The Role of Technology During the Global COVID-19 Pandemic

STAY HOME

/ **Jada Basi** RPP, MCIP GUEST EDITOR

What is a city, without people?

This is not a rhetorical question. It is a remarkable reality of cities across the globe and at home. The public realm has been hollowed out as the result of self-isolation, self-quarantine, and social distancing measures to address the public health emergency known as the coronavirus or COVID-19.

In this Spring 2020 issue of *Planning West*, we feature articles on emerging technological advances that are influencing community planning today and in the future. We brainstormed topics such as robots, drones, and data analytics. I thought we might poke fun at our archaic servers and the fact that most millennials have never seen microfiche let alone ever heard of it. I was hoping we could debate the moral value of e-permitting in our daily, ordinary lives as planners.

I feel a strong sense of how insignificant the original vision of this issue was given the sudden unfolding of a pandemic; at the same time I recognize that the intersection of technology and planning is more relevant than ever.

As I'm writing this article in mid-March, BC has the greatest number of cases of COVID-19 in Canada, and the number is climbing. Globally, the numbers are much higher. Sadly, we have lost members of our community. The aging population across BC, Yukon and Canada, in addition to vulnerable and at-risk populations, places us at considerable risk to the virus. This vulnerability is both an urban issue (population density) and rural (proximity to healthcare).

Rapid Adaptation

Institutions, businesses, and community organizations have quickly adapted to circumstance. Change was not a choice, it was a requirement. The Government of BC and numerous municipalities have declared states of emergency. The long list of evolving measures includes banning large gatherings; maintaining social distance (2 metres between people); closing public facilities/ schools; and curtailing food and beverage establishments.

The US-Canadian border is closed with the exception of essential travel (e.g. goods movement). Some communities are taking inventory of large format industrial buildings to temporarily function as hospitals or healthcare manufacturing facilities. The general instruction to all Canadians is to stay home as much as possible.

In short notice, society has experienced a dramatic disruption which has led to rapid adaptation. Flattening the curve is now part of our lexicon. Change is not a choice, it is an obligation.

While the seriousness of COVID-19 cannot be underestimated by planners, we must not let it cloud our ability to be part of the solution. Indeed, many of us in the profession became planners because we believe in public service and are highly skilled at community problem-solving. Following are some of the ways technology made it possible for many of us to adapt during the pandemic:

- Remote Working
- Virtual Engagement
- Hope and Leadership

Remote Working

A detectable shift in work culture is offices reimagined as virtual settings consisting of emails, conference calls, video calls as well as accessing files via the cloud and other file sharing platforms.

Remote working can be challenging but it is a privilege. Nearly 41% of rural households do not have access to high-speed internet[1] and there have been widespread layoffs in several sectors. Many planners can conduct work remotely and utilize online tools like e-permitting to continue delivering [limited] services, which is one way our profession can help 'keep the economy going' during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, when so many people started working from home, there was a 60% increase in broadband daytime home usage.[2] The unprecedented surge of users connecting over the invisible spheres of IT infrastructure has meant the broadband network is overloaded. The pressure stretched capacity thin, resulting in lower quality video and frequently dropped calls.

> → **TIP** Conference lines and video calls tend to fail at peak times and on the hour or half hour (e.g. 9am / 9:30am). Try scheduling calls at unusual times (such as 9:07am or 9:42am) to help avoid "crashing" the system.

As planners, we put considerable effort into bringing people together to facilitate dialogue on community issues. We often aim to attract as many people as possible to

events, and sigh at the thought of low turn-out. However, during the pandemic, our *new* goal is to space people out few and far between or disband in-person engagement activities altogether to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Given the banning of large gatherings and social distancing measures, most communities have suspended consultation. Creative engagement alternatives are being explored where deemed appropriate, and where there is capacity and the bandwidth to meaningfully engage.

When connecting with people through technology, the ability to hear the other person's voice and/or see their facial expression is important (this also applies to remote working and connecting with colleagues). Virtual tools can enable this connection such as telephone/video conferencing, digital visual facilitation, and virtual focus groups.

> **→ TIP** IAP2 Canada has resources to help planners and event organizers adapt public participation activities including how to engage with people experiencing heightened anxiety during the pandemic.

There are statutory hurdles with holding virtual meetings, as described by Young Anderson's timely bulletin on Provincial Options for Modifying Meeting Rules. At the time of this article, options are being explored to temporarily modify the Community Charter and *Local Government Act* to enable electronic local government meetings – an important consideration for planners to ensure we practice within our legal framework.

Hope and Leadership

Hope and leadership are essential ingredients for taking bold action for swift resiliency, as well as leading teams and communities through extraordinary times. Planners do not need technology to embody hope and leadership. However, technology may be relied upon for dealing with crisis, be it a pandemic, flood, fire, earthquake or the like. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that sometimes we must adopt technologies when we have no other choice but to do so.

As planners, we anticipate and plan for change. We will surely need to integrate this experience into our practice. I imagine planners will analyze the impact of this historic event for years to come, from emergency operations to public transit systems and high-density living.

We may reflect on land use flexibility to convert operations to overnight solutions. We can consider how to better address the needs of vulnerable populations, including persons experiencing homelessness or who are precariously housed. We should not underestimate the value of balconies and access to fresh air and natural light in a time of self-isolation, a common feature being challenged for energy efficient building design. We need to improve access to high speed internet in rural communities. We should evaluate our internal IT systems to be able to continue serving communities during unforeseen events. There is much to consider, once we have the space to catch our breath.

It is too early to tell if our actions will mitigate the current crisis. Early observations of rapid adaptation give hope that we can learn from our collective experience towards enacting positive, healthy changes to community planning. ■

Jada Basi is a planning consultant with CitySpaces Consulting and is the chair of the PIBC Communications Committee. She can be reached at jbasi@cityspaces.ca

[1]Source: Rural Canadian Households, CRTC

[2]Source: Telecom networks deal with 'unprecedented' pressure as Canadians work from home, CBC News (March 20th, 2020)