



COVID-19: How public works can support all people

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C OVID-19 is a strong reminder of how connected our world is. Back in December, when I was writing the introductory article for the *APWA Reporter* series, “People, the Engine of Public Works,” I was focused on our internal teams within our organizations. I had a similar focus the first few days we transitioned our office to working remotely due to limiting our exposure to the virus. Once we recognized that we could support our team in a virtual workspace, it dawned on me that our office is only one part of the equation for our work. Since we cannot implement our work plans alone, our success is somewhat dependent on the success of our external partners. Public works and the private sector are deeply rooted and work together to enhance the quality of life for all.

After seeing this connection, I reached out to a good friend, Marilen Reimer, executive director of the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) of Colorado, to gain her perspective of how the private consulting sector is handling this crisis and what we could do as public works to support the industry.

Laura: What is the general sentiment among your membership?

Marilen: First of all, thank you for reaching out; my members and I truly appreciate your consideration during this

difficult time. There is a lot of uncertainty, which is causing firms to work on contingency plans and other business continuity efforts. There is also concern over whether and how projects will continue given this new remote working situation. Timeliness, responsiveness and prompt payment will be paramount.

Laura: What are the immediate concerns you are hearing?

Marilen: Cashflow seems to be the biggest issue on everyone’s mind. Most firms have expressed that they have a decent backlog of work for the next two to three months. And, as long as the project does not stall out, they should be able to stay productive. Many firms already have established remote working and those who have not have been getting up to speed, quickly. Regardless, none of us view the latter as a major obstacle.

Laura: What are the main reasons that cause projects to stall?

Marilen: Having decision-makers at the table is one of the best ways to keep things moving. Even as we go to remote meetings, making sure the right people are participating will help the design team get their questions answered so they

can keep designs moving. Another stall-out is submittals not being reviewed in a timely fashion.

Laura: What long-term impacts do firms see?

Marilen: The most significant long-term impact would be if new projects are delayed in being introduced by agencies. Consultants are looking for new projects to start working on in the next four to six months. No one wants to lose a construction season. If projects are postponed, then firms will not have work leaving them with people who cannot bill their time. This leads to layoffs.

Laura: What are other things we should be considering during this time?

Marilen: I think the main thing is to be flexible. Everyone is in a little different situation. Some people are able to keep their same work schedule and appreciate projects moving at a reasonable speed. For others, though, who are managing children at home and having to do distant learning, they may not be able to work full days. Increased and ongoing communication and understanding among those on a project team is definitely appreciated.

Key Takeaways for Public Works Agencies:

- Send clear and regular messages to your stakeholders about your business operations status.
- Make paying invoices on time a priority.
- Keep projects moving in both design and construction.
 - Decision-makers need to be part of remote meetings or respond promptly through email so that projects do not stall.
- Initiate as many projects as possible to have in a queue so that we do not lose a construction season.
 - Flexibility to start projects when needed to avoid consultants and contractors from being idle (remember consultants only make money to pay their employees, if they have billable work).
- Increase communication and curiosity.
 - Help your partners feel comfortable talking about how everyone in the process can be successful. Ask open-ended questions about how your project team is doing and be open to creative ideas.
 - Adjust schedules based on what you learn to help the team be successful.
- ACEC Colorado and its members are available to help public works agencies in any way during these challenging times.

Finally, as respected leaders in our communities, our colleagues, stakeholders, and the public are looking to us for confidence, consistency, and reassurance. Look for opportunities to provide not only normalcy and certainty to your internal team but also to your external partners whose businesses rely on our work. This is a time to come together and become a stronger team united in providing public services. We don't work alone, and we need all of our people to keep our engines running. It is through our interconnections that we are most equipped to manage this crisis and help our communities recover quickly.

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Screenshots from Mile High Flood District staff:

Staff:

I hope everyone is doing their best to adjust to their new work environments. My biggest challenge will be the proximity of my home office to a well-stocked kitchen—tips on removing guacamole from a keyboard, anyone? If you are also finding this transition to be a challenge, just remember that we're not in this alone. In fact, TIME magazine is calling this "the World's Largest Work-From-Home Experiment." I am confident that with proper planning, commitment, communication, and technology, we will get through this challenging time.

Laura Kroeger

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Colleagues, I plan to swing by the office on Saturday to pick up work stuff for working from home next week. Let me know if you have office plants you need watering. Glad to help with this while I am there.

Benefit of spending spring break at home in isolation, I have figured out that 60 laps between my kitchen and living room makes 1 mile. Not a sign of restlessness right 😊. All be safe and healthy.

Barb Chongtoua, P.E., CFM

Project Manager

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