



The Enduring Meaning of Place:

An advisory for municipal planning, building and design practitioners

As communities work together responding to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves organizing and reorganizing our thoughts, prioritizing and reprioritizing our actions and wishing there were more time for focused planning (rather than hurried and urgent reacting).

Planners, building professionals, landscape architects and urban designers are at the core of so many critical responsibilities to ensure our towns are able to reopen safely and begin to resemble the communities people value; thus, the McKenna team has found ourselves extensively gathering resources, scenario planning and anticipating the most challenging responses needed for our built environments to thrive.

Every day is a call to action. Our team is following the CARES Act with its appropriations to HUD entitlement communities—how will already-overwhelmed community development professionals be able to focus on spending and compliance under currently muddy guidelines? And what about downtown management...how can the heart of our communities stay vibrant, vital centers of economic activity amidst physical distancing requirements and shoppers afraid to make in-store purchases?

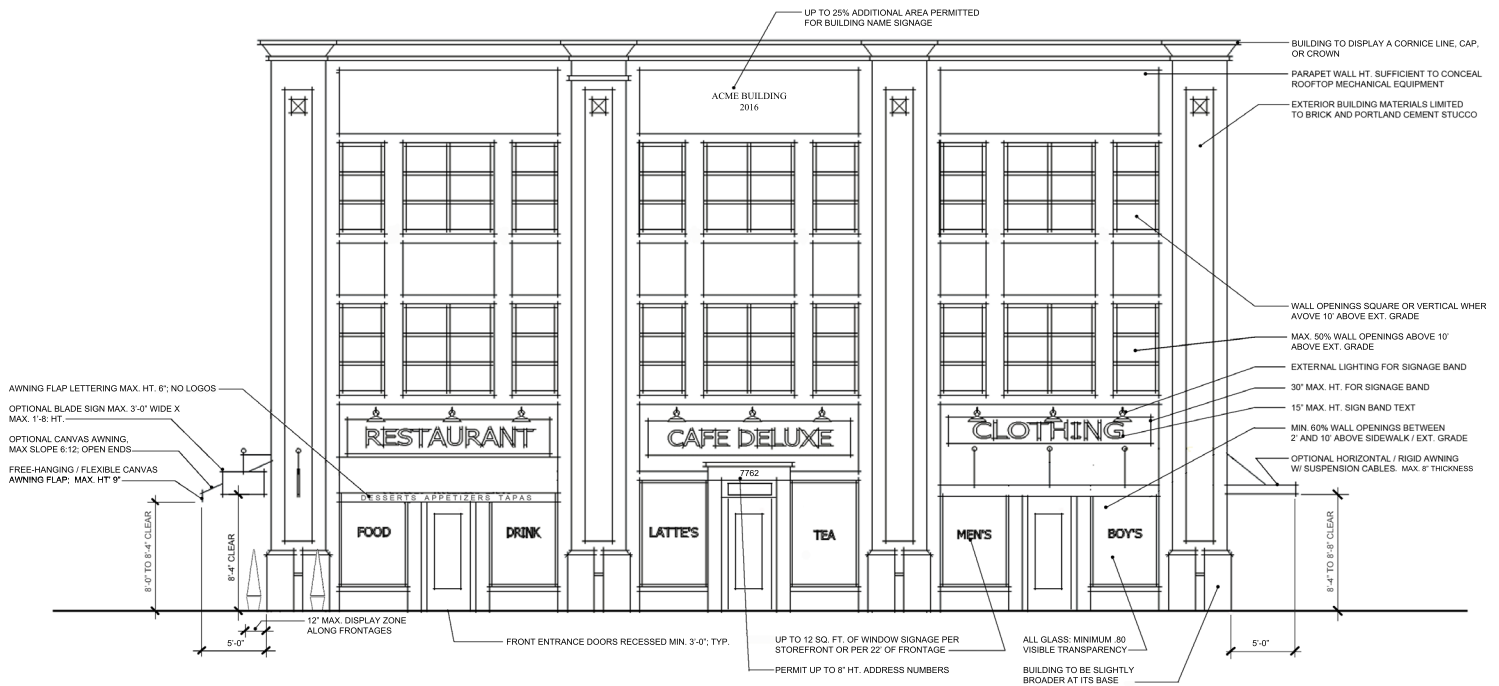
In the face of all this uncertainty, we've been keeping lists of ideas and imperatives that we must not lose sight of—until we've collectively beaten this devastating and tragic virus; a few of our thoughts, broken into practice categories, are on the following pages.



Planners should be focused on diagnosing and implementing flexible regulations in codes and land use policies—encourage thoughtful temporary use of public and private space, promote safe and responsible use of land and streamline review and approval processes.

PLANNING AND ZONING

- Communities should work diligently to maintain momentum on their projects, from development reviews and approvals to long-range planning efforts. Consider whether a blanket extension of site plan approvals is appropriate, since all current developments have lost at least two months (some of which might be coming upon expiration of their approvals).
- Shift pre-application meetings with developers to virtual meetings as a general rule, even after current distancing restrictions are relaxed. This practice will remove travel, cost and convenience barriers to this crucial step in the development process.
- If Planning Commissions and Zoning Boards of Appeal haven't been meeting, get those monthly (or bi-monthly) meetings back up and running remotely. Utilize practice runs before the public meeting to make sure any technical or user glitches are worked out in advance.
- Consider reexamining permitted and conditional uses of land in your zoning code. We anticipate there being increased demand for uses that are typically inconsistent with traditional design imperatives, such as drive-throughs, warehousing, drop-off service areas, home occupations and delivery and appointment-based storefronts. What are mechanisms you can employ to safeguard good urban form from these less-desirable uses?
- Allow for more flexible temporary land uses and site design—accommodate spaced outdoor dining, pop-up drive-in movie theaters and queuing in former parking aisles. Consider designating “Business Recovery Zones” with pilot projects using closed-off / open public streets for additional outdoor dining space or other practical and desirable uses.
- Explore whether it's feasible to provide for minor modifications to approved site plans under emergency conditions; is administrative review and approval possible to quickly respond to the needs of businesses?
- Consider modifying parking standards, explore flexible uses of parking lots and create pick-up zones.
- Examine administrative rules, submittal requirements and development procedure manuals to ensure the utilization of online resources and transition to fully online submittal capabilities.



Municipal building professionals are already back in the field, safely inspecting critical developments, reviewing important proposed physical improvements and innovating through the use of remote technology to keep the construction industry at work.

BUILDING

- Ensure the safety of building inspectors, homeowners and contractors through use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), physical distancing practices and field sanitization.
- Consider developing a Personal Protection Agreement, requiring homeowners and contractors to sign-off on certain safeguards before an inspection will be scheduled.
- Invest in IT infrastructure to enable fully remote applications and payment of fees for all permit types.
- Continue to prioritize code enforcement—focus on life safety issues and voluntary compliance to maintain property conditions and community pride.
- Evaluate your ability to conduct remote inspections using video and photograph technology.
- Consider conducting contactless inspections, starting with online applications and scheduling, through to onsite inspections being scheduled and conducted in accordance with safe practices.



Public parks, trails, waterways and open space have proven to be critical infrastructure. Landscape architects and urban designers are examining the equitable provision of these community assets by studying access and usability, considering design adjustments and scenario planning for long-term implications and focusing on how natural beauty and spaces for reflection bolster moods and provide comfort during challenging times.

LANDSCAPE AND URBAN DESIGN

- Review parks and recreation master plans with a focus on analyzing current provision of open space and parks, both passive and active; what's the right balance? Is access equitable? Are there gaps that need to be shifted to a higher priority for capital improvements, acquisition or additional planning and development feasibility studies?
- Quickly plan for site design modifications for prolonged physical distancing; are there tactical / temporary approaches your community can take to improve safety this summer and beyond?
- Consider how designers might incorporate today's reality into future public space designs. Are we on the verge of a more permanent sea-change?
- Always remember our human need for beauty, artistic inspiration and signals of hope; your community's public open spaces and parks should be a beacon of inspiration and source of comfort during these trying times.



Public processes require public input; public engagement practitioners are focused on their mission, designing and implementing new ways to engage residents—equitably—using virtual tools, bringing forth tried and true principles for meaningful engagement.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- Continuously evaluate the effectiveness of virtual meetings and begin recalibrating traditional public engagement stalwarts like charrettes and open houses for fully online formats.
- Develop and administer a survey initiative for your community's residents, gathering opinions on individuals' comfort level in engaging in virtual public processes; test whether there are certain types of initiatives that are better suited for virtual engagement.
- Access to government services varies widely for residents with different ranges of abilities, incomes and lifestyles. These times shine a light on the ongoing need for multiple engagement tools to ensure equitable public processes.
- Consider that more households have access to information over their cellular network (using mobile phones) than broadband (using mobile phones on wi-fi or wired tech)—make sure you plan for mobile access and participation, not just personal computers.
- Rethink the purpose of public engagement—how can our collective COVID-19 response lead to a productive push for more inclusion, representation and participation? Are traditional methods effective? Are cutting-edge methods getting the job done?

Planning is, by definition, a hopeful endeavor—and we have hope that together we can adjust to our society's changing needs and create a better world in the process.

Team McKenna stands ready, willing and able to help with your planning, building, design and public engagement needs. Contact us at (888) 226-4326 if we can be of service to your community.