

# PIBC NORTH ISLAND CHAPTER: PANDEMIC DIALOGUE

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PHOTO CREDITS: PATRICIA TAYLOR, COURTNEY SIMPSON, NANCY GOTHARD



# ABOUT THE PANDEMIC DIALOGUES



Few of us would have ever imagined that we would live through a global pandemic in our lifetime. Collectively, we are living through a significant life event that has impacted our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. In addition to how we are affected personally, this also has great implications for our work and our roles in community.

This dialogue series was first offered for the Comox Valley Community Health Network in June 2020 as an online opportunity for community members to come together and “debrief” their experiences of the pandemic. We designed these sessions for people to connect with one another through meaningful conversations, making sense of the times and generating recommendations and actions that could inform the work of governmental and community organizations.

For the PIBC North Island Chapter, we expanded the format slightly, making more space to support both personal and professional reflection and discussion. After reviewing a timeline of pandemic-related events and milestones, we invited participants to engage in four rounds of conversations in groups of three to four people:

1. Sharing stories and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, including key events and important conversations or decisions.
2. Reflecting on stories heard in the first round...noting what was surprising, any themes they noticed and questions that were arising.
3. Sharing concerns and hopes, identifying values and principles and discussing “creative tensions” they are facing.
4. Arriving at their “calls to action,” considering what inspiring ideas to carry forward, and imagining what a “big leap” forward could look like.

This report provides a taste of the conversation, in three main sections: Our Stories, Implications, and Calls to Action.

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*These sessions were imagined, hosted, and stewarded - with respect, gratitude and humility - from the unceded traditional territory of the K'omoks First Nation.*

# THE PIBC NORTH ISLAND CHAPTER CONVERSATION

*“By the end there was a sense of togetherness and solidarity that I’ve never experienced at a session like this before. It was surprisingly intimate, and successful in doing that. It was an emotionally and professionally healthy conversation.”*

*“This wasn’t a webinar, it was a chance to drop the professional gloves and have a real conversation and dialogue in a way that networking used to fulfill.”*

*“A lot of people didn’t realize how much they needed this.”*

*“We could see the importance of being introspective and thinking about what’s happened, not just about how to fix it and move forward.”*

*“It was cathartic by the end...”*

The PIBC North Island Chapter created this opportunity for members to come together and make sense of what we had been through so far so that we could learn from this experience and generate ideas for how to move forward now, even as many things remain uncertain.

This was also coming from an understanding that not everyone wants to go back to exactly the way things were before the pandemic. We wanted to take this opportunity to begin to imagine what might be possible now, that wasn’t possible before, for the health and well-being of our communities.

Some of the questions we started with included:

- What are the implications of people leaving cities for the smaller communities in our region?
- How do we encourage urban density when backyards are more popular than ever?
- Is this an opportunity to gain momentum on healthy built environment projects?
- How do we address the synergies and tensions of issues like climate change, aging in place, and COVID safety at the same time?

We also wanted this to be different from a webinar, or a typical professional development session. For one thing, it was happening at the time we would normally have our winter social, and we wanted something that would make space for connections and a personal touch. It also felt important to offer members the chance to pause and reflect about what has happened this past year, to acknowledge what it’s been like both personally and professionally, before we rush too quickly past this moment and into how to fix things and move forward, or go back to “normal.”

Through rounds of conversation we arrived at a sense of clarity together, of the need to act on the things that COVID has brought to light and not just forget these lessons. In particular, this experience has elevated our sense of responsibility as Planners, to uphold the needs and voices of those who are vulnerable and not often well represented in our planning processes. And in addition to bringing us to some clear Calls to Action, the session was also a healthy and fulfilling experience for participants.



# OUR PANDEMIC STORIES



PHOTO CREDIT: CLAIRE NEGRIN

# PLANNING IN A CRISIS

***“The whole community is looking to us (planners, the City) for answers”***

***“Work projects were impacted, public engagement changed. New work plans needed to happen in response, but instead the project was put on hold. It could have been a rewarding experience, but instead the standard way of doing things was expected.”***

***“Everyone wants to be hyper-productive, yet we may not be as productive when working from home”***

***“I was feeling very low for awhile, but then I rallied and pivoted. I’m learning new ways.”***

***“People are still getting work done in a different world. I’m impressed with everyone’s commitment to adjust.”***

As the pandemic hit, local governments were on the frontlines of a crisis. To some this felt “like the sky was falling,” a “weird feeling was in the air” and even a sense of panic.

The experience at work ranged for people, from a simple transition to working from home and through virtual platforms, to others who found themselves in an escalating situation of stress and pressure, without the supports of face-to-face interactions or the usual equipment, processes and team environment. Everyone was suddenly learning new skills and tools for remote working.

The nature of the work changed for many, especially those involved with public engagement. While engagement paused for a time, some found that different tools even improved engagement in certain ways. The changing situation was forcing us to do things like planning and governance differently.

All of this has revealed the resilience and adaptability of individuals, as well as institutions. Some noted the responsiveness of local governments and others to make things work in a crisis.

# SEEING SOCIAL (IN)EQUITIES

***“Housing policy needs to be more nimble than ever with all of these circumstances.”***

***“Certain institutions like BC Housing didn’t slow down - problems of secure housing were exacerbated by the pandemic.”***

***“We have a stronger social equity lens so we can see who the ‘winners and losers’ are. People aren’t so secure being happy in their own privilege.”***

***“We are thinking more about social planning in small communities where planning departments are usually so focused only on development”***

At the same time, the needs of people experiencing vulnerability and marginalization were a paramount concern and focus for many planners. Alongside the many impacts of COVID and our responses to it, communities were simultaneously dealing with homelessness and the overdose crisis.

Participants expressed much concern about addressing systemic inequities and issues and not simply returning to “normal.” The context of rising housing, land and food prices makes this ever more concerning.

Participants also noticed a much greater willingness to address these issues than before COVID.



# MEANWHILE AT HOME...

***“Sending kids to daycare was worrying”***

***“Our In-laws moved in. We had to make it work, and it was difficult”***

***“We didn’t leave our house in the city for 3 weeks”***

***“I recently divorced, and was only travelling a bit for work”***

People have faced different kinds of decisions as they weigh priorities between personal and professional lives.

Many were suddenly adjusting to working from home while also homeschooling their children, or making tough choices about daycare.

Others were figuring out how to accommodate other family members and activities in their homes, while some were dealing with the opposite: suddenly finding themselves isolated from work and social contacts.

# SOCIAL ISOLATION & CONNECTION

*“I had a heavy heart when I realized I’d be spending Christmas alone”*

*“I ended up drinking more, connecting with people by bringing them beer from a friend’s brewery”*

*“It was so important to see family but we felt very guilty travelling”*

*“Although we can work from home/virtually, there are things that just don’t function as well. Work (and life) doesn’t happen as easily as just walking over to see someone.”*

*“Connection is really important to planning work: why we do it, and who we are.”*

Everyone had stories to share, of the people and events that they have been missing through this time.

The prolonged lack of face-to-face time on a daily basis has impacted people’s lives and well-being significantly. And then there are the missed events, like graduation, births, illness, and holidays that have piled up. Many people spoke of the emotional toll of missing family and friends.

The sudden absence of in-person interactions also revealed the importance of connections to planners and the profession – both in a practical sense of how the work gets done, as well as to their identities as planners.



# A RANGE OF EXPERIENCES

***“The company cut our hours to 80%. I had only been there 5 months so I worried about being laid off, but we had such beautiful spring weather, it felt like a vacation. I was back to work in 6-8 weeks.”***

***“My husband was laid off, and our home became a haven. I felt the inequities as others are in sub-standard housing.”***

***“I have simple responsibilities, work pivoted easily... I see friends in my neighbourhood just walking around – it feels normal, like community. I feel grateful for this not being a challenging process.”***

There was a wide range of experiences of security and ease during this time. While some have felt little impact, others have been affected in most every area of their lives.

Many were concerned about lay-offs and job loss – either themselves directly, or a partner. Some were in life transitions – job, school, home – and this situation layered uncertainty on top of uncertainty.

In contrast, a number of people expressed gratitude for their relatively secure and comfortable situations, with awareness of how much others were struggling.

# A CHANCE TO REFLECT AND REGROUP

***“We were reconsidering our priorities. Moving back to the Island to be closer to family was part of that. We changed our work priorities to move to a different place for lifestyle, and chose a small place instead of bigger city.”***

***“As an introvert, I was ok with change at first but over time I wanted more interaction.”***

***“2020 was not a good year. But there is a great amount of beauty and creativity happening in this bleak backdrop. We continue to enjoy creative and beautiful acts.”***

COVID has been challenging for most, but it has also brought unexpected gifts. Numerous people shared how this time has led them to clarify what is important, personally and professionally, with a few having chosen to move to the region in recent months as a result.

One introvert discovered her need for social interaction was stronger than she had realized, and others were drawn to be more intentional about close friendships and relationships.

And there was an appreciation for the wonder of everyday life.



# IMPLICATIONS

**NEW** VIRTUAL PUBLIC HEARINGS

- LIVE BY ZOOM WEBINAR
- LIVE BY PHONE CONFERENCING
- WATCH LIVE ONLINE
- SUBMIT WRITTEN COMMENTS

[courtenay.ca/publichearings](https://courtenay.ca/publichearings)



PHOTO CREDITS: PATRICIA TAYLOR, CHRIS HUTTON

# PLANNING FOR EVERYONE

Through the intimate conversations that we had, there was an upswelling of recognition that our experiences during the pandemic have collectively put us in touch with what matters; we don't want to simply go back to what used to be considered "normal." We recognized the importance of stepping out of our comfort zones as planners to take brave leadership and take a stand for what truly matters. And to also recognize the bright spots and opportunities for doing things differently that COVID has revealed. Here we share our Calls to Action, to help us remember and act on what we've learned and seen. These are distilled from the group who gathered for this conversation, and we offer them as inspiration for the North Island Chapter to consider in shaping its future priorities.

The values of compassion and justice emerged as a guiding light from participants' reflections on the pandemic, emphasizing the need to elevate the place of social planning in the profession. That includes embedding issues like health, equity and social connectedness in decision frameworks to tangibly shift the focus of policy and actions so that we are "planning for everyone" and especially those who have often not had as strong a voice in planning and decision-making processes. While this isn't new to planners, the urgency of this shift, and recognition of how far we still have to go, has been magnified through this experience.

***"COVID has sparked some awareness of the urgency of these issues. It's brought these things to the forefront—for planners, but also for the public."***

***"Steer growth pressure to leverage a more equitable future."***

***"Health and equity need to be a key element of any decision framework."***

***"I'm really hoping for a political shift in priorities from land use planning to social planning, and that we focus on well-being metrics for human flourishing, rather than wealth and prosperity."***



# CONNECTION IS AT THE HEART OF PLANNING

The practice of physical and social distancing has really driven home how important connection is to us as humans, and to the profession of planning as well.

The critical place of social well-being and connectedness in healthy and thriving communities has rarely been so evident. One participant noted the importance of normalizing access to government supports, while also investing more, as communities, in social networks as a “safety net” and essential ingredient for community resilience.

And as many of us have experienced, this also includes extending those networks beyond immediate connections like coworkers, friends and family. Coupling public, outdoor amenities with a focus on social connection and planning should garner greater focus.

***“How can we as planners facilitate and contribute in a way that supports connection and works against isolation?”***

***“We need to work to shift from developer-driven to community-driven planning: work to change the mindsets and expectations that profit is the bottom line. We need less (things, space, travel) than we thought. But what we do need is each other.”***

***“We need more of that grassroots empowerment being embraced by local governments.”***

# WE NEED BRAVE LEADERSHIP

Another strong thread running through our reflections was the need to act with courage. This also came across in words like tenacity, boldness and conviction.

This is how we can resist the drive to return to an ever-expanding global economy instead of all the other things that are much more important. We need a shift in priorities from protecting views, parking or neighbourhood character, and towards bolder action on climate, the housing crisis and social equity. Planners have an important role to play in that.

Participants noted the need to educate decision-makers about what constitutes good planning, and that planners need mentorship and encouragement to transform organizational cultures in order to play more of an advocate role.

***“Create a new vision as planner and have the courage and tenacity to work towards implementing it. We need to change the status quo. Accessibility, health, equity issues, these all need bold action. We have to be willing to stick our necks out.”***

***“I hope we get comfortable taking some calculated risks to try new things, like we’ve had to do during the pandemic.”***

***“The pandemic has shown if we have the will to save our own skins, we can do it – we need to treat the climate emergency with the same degree of seriousness and urgency as we have the pandemic.”***

***“Do not apologize for recommending actions that promote environmental and social well-being at the expense of economics.”***



# PLANNING IN UNCERTAINTY

We find ourselves in unknown territory. “Planning” takes a different shape entirely, amidst this level of uncertainty. Planners need to be more adaptable, bold and creative to fulfill their essential role in these times.

Similarly, it was noted that emergency planning is an important component of the overall planning portfolio which is often overlooked. And competencies of “resiliency planning” now have more obvious relevance for all planners. While pandemics have not been top of the list for disaster planning and emergency management, a lot of learning is occurring that will lead to being better prepared in the future.

Which also points to the value of a forum like this, where participants were able to slow down and make sense of the situation together, to reveal insights and paths forward.

***“We need to be able to pivot as a key element of our profession.”***

***“Planners are going to have to be more outside the box to address key issues.”***

***“I’m trying to figure out what’s next, and learning how to be adaptable. We are facing a huge change that you can’t prepare for but just ride out.”***

***“Recall that the province used to be ill-prepared for wildfire season, but now it is a more regular event that we are experienced with and can better prepare for and recover from – I expect the same for a pandemic.”***

# EXPLORING THE “CREATIVE TENSION” BETWEEN DENSITY AND SPACE

It is no secret that the pandemic has been driving a migration from denser city areas to smaller towns and more spacious rural settings, driving up land and housing prices outside of the city. This particular version of “physical distancing” goes against years of efforts by planners and communities to promote the individual and collective benefits of higher density living, as well as housing affordability.

In the session, many explored the challenging tension between the benefits of density on the one hand, and the desire for more outdoor space being driven by the current public health imperative, on the other. There is clearly something that people need in the built environment that is not being met in cities.

Participants identified a number of positive directions emerging from this shift in priorities. They saw an opportunity to promote good community design that creates more healthy communities – capitalizing on a healthy built environment approach, for example. Active transportation has become more important, along with the need for well-designed outdoor gathering places and park spaces. There is an opening to more creatively explore and invest in different design and programming options and promote equitable access to amenities, social connectedness and neighbourhood or community resilience at the same time.

***“For years we have been encouraging people to live in downtowns and high-density areas and now there is a rush towards rural areas.”***

***“With the influx of people coming from cities to rural areas, I’m concerned about the impacts on local governments, development, community culture and inequity.”***

***“People want to go back to rural areas, we are still a resource-based country. We need to recognize this.”***

***“Complete neighbourhoods need to be a focus... the understanding of access to spaces and amenities as a fundamental need for the health of the public.”***

***“Recommit to liveable density and create quality public spaces where people build social resilience to get through future risks together. That becomes the antidote to isolation and unsustainable land use of single family homes with large yards in suburban areas.”***

# THE POSSIBILITIES OF ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

A number of participants spoke about the gains made in working and engaging online, and some of the benefits of having this as an option.

For one, it has expanded the planning and engagement toolkit, making different methods more accessible. Planners and others have learned a lot and gathered knowledge and tools to more effectively reach certain groups in the community who are typically underrepresented in planning processes – notably, youth. This creates opportunities to prioritize youth engagement and voices, and go to where people are, rather than expecting them to come to us.

As well, having virtual engagement options provides different ways for the public to choose to engage, while also creating an option that avoids creating greenhouse gas emissions. We are able to do things differently, and there are co-benefits to doing so.

***“When everyone has the same size square on the screen it’s a different type of engagement. An equalizer.”***

***“COVID has removed the excuse of ‘we don’t know how to do engagement online.’ It should be a minimum requirement to ensure a diversity of engagement methods.”***

***“We have more hope of reaching more people if we can use technology and engage with people the way they want to be engaged.”***

***“We now know that driving to a public meeting is not needed, and in the process we have improved virtual services and reduced GHGs.”***



# RECOMMENDED ACTIONS



PHOTO CREDITS: NANCY GOTHARD



# ACTIONS FOR PLANNERS & THE PLANNING PROFESSION

- Place the principles of courage, creativity, adaptability, compassion, tenacity and justice at the forefront of planning practice.
- Work with local governments to require equity and health-promoting community design.
- Advocate for the needs and well-being of vulnerable and marginalized groups in all aspects of planning.
- Implement metrics that prioritize core values such as human and environmental well-being and equity.
- Shift the balance of focus away from land use planning and towards social and environmental planning; take a systems approach so these things are considered with every decision.
- Include human connection and interaction as a planning objective.
- Cultivate more representative, inclusive and community-driven planning by addressing systemic biases in policy and decision-making structures. For example, communicate to decision-makers the degree to which engagement results are, or are not, representative of the community, and advocate for addressing the shortfalls.
- Include public health objectives in regulatory language.
- Get more planners into local politics to make more informed planning choices.
- Use technology to extend the reach of our engagement efforts, and take advantage of ways that this can be an equalizer. Advocate for the continued use of online engagement options (e.g. virtual public hearings).
- Promote the importance of both public spaces and density – find the opportunity in this heightened tension.
- Invest in the local scale and the public realm.
- Enhance public spaces, programming and active transportation options that are accessible and prioritize the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- Put more humanity into the practice of planning: make ourselves more accessible to the community and work together towards shared goals.
- Normalize making mistakes and learning as we go – make calculated risks the new norm.

# ACTIONS FOR THE PIBC NORTH ISLAND CHAPTER

- Develop a statement or policy on addressing diversity, equity and inclusion within the profession.
- Provide education and supports (e.g. mentorship) to planners to play an advocate role in their organizations.
- Use this type of format (participatory with small group dialogues) in other sessions (e.g. lunch & learns), to allow for more reflection and unstructured conversation.
- Take time for a more personal connection and intimate exchange of ideas before getting to business during Chapter meetings and events.
- Offer engaging online sessions for members to meet across a wider geographic scale.
- Create opportunities for members to “work collaboratively and conspiratorially with each other.”
- Offer sessions on resilience leadership.
- Turn this report into an article for planning journals.
- Share this process with other PIBC chapters.