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Remote Engagement.

Here in April 2020, life has become dominated by social distancing and remote engagement. The substitute for personal interactions has become “remote engagement”. Remote engagement has many manifestations. As systems are being rolled out, mistakes and missteps are happening, but experimentation continues and creates goodwill from the users since something is being tried to restore communication possibilities.

- **WORKING FROM HOME** requires employees and employers to trust each other to be productive and fair when each cannot be seen. One likes to think this trust is warranted most of the time, but many employers are working on systems that let them trust but verify. Working from home now is an acronym...WFH. Many employees lucky enough to have a continuing job and paycheck are indeed working from home or some other isolated place. This builds on the many people who have been doing this for some time.

The employees and employers who have now become physically detached are learning new processes, policy needs and programs to facilitate the change. Once in place, what will happen when the worst of the emergency passes and people can return to their place of work? Some will return, some will stay remote, but it is reasonable to expect that the trust but verify systems will remain...as with most technologies – good news/bad news.

From the perspective of small city and town economies, working from home has certain advantages. Fewer people will be commuting to regional employment centers leaving more time for community and family activities even if the WFH only a day or two a week. Reductions in commuting not only reduce greenhouse gases [GHGs], but also reduce traffic, traffic accidents and general tensions. WFH also increases family interactions which is a good thing; and possibly a bad thing. Increased interactions may produce family tensions since many people are happy together for a while and happy to not be together for a while.

Small cities and towns have options to address both situations. [1] One is more civic programs, even with social distancing. Walking and biking work. [2] Accommodating necessary trips for groceries and medicines can be made safer. [3] Information from the CDC and other credible sources can be distributed through a community bulletin board.

[4] Remote engagement can be facilitated with high-speed broadband internet service. Those cities that have it should make sure it works; those without should make plans to install it as essential community infrastructure. Some internet service providers are offering free “hot spots” to expand coverage. [5] Cities should work with these providers to keep the increased access in place once the emergency passes.

- **RETAIL TRADE** will continue the inexorable slide to e-commerce, more on-line shopping. The many experiments by retail shop owners, local and national, to embrace and survive the changes are on-going. Since we know, or at least believe, that retail shops will always exist, the question becomes what will it look like? How will it function and what will be the business model?

In this emergency, there are things small cities and towns can do to help shop owners and downtown property owners. [1] Establish a Main Street Emergency Trust Fund as discussed in an article posted on this edition of *CharacterTowns.org*. [2] Facilitate safe shopping as soon as the CDC or other credible source sounds the all clear. [3] Work with the main street merchants to organize a main street festival of some sort... "light Up Main Street", a music and old car Saturday or a themed event base on an authentic feature of the town's history, prominent persons, events or other notable feature. This may be an event that already exists or a new event that may persist over the years.

[4] Work with the merchants and property owners to reduce or postpone their operating expenses, as much as possible, such as utility fees and property taxes. [5] Become a resource with city staff research into ways for small businesses throughout the city to receive benefits available from federal and state programs.

- **LOCAL GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS** are continuing in various ways. First responders are still very much on the job as are other critical workers. [1] Identify critical community workers; this is a good time to acknowledge that the community depends on certain occupations and trades to continue to function. Once there is an acknowledgement of the importance of these people, do things to assure that they live and work under conditions that let them keep working.

[2] Affordable housing comes to mind. Programs that certify certain occupations and trades as critical can receive special benefits when buying or renting their residence. [3] Training people to learn skills needed to provide critical community services is within the power and resources of the local school board and community college. Set up the opportunities for residents of all ages to learn useful and employable skills.

[4] Virtual personal networks (VPNs), a generic term, are common in some city halls, not in others. Several different types of vpns are available. Those without have installed VPNs that enable their staffs access to all their in-office network files. It turns out to be a simple installation and, with proper encryption, secure. Once a city has created a VPN, will they abandon it after the emergency? I don't think so. These accelerated digital upgrades will provide long-term benefits.

[5] Electronic permitting is one of these benefits available to all small cities and towns. E-permitting has been practiced well before the current emergency by many cities. With the emergency, more emphasis is being placed on enabling e-applications and plans,

e-permit reviewing, e-inspections and remote citizen engagement. As an example, inspections are increasingly being done with drones. These efforts will accelerate the current trend and improve the efficiency of the land development and permitting processes requiring less travel to city hall, less waiting time for approvals and better coordination of inspections.

Land development and permit applications are increasingly being submitted electronically. Digital applications open a new world of efficiency for the reviewers and the applicants. A recent “remote” Development Review Committee [DRC] meeting had the ten reviewing staffers from the various departments on the MicrosoftTeam screen; and the applicant and the plans being reviewed.

- **CIVIC ENGAGEMENTS** through all types of meetings are being conducted remotely from citizen workshops, the city staff meetings to city public hearing. Remote engagement methods [REMs] are exploiting the existing social media resources. Special committees for child health care and homelessness can carry on with available social networking. The explosion of ZOOM users is the best example of people searching for ways to stay in touch, remotely. Workshops and community meetings can use these many methods effectively and the feedback lines of communication are even better since a permanent record is usually created.

Comments from all were real time. Agreed-upon minor revisions to the plans were made during the session since the plans were digital and controllable by staff and applicant. The dreaded “revise and resubmit” which usually takes days or weeks was accomplished with a push of a button to change the digital plans with the approval of the staff and the applicant. This doesn’t work for major changes, but may minor changes can be quickly dispatched. For major changes, the staff comments from the e-DRC meeting are produced real time and eliminate the waiting period for the staff report. Once the emergency passes, will those folks go back to the old system? I don’t think so.

- **ON-LINE EDUCATION** is a really big dynamic topic, the subject of a subsequent article. Suffice it to say here that more and more education and learning is happening on-line. The opportunities to provide people with improved skills and knowledge for employment or enjoyment is stupendous. This increase in social capital may equate to the seismic societal advancements made by the High School Movement at the turn of the last century. [1] Cities can be a big art of this movement if or when they have great internet service.

The other side of this emergency will be different. With the proper attitude and preparation, many systems, processes and programs can be better. While attention needs to be paid to the dire needs of people still in trouble, some thought can be given to the future.