

PANDEMIC DIALOGUES – LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

/ Claire Negrin RPP, MCIP, and Chris Hutton RPP, MCIP,
with input from the PIBC Vancouver Island North Chapter Committee

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 global event that has impacted each of us in terms of 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 as planners.

The PIBC Vancouver Island North Chapter struggled to find ways to support its members in 2020, just as many organizations and individuals faced similar challenges. Through the spring and summer of 2020, local and international events like pipeline protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, the affordable housing crisis, the opioid overdose emergency, and the Black Lives Matter movement increased conversations about social and racial inequities in our communities. The sudden frankness in conversation about these issues opened up the opportunity for us to begin to talk about how these issues are impacting planning on Vancouver Island and in BC.

On December 12, 2020, after nearly a year without any opportunities for in-person learning or networking, we hosted a free virtual event entitled, “Pandemic Dialogue: What Happened? Where Do We Go From Here?”

Facilitated by Jenn Meilleur of NewStories and Erica Crawford of SHIFT Collaborative, the event was a virtual ‘debrief’, an opportunity to connect, reflect on our experiences, and generate recommendations and actions that could inform the work of individuals and organizations. It was an opportunity to begin to imagine what might be possible now for the health and well-being of our communities.

The Conversation

The PIBC Vancouver Island North Chapter created this opportunity for members to come together and share individual experiences of the change we had been through so far. Through this process, we affirmed common and new experiences. Participants made observations that we could use to generate ideas for how to move forward during and beyond the pandemic, even as many things remained uncertain.

This discussion was motivated by an understanding that not everyone wants to go back to exactly the way things were before the pandemic. Through rounds of conversation, we arrived at 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. In addition to bringing us to some clear Calls to Action, the

session also provided a healthy and fulfilling experience for participants to share their experiences.

The Pandemic Dialogue Report provides a taste of the conversation, in three main sections: Our Stories, Implications, and Calls to Action.

Our Stories – What Happened

Our Stories is an overview of our experiences over the course of the pandemic:

- what it was like to plan in a crisis;
- how the pandemic highlighted social inequities;
- how we weighed our priorities between work and home;
- the emotional toll of missing family and friends; and
- how reflecting on this time has provided us all with an opportunity to clarify what is important, and appreciate what may have previously been taken for granted.

Implications – What Does It Mean

Implications is pulling the main themes from the discussion, such as:

- the urgency to plan for everyone, especially those who have often not had as strong a voice in planning and decision-making processes;

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- the critical place of social wellbeing and connectedness in healthy and thriving communities;
- the need to act with courage, tenacity, boldness, and conviction;
- the need for us, and our plans, to be more adaptable, resilient, and creative;
- the challenging tension between the benefits of density and the desire for more private and outdoor space; and
- the gains made in working and engaging online, going to where people are, rather than expecting them to come to us.

Read the Pandemic Dialogue Report on the Vancouver Island North Chapter webpage on PIBC's website. Learn more about our facilitators at: www.newstories.org and www.shiftcollaborative.ca ■

PIBC Vancouver Island North Chapter Committee are:

- Chris Osborne RPP, MCIP, Chair
- Chris Hutton RPP, MCIP
- Claire Negrin RPP, MCIP
- Courtney Smith RPP, MCIP
- Dana Beatson RPP, MCIP
- Kevin Brooks RPP, MCIP
- Lauren Wright RPP, MCIP
- Nancy Gothard RPP, MCIP
- Nick Redpath RPP, MCIP

CALLS TO ACTION – WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As a group, we developed these 'Calls to Action' during our discussions. These Calls to Action are not only for us as individual planners, but also for our organizations, volunteer committees, and professional institute:

- place the principles of courage, creativity, adaptability, compassion, tenacity and justice at the forefront of planning practice;
- implement metrics that prioritize core values such as human and environmental well-being and equity;
- 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;
- 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.

FOR PIBC AND OUR COMMITTEES:

- 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 participatory with small group dialogues in other sessions, to allow for more reflection and unstructured conversation;
- 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," and;
- offer sessions on resilience leadership.