurance covers them in such an event. Put policies in place that can assure full pay for employees as this event plays out. A comforted employee is an impactful employee, and one that will be loyal to the organization going forward. Give clear direction, and don't ask them to do more than you are.

This is a perspective I share, and frankly could not have expressed better. Something we can all do can be as simple as beginning calls with “before we get started, how are you doing?” as my employer now does commonly.

APA is preparing a number of tools and resources to support the membership, and is also continuing to evolve its response to the cancellation of NPC. I can assure you they are thinking about everything—digital transitions, refunds & credits, certification maintenance, preparing resources for how to approach common planning activities in the new pandemic environment, and much, much more. Visit planning.org and texas.planning.org for ongoing updates.

In closing, this is not like any disaster we have encountered in living memory in the United States of America. This will be a long process of response, and a long process of recovery afterward. Take care of yourselves. Encourage others to take care of themselves. Take care of one another. Show kindness and empathy, which is just as possible as it was before social distancing became essential. Reach out to those that may be isolated and struggling. Remember that mental health is part of physical health. Find and share joy where you can.

Love and hope to every one of you,

Chance Sparks, AICP, CNU-A

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