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SPECIAL ISSUE:
CITIES AND THE PANDEMIC

CONTENTS

4 On Cybersecurity

5 On Mental Health

14 Cities and the Pandemic
Coronavirus brought much of the world to a halt. Cities kept moving.

27 Cities’ Coffers Hit by Pandemic
A look at where municipal revenue comes from, and COVID-19’s impact.

30 COVID-19 A Big Live-Drill for Telework
Zoom calls, digital council meetings—these necessary tools will get us through the pandemic, and may be a preview of what’s to come.

33 For One Town, Perseverance and Connection Leads to Success
Following an all-too-common downturn, Rockingham found a way to maintain economic vitality.
INSIDE

1 Board of Directors

7 Speaking Out: A Frustrating Time That Will Lead to an Inspired Response

8 Advocacy Update: League Mobilizing for Advocacy Effort on COVID-19

10 Legislative Update: COVID-19 Crisis Highlights Broadband Inadequacies


36 Talk of our Towns

44 Taking the Field: Finding a Better Tomorrow

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ON CYBERSECURITY

Yes, there’s a cybersecurity angle to the pandemic, too.

Sadly, you might have predicted it – disasters and crises always seem to attract the scams. From phishing to data theft to money theft to ransom-seeking file-encryption, it’s all in circulation. Bad actors don’t lay back when people are more susceptible than usual.

Some municipal governments may not immediately see themselves as uniquely vulnerable. But beware that the nature of government business, and the data and funds associated with it, may attract specific nefarious efforts. Perhaps you’ve even received them, like those emails offering N95 masks or COVID-19 test kits or other needed supplies through a weblink provided.

“You go to their website, then a payload is downloaded into their machine, and the bad guys are off to the races,” said Pete Seeber, founder of the Mooresville-based Corvid Cyberdefense, which has worked with the League on protective education.

As reported by tech news site ZDNet on April 18, FBI Assistant Director Tonya Ugoretz said the number of cyber-crime reports had risen four-fold over months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The FBI has an Internet Crime Complaint Center, the IC3, which is our main ingest point. Sadly, the IC3 has been incredibly busy over the past few months,” the site quoted of Ugoretz. “Whereas they might typically receive 1,000 complaints a day through their internet portal, they’re now receiving something like 3,000 to 4,000 complaints a day not all of those are COVID-related, but a good number of those are.”

The League began fielding more cybersecurity questions as the coronavirus curve rose and added information to its FAQ page at nclm.org/coronavirus explaining how cities and towns may find themselves prime targets. For one, many municipal staffers are in work-from-home mode, performing tasks over an internet connection, and in an environment where security standards may be lower. More emails with bogus offers and links are coming in, where a compromised system might just be one curious click away. And, due to the limitation of non-essential personnel and other staff working from home, governments had to leverage commercial apps that normally wouldn’t have been approved.

Verizon releases an annual Data Breach Investigations Report that looks at the past year’s activity and trends. “Cyber-Espionage is rampant in the Public sector, with State-affiliated actors accounting for 79 percent of all breaches involving external actors,” the 2019 report said. “Privilege Misuse and Error by insiders account for 30 percent of breaches.”

“Privilege Misuse and Error” pertains to exploitation of a user’s privileges in a system, sometimes with bad intention on part of the employee and other times a mishandling.

“Be aware of your own vulnerabilities,” said Seeber, who has 15 years’ experience in the tech space.

The email thing might sound too simple to avoid; just don’t click links you haven’t verified, right? Well, the same confidence would have to be spread through everyone with access to your systems.

“Think of it from this perspective,” Seeber said. “Whether somebody is a work-from-home person or somebody is a work-in-the-office person, 90 percent of the time … those bad actors’ entry point is that person’s email inbox.”

He said the number-one defense against cyber breaches is to have the right training and awareness among all employees. “Think of it as a battlefield. The frontline soldiers in this battle are every employee who has an inbox.”

An unwary soldier could easily hit a bad link. Sharp soldiers know how to identify and avoid them.

With COVID-19 ramping up criminal opportunities, be skeptical of emails that seem unrelated to normal business. If the sender includes a URL that, on the surface, appears to represent an organization, “do 10 seconds of research” and look it up in a web browser, Seeber said. “Don’t click that link (in the email).”

Hyperlinked text in an email can be investigated easily, he continued. Just hover your mouse over the link (don’t click) and see what URL appears in the information box. Examine it and its spelling carefully.

continued on page 6
ON MENTAL HEALTH

The more we think about the impact of COVID-19, the more we realize it’s impacted just about everything. Which, in itself, can be a stressful topic for the mind, and with little escape for anyone who puts any amount of attention to news or social media.

But what’s harder to cope with is, for many, the fear that it’ll enter a personal circle, or the heavy knowledge that it already has. Mental wellness is a concern in the best of times – life’s responsibilities are enough, sometimes – but, now, people in every community are faced with not only infection risk but job losses or other financial strains, the lack of access to de-stressing amenities, isolation through social distancing or a too-crowded house with personalities growing anxious or testy, and so on.

It’s a lot of change at once, and it can toll. And while the municipal government crowd knows health, administratively, is more often in the purview of county and state government in North Carolina, mental health has certainly become a conversation for cities and towns as we plod the pandemic together. Ask any first-responder.

“In talking with law enforcement leaders across North Carolina, there has been no limit to the new challenges and questions that have emerged as first responders are serving our also overly stressed communities in this new and different world,” said Tom Anderson, a career law enforcement veteran and the League’s Director of Risk Control and Public Safety Risk Management.

National news reports suggest call volumes for police response have risen since the pandemic entered the U.S. and restrictions took effect. A New York Times headline on April 6 read: “A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide.”

A report from the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) a few days later discussed an anecdotal, probable increase (as total numbers had yet to be prepared) in suicides related to the coronavirus’s effects. The report names economic strain, personal isolation and “national anxiety” (via overwhelming streams of COVID news and talks of a recession ahead) among other factors.

It’s a lot to consider, but JAMA and other voices suggest we keep our front-line workers, responders and community residents in mind together.

From the municipal angle, “Police chiefs are currently facing leadership challenges and local issues unlike any time in our history and as we talk about mental health for the front-line employees, we must also keep our public safety leaders in the same conversations regarding mental health, wellness, and resiliency,” Anderson said.

In city, town and village halls, workplace mental health has also entered conversation, whether the employees are office-based or teleworking from home. The American Psychiatric Association says the basics – healthy eating, exercise time, good hygiene, full sleep and breaks from work – are as important as ever in keeping a balanced brain these days. The association advises human resources directors to keep employees’ anxiety in mind, recognize the effects of loneliness and encourage fun connections with group video chats.

That’s been key at this time, said Jackie Hampton, Town Clerk of Bolton. The town has used the Zoom video conferencing application like never before so parties can conduct business with distance between them. Hampton said the town’s government is actively keeping warm conversation going with the community, too. Officials are even checking in on residents just to say hello and see if they need anything.

“People appreciate it,” Hampton said. “We’re encouraging our citizens, especially our elderly population, that just because you’re in isolation doesn’t mean you have to be alone. “Call somebody,” she said. “Let them know, ‘I’m thinking about ya.’ That’s what we do.”

In what JAMA calls a “silver lining,” the rates of individuals falling into the most desperate straits has historically declined for a period of time after national disasters in the U.S. (such as the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center).

continued on page 6
“Impersonation emails” are another tactic, where the cyber-attacker masquerades as, for instance, your city manager or supervisor asking you to make a wire transfer. It might even look legitimate.

“You just have to slow down,” said Seeber. Confirm it another way, first, and consider having controls in place. For instance, some organizations require two signatures from designated staffers on any request to transfer sums over a certain size.

There are also technologies that municipalities can apply to their email systems to filter out phishing or malware attempts. These applications can spot suspect language, attachments or links and quarantine them.

“Think of it like a TSA checkpoint at the airport,” Seeber said.

Options and best-practices exist and should be on every local government’s mind. But it’s not just for your information technology department to deal with. Everyone has to be vigilant.

“It is a tone and a culture that the organization has to set,” he said.

A few more tips, and some reiteration:

- If you are working from home, keep your work computer for business only. Surfing and other purposes should be limited and used only on your personal computer.
- Avoid clicking links in emails or responding to suspicious emails.
- Do not visit sites you are unfamiliar with.
- Make sure you change your passwords often. Practice good password management.
- Back up your important data frequently.
- Do not leave devices unsecured with no password protection.
- Make sure your devices are up to date on patches, have antivirus/anti-malware software installed.
- If you are working from home, and need a non-standard application to help boost productivity, get it approved by your IT team first.
- If you do not have a work computer and are using your home computer for work, please contact your IT resource to discuss what measures can be taken to ensure you have help protect the organizations network.

“One hypothesis is the so-called pulling-together effect, whereby individuals undergoing a shared experience might support one another, thus strengthening social connectedness,” said the April report.

“Recent advancements in technology (eg, video conferencing) might facilitate pulling together. Epidemics and pandemics may also alter one’s views on health and mortality, making life more precious....”

This issue of Southern City takes a look at the challenges and new ideas keeping our communities strong together during these vision-blurring times.

Thanks to all of our municipal officials and community members contributing to this worldwide effort.
As my term as president of the North Carolina League of Municipalities comes to an end, the uncertain times that we live in remind me of why I sought to become involved in municipal government, and then, why I chose to become involved in this organization.

It starts with frustration.

You see something in your community that frustrates you, that you want to make better. Then you chart a path to making it better. And that path can lead you to local elected office.

Add in some caring, stir in some desire, fold in a little knowledge, and spend a little time observing, and you can work with others to accomplish great things.

Right now—and seen throughout this special issue of Southern City—all of our communities have great challenges before them addressing both the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis. It is frustrating to see our restaurants, our hotels and many of our retail stores economically sidelined by the need to keep people safe. It is frustrating to know that the progress seen in so many of our towns and cities – seen in vibrant downtowns and the economic activity that they have sparked – is threatened by this spread of this virus.

Borne of that frustration, though, will be innovative leadership. It may take time, but I have no doubt that my fellow local elected officials will find ways to help their communities survive and then thrive, in spite of these great challenges.

And, of course, the League will be right there, as it has been, assisting cities and towns on this path. It will be there to advocate for the resources that each member municipality requires during this time of crisis. It will be there to connect each with ideas on how to move forward. And it will be there with services that help move our citizens forward.

Over this time as president of your League of Municipalities, I have enjoyed the opportunity to continue to see organization programs grow and thrive. We have implemented more robust member education through the Advancing Municipal Leaders program. We have more membership service offerings. Our grassroots advocacy efforts have matured to help the League become a modern, nimble organization able to quickly respond on any policy front and make municipal priorities understood and considered.

I am proud of how we have responded to member needs, making grants available to municipal employees during a time of disaster. And now, facing this COVID-19 crisis, connecting members to needed resources. It should come as no surprise that this work has continued at such a high level even as staff has had to work from home.

It has been wonderful as League president to be able to connect with those staff members and my fellow elected officials.

The best thing about being in this position has been the friendship and respect of my fellow board members, and the faith that they invested in me to lead this organization. They are a tribute to their towns and cities, like everyone who serves in their respective offices across this great state. You truly are a class act.

Those relationships will continue, but I want to thank all of you, as well as my predecessors in this position, from whom I learned so much – Al King, Ronnie Wall, Lestine Hutchens, Bob Matheny and Michael Lazzara.

It has been a great pleasure and great honor.
There can be little doubt that the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis will pose historic challenges to municipal governments across in North Carolina, though their true scope may not be known for months.

Restaurants, hotels and retailers of all types have been forced to close their doors or limit operations and hours, whether due to Gov. Roy Cooper’s stay-at-home order or simply as a result of people not frequenting businesses to avoid contact with others and lessen the chance of contracting the virus. As this crisis began, cities and towns dealt with the immediate effects and the public health concerns. That meant taking new steps to protect workers engaging with the public while providing crucial services; having first responders ensure that residents were gaining access to needed health care; and policing stores and other places where people gather to ensure that required social-distancing measures were enforced.

Addressing those immediate effects took priority. But it was obvious that cities and towns would be hit with another challenge created by the crisis: drops in revenue required to pay for crucial services for residents.

Sales taxes, utility payments and hotel occupancy taxes are among the revenue streams likely to see substantial drops in relation to the struggles being experience by retailers and other businesses.

Anticipating those revenue impacts, NCLM staff and the Board of Directors began strategically working in March to put those needs before state and federal policymakers ahead of consideration of legislation addressing the COVID-19 crisis. Those efforts began in mid-March with letters to Gov. Roy Cooper and legislative leaders outlining general needs.

League President William Pitt, writing on behalf of the Board of Directors, stated: “For employers with smaller workforces and smaller operating margins, particularly retailers, surviving weeks of reduced or non-existent income streams is simply not feasible,” said Pitt. “These businesses will need help to survive.”

The letter then noted that, just as state government depends on sales tax revenue generated by these businesses, so do local governments. “Cities and towns receive $1.2 billion annually in sales tax revenue, with that revenue stream representing more than 25 percent of many of their budgets,” Pitt noted. “On the expense side, public safety makes up the largest portion of non-utility municipal operating budgets, and it is those personnel that we will be relying on heavily in the weeks ahead.”

Two weeks later, League Chief Legislative Counsel Erin Wynia reiterated those needs before a House select committee formed to address the COVID-19 crisis. That presentation was followed up with specific requests for cities and towns in a letter from Rose Vaughn Williams, Associate Executive Director of Government and Public Affairs. The letter noted that “the crisis and the strains that it is creating across society are changing daily, and it is difficult to predict how the challenges of cities and towns will change.”

The requests:

- Appropriate $60 million each month to municipalities for April, May, and June, as a way to offset anticipated lost sales tax revenues as a result of mandatory business closings and social distancing measures.

- Make available $50 million in interest-free loans to municipalities to aid with cash flow challenges created by the deferment of sales tax payments, with loans repayable later this calendar year as deferred sales tax revenues are received.

- Make available $100 million in new grant funds to help local government water and wastewater utilities meet cash flow needs due to the mandates of Executive Order 124, reduced commercial usage, and other potential losses of revenue due to the ongoing pandemic.

- As vehicle registrations are deferred and delayed, continue to allow property taxes on those vehicles to be collected on schedule.
• Clarify the state Public Meetings Law so that councils can meet remotely, protecting the health of the public and meeting requirements of stay-at-home orders.

• Approve and incorporate the NC FIBER Act into any relief package to assist residents working from home and school children doing work from home with better broadband availability.

NCLM staff then organized and held virtual conference briefings for each of the four legislative party caucus – House Republicans, House Democrats, Senate Republicans and Senate Democrats.

While state lawmakers in Raleigh were busy assessing how to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, Congress was moving ahead with legislation in March and April. In response, the League formulated a federal advocacy strategy, which included individual meetings and contacts between NCLM leadership and the White House and N.C. members of Congress; formal letters to those same parties; and virtual town hall events for NCLM members and members of Congress. There were also calls between members of Congress, their senior legislative staff and the Public and Government Affairs team.

To help facilitate advocacy work, the PGA staff created a new weekly advocacy-focused virtual briefing for members, Advancing Advocacy, each Thursday afternoon. Those briefings included not only a review of staff advocacy efforts, but tips on member interaction with policymakers, including providing talking points to make the case.

The effects of these advocacy efforts, and those that continue, will only be known in the weeks and months ahead.

Congress, in April, passed the CARES Act, which directed more than $150 billion to state and local governments nationwide, but a majority of that money was restricted to direct COVID-related expenses and did not address backfilling any revenue holes. Even so, the discussion shaping up over the next round of federal legislation had those local revenue needs at the forefront of the debate.

State legislators, as of this writing, were set to address immediate COVID-19 needs, including clarifying remote meeting authority for government meetings. Larger budgetary effects were more likely to be considered in the summer, as the revenue picture and the economic consequences of COVID-19 became clearer.

But NCLM is fully mobilized and committed to continue making the case for cities and towns, showing how their recovery is crucial to the larger economic future of the country.

NLCM Executive Director Paul Meyer made that clear as early as mid-March.

“We’re in constant contact with all levels of government, from your town hall to the White House, to make sure we’re all on the same page in positioning our communities for the best outcomes,” Meyer said.
COVID-19 Crisis Highlights Broadband Inadequacies

By Scott Mooneyham, NCLM Director of Political Communication and Coordination

As the COVID-19 crisis has closed schools and shut down businesses, it has also brought into sharp focus North Carolina’s digital divide – how some areas of the state have strong broadband connections to the home and others have inadequate connections.

It is a story that is playing out across the country. With school children forced to do online assignments from home, and employees and business owners staying connect to their jobs and customers through the internet, the outcry from those without reliable and fast connections has grown even louder.

A recent headline in the Wall Street Journal proclaimed, “Pandemic Builds Momentum for Broadband Infrastructure Upgrade.” In Politico, the Washington, D.C.-based publication following all things federal government, a story headline read, “Rural areas struggle with remote learning as broadband remains elusive.”

“I would say that this current pandemic has really brought to light the challenges facing rural America when it comes to the lack of broadband,” New York Congressman Anthony Brindisi told the publication.

“These are challenges that many of us have been screaming about for many years, but [now] it seems to be very visible to the public at large.”

Closer to home, a series of stories in the Chatham News & Record explored the digital divide in Chatham County and the Pittsboro area as residents negotiated a new world created by fears of the virus and a state stay-at-home order. The series relied heavily on NCLM’s work on the issue and our 2018 report, “Leaping the Digital Divide.” One of the articles noted, “Chatham’s high-speed broadband service, or relative lack thereof, has been a talking point among local elected and economic officials for years. But the spread of COVID-19, moving school classes online and stay-at-home executive orders, have made that deficiency much more visible.”

The news coverage followed the airing of a documentary in mid-March, “Disconnected,” on WRAL-TV and other affiliated news and online channels. Produced in collaboration with the League, the documentary focused on the Town of Enfield in northeastern North Carolina as a case study of a community that could enjoy more economic and other opportunities with better internet access. The documentary also explored why the digital divide exists and looks at the FIBER NC Act, legislation better enabling public-private partnerships that could help address the access gap.

In addition to the League’s assistance, the Institute for Local Self-
Reliance, based in Minneapolis, and Google Fiber helped to underwrite the project.

That focus continued when the state Institute for Emerging Issues held a remote conference in April in which policymakers discussed providing better access.

At the conference, Rep. Josh Dobson of Marion, a sponsor of the FIBER NC Act, discussed how the lack of reliable internet “has been invisible to some parts of North Carolina, but it has been very visible to the parts of the state that didn’t have internet access.”

He added: “This crisis has been a catalyst to the challenges we face in this state with respect to internet access...it’s not fair that parts of our state do not have access to high-speed internet.”

Another bill sponsor, Rep. John Szoka of Fayetteville, spoke of the heightened awareness before a House committee looking at COVID-19-related needs.

“Broadband is more infrastructure than just an essential service...we need to work with our internet service providers as well as local governments,” Szoka said.

Meanwhile, the League’s work on the effort has drawn the interest of residents seeing the first-hand effects of poor broadband access in a landscape where telework and online schooling has suddenly become the new norm.

Terri Wells of the Sandy Mush Community in Buncombe County told about how many people in her community are forced to use a local community center as their sole internet source. With the center closed due to the COVID outbreak, residents increasingly have shown up to park outside to take advantage of its wi-fi connection.

But with only 10 mbps speeds, and more use now, it is not enough, she said. The connection costs the center $750 a month. But when asked to increase the bandwidth, the provider, AT&T, wanted a new two-year commitment, something that a volunteer community center organization has been reluctant to do.

“This is a basic 21st century infrastructure necessity, and many in our community are either unserved or underserved. Access is a priority for educational, economic, and health prosperity,” Well said.  

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There is now little question among economists—and, I expect, most people also—that the economy is in a coronavirus-induced recession.

The definition of a recession is actually rather simple. It means the economy takes steps backward rather than steps forward. In other words, the economy contracts, or shrinks, rather than grows and expands. Signs of a recession are increased unemployment, reduced household incomes, and lower sales and revenues for businesses.

The fact we’re now in a recession shouldn’t be surprising. Mandating that a significant portion of the economy shuts down, and that people restrict their travel in order to curtail the spread of the virus, was sure to send the economy into a nosedive. Our economy runs on human interactions and trade. When, for health reasons, those can’t occur, our economy doesn’t work.

We hope to return to normal soon. But, what will ‘normal’ be after the virus crisis? Will the economy simply pick up where it left off? Will jobs, incomes, sales, and stock values come back as quickly as they went away? Or, will we be in for a long period of modest improvements, with years passing before we fully recover?

Economists see four possible paths that any post-recessionary period can take. They are described in the form of letters.

An ‘L’ shaped recovery is what we don’t want. Here the economy improves very, very slowly – if at all - once the recession ends. It may take several years or even decades for the lost jobs, incomes, and sales to be recovered. Because the recovery is so slow, people and businesses feel as if they’re in a never-ending economic hole. Japan experienced an L shaped recovery in the 1990s.

We also don’t want a ‘W’ shaped recovery. In this situation there is a recession followed by a recovery, but then a second recession hits followed by a second recovery. In other words, the economy goes through a double-dip recession with a recovery at the end of each dip. An example is the two recessions in the early 1980s.

Today some experts worry that after being contained sometime this summer, the coronavirus could re-emerge in the fall and cause a second round of shutdowns and a second recession.

“Just as with the Great Recession, the virus crisis will have lasting effects on our views and behaviors for decades.” Photo credit: iStock
A ‘V’ shaped recovery is ideal. This kind of economic rebound is quick and strong. Jobs, incomes, and sales return to their pre-recession levels within months rather than years. The recessions of the early 1990s and 2000s had V-shaped recoveries. Those who see the virus being quickly beaten and the economy returning to normal by the fall are expecting a ‘V’ kind of economic boost.

The last possibility is a ‘U’ type of recovery. Like the ‘V’ recovery, the economy does get out of the recession, but it isn’t immediate. Instead, a U-shaped recovery can take months or possibly several years. The recovery from the Great Recession of 2007-2009 was of a ‘U’ shape.

While most hope for a V-shaped recovery, many economists think a U-shape is more likely for several reasons. First, while the just-passed multi-trillion-dollar federal stimulus package is designed to save businesses and keep them intact until after the virus crisis passes, unfortunately I don’t think this well-intentioned effort will be totally successful. There will be some business bankruptcies and closures, meaning unemployment will stay elevated for some time.

There will also be some restructuring in the economy after it gets back on its feet. Many businesses will have innovated and changed their way of operating during the virus crisis. For example, home delivery may continue to replace some in-person dining and shopping even after the virus is gone.

These changes will create some winners but also some losers. Many workers may experience extended unemployment until they reconsider how their skills can be used in the post-virus economy.

There will be changes from, what I call, the re-adjustment factor. Just as with the Great Recession, the virus crisis will have lasting effects on our views and behaviors for decades. Some form of social distancing will continue, resulting in reductions for large gatherings at sports and entertainment venues. People may purposefully shy away from any gathering of, say, more than 50 people.

Last, we may be in for a period of extended societal fear: fear of whether the virus lingers, fear of the possibility it or a new virus will return, and fear and anxiety over all the changes the virus has caused in our lives. One economic consequence of fear is often a reluctance to take risks or commit to large purchases. Hence, one casualty of the virus could be homebuying and big-ticket items like vehicles and furniture.

The conclusion is we may be living with the impacts of the coronavirus for many years. Once the virus is eliminated, the first question is which letter of the alphabet the economic recovery will follow. You decide. 

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Walden is a William Neal Reynolds Distinguished Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at North Carolina State University who teaches and writes on personal finance, economic outlook, and public policy.
Coronavirus brought much of the world to a halt. Cities kept moving.

By Jack Cassidy, NCLM Communications Associate
I. LANDFALL

“I’VE BEEN WALKING AROUND THINKING, ‘I’M IN DAY 40-PLUS OF A HURRICANE.’” PINE KNOLL SHORES POLICE CHIEF RYAN THOMPSON DRIVES THROUGH HIS BEACH TOWN UNDER A WARM SPRING SUN, AND IT’S EMPTY.

“It reminds me of six hours before landfall.”

As winter reached its end, the arrival in the U.S. of the 2019 novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, became an inevitability. It was a remarkably contagious virus that was spreading quickly across the globe. Still, the extent of the austerity it would impose on most of the world was not yet understood. Even with Europe undertaking shelter-in-place measures weeks ahead of time and in full view, the personal impacts of the situation were difficult to forecast. There was little historical perspective to place the circumstances within and glean some comprehension. On March 11, hundreds of attendees at the NC Main Street Conference exhausted the sanitizing supplies and formed lines to wash their hands, but still they mingled, ate together, and attended large sessions. On March 13, a national state of emergency was declared, and no events have happened since.

That’s not to say there weren’t preparations taking place. James Inman, city manager in Bessemer City, saw it coming and ordered hand sanitizer in bulk – an order that was cancelled by the supplier before arrival. Police chiefs began toying with the idea of altered schedules. Public works directors saw that multi-person garbage trucks posed problems as it related to the public’s collective effort to slow the spread of the disease, otherwise known as social distancing. And if not voluntary, then soon forced upon everyone was a shift in attention from the future to the day-to-day.

But of course, cities and towns were already present in each of those temporal spaces, both handling the tasks of the moment and the strategy of the decade ahead. Cities and towns are many things. They are a sprawling urban hub and a mountainous retreat; they are quaint, large, developing, re-organizing, artistic, commercial. They are the constant provider—your roads, your water, your police. More palpably, they are where you grew up or moved to, and where you work and have a family, and where your neighbor has a family too. It’s this social aspect of towns that has come most clearly into view.

Standing in front of the Sylva library, renovated from an old courthouse and perched atop a hill that overlooks town, Mayor Lynda Sossamon sees a main street that had taken decades to progress from empty to buzzing—and is now back to empty again.

“It hurts my heart,” said Sossamon. She also highlights the positives that have emerged through the crisis: neighbors checking in on neighbors, and food being provided to residents in need. The lack of visible activity, though, is jarring. “We had so many businesses that were vibrant. Everybody was downtown. Now, it looks just like it did 30 years ago: empty and dead. I try to look towards the future, but will it ever be like it was before?”

Thread through every empty street or story of resiliency is the money. The lockdown, in regards to public health, saved innumerable lives.
a stellar clip over the past 10 years does not mean that budgets were not always tight. Through both those times and this one, cities have continued on. They cannot shut down. They cannot even pause, nor have they. “The water has to flow,” said Inman. By and large, the duties of the roles have only expanded, taking on both a bolstered version of their typical work, as well as a pressing and urgent responsibility to respond to the health crisis itself. Police forces and public works employees still do their daily tours. Downtown revivals tiptoe and sidestep ahead. Managers pore over upended budgets. Councils meet and make decisions. It’s on Zoom, it’s on weekends—it’s all still happening, across all hometowns, every day.

and through April, North Carolina had fewer than 10,000 confirmed cases, ranking 20th among US states despite having the ninth highest population. The trade-off is economical. The financial fallout of the pandemic has yet to be fully appreciated, and potentially will not be for months or years, due both to the delayed nature of data collection and the fluidity of the circumstances themselves. A few points are obvious. People are not outside and shops are not open, which means that fewer goods are being sold and less money is changing hands. Those transactions yield sales tax, a much-needed revenue source that accounts for 28 percent of the median operating budget in North Carolina municipalities. There’s also occupancy tax, collected through tourism and hotel stays, and that source of revenue has suffered even worse. It will affect places in ways both different and similar. The two great economic calamities that have struck North Carolina in the past few decades are the exodus of the textile and manufacturing industry and the 2008 global financial crisis—downturns from which cities have responded and grown, but in varying ways and at varying speeds. Urban centers have thrived as the tech and financial sectors have found footing. Smaller towns have had to steer their communities more nimbly, often through sizable revitalization undertakings, to which many places have succeeded or are on the track to succeed. Still others continue to fend off the clouds of a recession that for them never quite parted. That North Carolina had grown at
II. “WE’RE STILL GETTING THE JOB DONE”

Perhaps the two most visible components of a city’s operation are its police force and its public works service, and in no municipality statewide has either stopped.

That delivery, however—the officer responding to the emergency, the garbage truck rolling by the curb—is only the final mile of a process that has seen significant behind-the-scenes reworking and reorganization since the onset of the pandemic.

Eric DeLaPena, the City of Charlotte’s deputy director of operations for solid waste services starts his day with hand sanitizer, gloves and a mask before floating through the administrative building to remind all others to do the same. It’s mostly empty anyway. Then, he figures out the logistics of socially distanced garbage pickup for a city with 223,000 curbside units, which require garbage, recycling, yard waste and bulky item collection; and 136,000 multi-family units, which means dumpsters or compactors.

His job has changed considerably in the past six weeks. Overseeing operations, much of his time last year was spent positioning the department for the future and considering how best to serve the ever-growing population of Charlotte, primarily through personnel and equipment issues. That has now all channeled into a day-to-day focus.

“Things have changed quite a bit,” said DeLaPena. “It’s permeated every part of our operation.”

Under a pandemic, everything is a re-allocation. Roles change and money is moved around. And though the same amount of employees remained on the job for Charlotte’s solid waste department, the utilization of that labor dramatically shifted.

There are a few ways to collect garbage, the main two being automated collections and rear load collections. They do not evenly fit into pandemic protocols. The automated trucks, because they can be one person to a truck, are significantly safer as it pertains to social distancing and the health of the employees. With the driver on the right side, the truck can pull up to the trash bin, operate an automatic arm, complete the collection process without requiring multiple operators or physical contact with the trash, and then can roll on to the next bin. With the rear load operators, those conveniences are not possible, so the process is altered. Bulky item and yard waste collection had to be suspended altogether.

Barbara Edgecombe, a veteran of the solid waste department, is not an automated collector, so is one of the employees most affected. There’s almost no part of the day that’s not impacted.

Schedules are staggered. She isn’t meeting up with her coworkers in the morning, and they aren’t heading out onto the route together. Some punch in at the warehouse, others at the fire logistics building across the street; some at 6:30 a.m., others at 6:45. Separately, they load up on personal protective equipment, or PPE, for the day. Then, instead of heading out with three people in the truck, they head out alone. Once they’re on the route, an additional person is delivered to them, and will keep distanced by remaining on the back of the truck all day.

“We’re still getting the job done,” Edgecombe said of the new, two-person arrangement. “They bring the person out, and then they come pick them up at the end of the day to bring them back in.”

Weekly automated collection is the most viable option, but to operate that arm is an art, says DeLaPena, and former rear load operators need time and space to train. Both were in short supply.

“Typically, we have four or five people, seven at most, in training at one time,” said DeLaPena.

“The challenge to train this many people, all at one time, while social distancing, required a tremendous amount of acreage. Our normal training areas were not sufficient.”

To solve that problem, they partnered with local Bojangles’ Colliseum to host the training sessions. With events postponed or cancelled, the arena parking lot is now scattered with trucks and collectors in training.
Prior to the pandemic, the service requirements of the department had grown to match the growth of the city, and Brandi Williams, Charlotte’s solid waste community affairs manager, put a great deal of focus on behavioral communications—the small things that connected the community to the process, while improving effectiveness and efficiency of the service itself. Things like proper recycling and preparation.

“Now, it’s a lot less of that and a lot more making sure people are up to date on what’s happening, what’s going on,” Brandi said. “We’ve almost served as an additional customer service arm during this time.”

There are internal concerns, too. Operations are in-flux for a department that has 275 of its 310 employees in the field and not on email. Operations and decision-making at the moment require constant flexibility.

“How do we share this information? We can’t bring everyone in,” said Williams. “So, we’ve gotten creative in using the radio.”

Like every local government across the state, Charlotte’s revenue is frozen. Louie Moore is a business manager for the department, and sitting in a half-filled administrative building, reviewing numbers and revising the budget requests he had prepared to make, Moore sees plans for projects and new equipment fall apart under the weight of financial uncertainties.

“It’s a different world right now,” said Moore. “Charlotte has been expanding and growing so rapidly no the residential unit side, and we expect to keep growing. But when the revenue side is impacted, you get an imbalanced equation. That’s a problem.”

Still, the garbage is picked up. Completing her tours of duty one week and tours of training the next, Edgecombe even sees positives. Management has proven its ability to support its employees, and she’s taken notice. She’s learning more through the training sessions. She’s never short on PPE.

And, riding the streets, one person in the front and another on the back, she understands just how essential she is.

“The streets are empty, but people come to the door when we’re working and look out. Some try to give us high-fives, saying ‘Thank you, thank you—glad to see you.’ It’s a good feeling.”

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It’s mostly empty in Carteret County, too. Chief Thompson’s tours of duty through Pine Knoll Shores see little of the life one could expect to see on the Outer Banks on a warm April day. The streets and hotels are empty. Crime has gone down, and he’s impressed at the resourcefulness he’s observed of the community of 1,300—still, the amount of work has only increased.

It begins, as all pandemic tasks too, with a stockpiling of PPE. Communities around the state were all relying on the same outlets for material, as Thompson recalls, so while getting supplies in bulk was difficult, it was found. From there, Thompson took on several unofficial roles as they emerged.

“I feel more like I’m running a sanitation crew than a law enforcement agency,” said Thompson.

Chief Jeff Ledford followed a similar game plan in Shelby: acquire PPE, establish sanitation protocols, and do whatever necessary to maintain police service. Operationally, that meant segregating employees into “waves” so that different groups did not interact and risk contaminating one another, and then re-organizing officers into a “frontline” and reserve units termed “the bullpen.”

He worked concurrently with a local car servicer to have his crew’s...
police cars regularly sanitized, and a dry cleaning process was put in place at the station, so that officers could leave their potentially-infected uniforms behind. Ledford didn’t want anything going in with the family laundry.

“Today, I’ve dealt with dry cleaning and mental wellness,” said Ledford.

Law enforcement procedures do not neatly align with social distancing. Often, they’re in direct opposition, unable to work from home and, when in the field, applying the six-foot rule right up until they can’t anymore. In Bessemer City, Manager Inman, just hours after responding to a local emergency—a suicide—reports that rates for domestic disturbances and overdoses have risen. Back in Shelby, on top of it all, Ledford and city leadership were forced to begin their pandemic response while fending off a cyberattack that shut down several city systems.

But as Ledford describes, the duty to represent public safety is no longer just inherent in the job—it has become much of the job itself. In other words, it’s managing the anxiety of the community. That means prioritizing public visibility through a sustained level of service, at a time when it’s most difficult to do so.

“The one thing they need to see is their law enforcement out there on the line and to know that we’re here, we’re going to continue to stand that line,” said Ledford. “Across this state, people are doing the stay at home order and avoiding interactions and doing the things to keep themselves safe, and here’s a whole group of people that are putting it on the line, still, every day. It’s humbling.”

Still, operations have been stressed to the point of requiring revised processes. The only additional resource often available is extra hours from leadership. This was the conclusion both Ledford and Thompson reached, while also deciding that internal morale was critical. Officers needed to have a sense of consistency.

“We’re looking for those little things that we can do to help reduce the anxiety and reduce the stress,” said Ledford. “There’s been a lot of little things from a leadership standpoint to make their lives a little more normal.”

In Pine Knoll Shores, schedules were not revised, and additional shifts were taken up by supervisors. Thompson works seven days a week.

III. A REVIVAL, STALLED

SUMMER IN KANNAPOLIS HAD EXPECTED TO BE ONE OF GATHERING. CONCERTS DOWNTOWN. A MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL SEASON. IT WAS ALL BUILT INTO ITS MASTER PLAN.

City Manager Mike Legg drives through downtown Kannapolis, the site of his 15-year masterwork, which began following the textile exodus and was just days away from culminating in ‘Opening Day’ — a rebirth of town through a transformational, multi-phase revitalization project. The unveiling would be the first Kannapolis Cannon Ballers’s baseball game in the new stadium, Atrium Health Ballpark. It sits within redone streets, next to new apartment complexes and construction sites promising further success. Tenants had signed on, and businesses were moving in.

“Like clockwork it was coming together. It was the perfect plan,” Legg said.

The windows have ‘Coming Soon’ signs, and scattered around the area are a few joggers. Even empty, it’s a true renaissance from the uninspired area that emerged following two significant economic calamities. The lowpoint was in 2003 when Pillowtex declared bankruptcy and laid off more than 4,000 local employees. The single-tract economy in Kannapolis was from that point decimated. Another dip would then come with the economic downturn of 2008. Legg’s career in Kannapolis bookends the still in-the-works renaissance.

“Fortunately—or unfortunately—we’ve had to deal with this a few times,” said Legg. “Those cases were probably even worse, in some ways.”

Revitalizing Kannapolis became the goal the moment it cratered. It’s a common story across North Carolina, where towns and cities of all sizes are undergoing significant redevelopments, often spurred by
the same catalyst—the departure of industry. In Hickory and Hillsborough, Wilson and Wilmington, stories abound. What sets Kannapolis apart is the approach and scale. The town began by purchasing its own downtown.

City leadership recognized the local potential. In town, at the abandoned Cannon Mills property, which had been sold by Dole Food mogul David Murdock in the mid-1980s, was now the North Carolina Research Campus: a venture that includes research programs from eight UNC System universities. Development since its launch in 2008 had been slow, as had growth downtown. The vision, then, was that campus and downtown could be mechanisms of growth for one another, with the city’s role being to put things into motion.

Most crucial was the ownership situation of the downtown. Simply, it was all owned by Murdock. Kannapolis, opting in 2015 to pursue a direct role in the downtown’s development, acquired the entire, 84-acre downtown. “In a Bid to Revive Downtown, Kannapolis Buys Itself,” read the Charlotte Observer headline.

“At this scale, I would expect it’s never happened like this—to buy an entire downtown,” said Legg.

Enter March 2020, and the city’s work was about done. Everything was cresting with Opening Night and the start of the baseball season. The engine, from there, was community engagement. The engine was people downtown. The baseball season was the key. It was a planned celebration.

“There’s no question they would have been a major economic windfall for the city. That was the planned celebration. It was designed to be a summer of gathering. If the economy can freeze, can the social nature of the city freeze too? It’s the cost of lost momentum.

“To have everything going in the right direction and we’re ready to celebrate together, and then ‘Oh, we can’t,” stop, we have to just

“Occasionally, we’ll turn the (ballpark) lights on at night, just so people can ride by and see what it looks like with the lights on... We’re building anticipation to say, just bear with us, bear with us. It’s going to happen.”

– Darryl Hinnant
Kannapolis Mayor
wait’ — that's really painful. Socially, emotionally,” said Legg. Businesses that were ready to move into VIDA have put plans on hold. The hotel project downtown has also been paused. Legg expects it to take close to a year to get back up to speed. “That’s what my gut tells me.”

Under pandemic, efforts and focus don’t diminish. They re-allocate. As eyes temporarily turned away from downtown, attention instead turned to safety and community health, and a Cabarrus County taskforce was formed, containing representatives of the county, all municipalities within the county, and the local health system. Three times a week they meet, opening each time with details on the pandemic—number of cases, number of sick, and so on. And as the regular ways of socializing stop, others emerge. Mayor Hinnant, sitting on the task force, elevates the issue of mental health. “What can we do to promote the idea that it’s positive to call somebody up and let them know that you care about them? In the past, maybe we were so busy with our lives that we didn’t have the opportunity to do that.” Hinnant leads the way in that effort, connecting with neighbors, family members, and people across the community.

To Hinnant, momentum is only stalled. On the residential side of VIDA, interest in leasing apartments exceeds supply. People too, while distanced, are still coming downtown just to walk around.

“Occasionally, we’ll turn the (ballpark) lights on at night, just so people can ride by and see what it looks like with the lights on,” said Hinnant. “People can ride by and see the downtown all lit up and say, ‘Yeah, this is what it’s going to look like when we come over to the ballgame.’ We’re building anticipation to say, just bear with us, bear with us. It’s going to happen.”

And as the upcoming summer shifts, it still, in new ways, is meeting expectations. In parking lots, church leaders broadcasted service through FM radio waves, and divided by rolled-up windows, community members sat in their cars to worship together. Food services adapted, moving from community dinners to drive-thrus. One member of the community that had been socially isolated for months due to poor health called Hinnant to express his excitement about the new downtown, but really just to talk to someone. It’s becoming, as promised, a summer of gathering.

“This has been a gathering process. Gathering, and yet we couldn’t gather,” said Hinnant.

IV. “WE HAVEN’T BEEN DOING A LOT OF SLEEPING”

IF ONLY IT WAS ONE CRISIS AT A TIME.

Like the cybersecurity attack in Shelby, the storm of a pandemic does not preclude other storms, and in Charlotte’s case it was a literal storm. High winds and severe weather – tornadoes even, in some areas of the southeast – tore through Charlotte in early April, leaving behind a trail of tree branches just as the city reorganized its solid waste operations and moved to temporarily suspend yard waste pickup. The benefits of being a large, growing metropolis come with its tradeoffs, and one of them is flexibility. With resources split between short-staffed trucks and extra training sessions, re-implementing routes to collect the fallen debris was a logistical challenge. It took a full-department effort, including communications outreach from Williams, to organize a one-time city sweep to clean up the damage.

The storm presented dilemmas of internal safety as well. With potential tornadoes, how should the department take cover, while also staying six feet apart? What parts of the building can accommodate that?

“With every new question, the challenges are endless,” said DeLaPena. “My job has always been to keep employees safe while driving and operating heavy equipment. But now we have these additional risks. It just adds to the day-to-day priorities.”

Even when the problems are all pandemic-related, those problems are so multi-faceted and impact so many aspects of municipal operations that it’s an onslaught nonetheless. It’s a barrage on public safety, a barrage on the budgeting process, and a barrage on any semblance of a work-life balance. The duties of public safety and emergency management have
latched onto nearly every position, all while the typical duties of that role have either continued on or even increased.

The heaviest load has been public wellbeing and employee safety. No one interviewed for this story did not mention this point first when asked about the current priorities of the town. Mayor Ian Baltutis in Burlington highlights their ability to limit the local COVID-19 case count, while being able to effectively route non-profit resources to citizens in need. Mayor Sossammon emphasizes the residents in Sylva—both children and adults—flocking to parking lots to use local businesses’ Wi-Fi, since their homes lack the reliable internet needed for work and school. Primarily via web calls, city councils across the state are making decisions daily to address these exact issues.

Manager Inman in Bessemer City senses a fear in town, towards both health and the economy. He manages it all. An admitted “worrier,” he acted early to supply his town with hand sanitizer, and when his order was cancelled, he led the town’s administrative staff to find it in bulk. They then purchased as many little plastic bottles as the local dollar store had in stock. “We’ve been filling them by hand.”

In the hours between preparing those bottles and attending online meetings, Inman faces a prosaic budget that feels more uncertain by the day.

“I’ve been in local government for 34 years, and I don’t think I’ve had a more stressful 30 days.”

“This event is a simplifier,” says Rick Rochetti, a local government consultant with a background both in management and organizational development. “The question is what’s going to be important now and going forward. I know what was important last month, but now, what’s up with all that?”

To evaluate those priorities, Rochetti frames it in terms of cost. Having worked for the city of Raleigh for nearly 25 years, and with local governments since 1986, he’s intimately familiar with the structures and operations of municipalities. He’s familiar with the budgetary challenges.

“The short term piece is that North Carolina municipalities and counties will get through this. But I think that the cost will be high,” said Rochetti.

“The entire economic engine is stopped. Recovery from that is going to be a long-term thing.”

There’s then the emotional and organizational toll. How much of the burden is too much to bear? Like Chief Thompson in Pine Knoll Shores, the Joint Information Center in Cabarrus County, featuring Kannapolis Director of Communications and Marketing Annette Privette Keller, as well as communications professionals from the counties health department and other municipalities, were also on a seven-day-a-week schedule. “It’s exhausting. It’s overwhelming,” said Keller. “We haven’t been doing a lot of sleeping.”

There are similar stories of full-time crisis responses statewide. It’s a bombardment of calls, meetings, extra shifts, and long weekends. Managers and directors walk this line delicately—a balance between employing the leadership skills required to navigate an organization through a crisis and becoming a shield that bears the full brunt of the trauma.

It’s an understandable impulse to become that buffer, Rochetti acknowledges. But that line, while difficult to step, is critical to the long term health of an operation.

“Anxiety is a disabling thing,” said Rochetti. “The long term cost is that it’s not going to help the organization be resilient… In the short term, we make decisions based on what we think. In the long run though, the consequence is health.”

Inevitably, though, the weight of the moment will fall near the top. Salisbury Mayor Karen Alexander took up the mantle when the number of coronavirus cases began to rise in town. Alexander, whose background is in architecture, employs a data-based approach to her leadership, and she follows the numbers closely, even for issues that fall outside of her authority. She tracks the number of cases in town, and she knows how it has broken down demographically.
She knows the mileage of broadband in town – 343 miles – with which the town and county can promote online learning and tele-medicine.

That research also allowed her to be one of the first leaders in Rowan County to understand the vulnerability of Salisbury’s nursing homes, especially the Citadel Salisbury—home to the state’s worst nursing home outbreak of COVID-19, as of the end of April. Adult care facilities are under the authority of NC Department of Health and Human Services’ county health departments, not the municipality, but she saw the numbers the facility was reporting and immediately was on the frontline.

“As Mayor of Salisbury, I need to know what is happening,” said Alexander, who coordinated with the city manager and police and fire departments to stockpile PPE for the affected facilities. “I’m responsible for protecting our citizens, even though it’s not my responsibility form a funding standpoint.”

In Dare County, the pandemic burden is shared by what Duck Mayor Don Kingston calls the “control group”—a collection consisting of the county commissioners, the six local mayors, the sheriff, superintendent, and a representative member from Hatteras Island. They’ve been meeting daily since mid-March.

Duck is eerily still. Spring is traditionally the time that property owners spruce up their homes for the heavy tourism season, but this year it is silence. That’s because the control group’s first decision was to declare a state of emergency, which allowed them to first restrict all visitation. Four days later, they went a step further and restricted all non-resident property owners. In the coastal, tourism-reliant areas of the state, the key to public safety was population control.

This event is a simplifier. While Kingston’s decision will have serious financial ramifications, the priority was public health.

“Our hospital has very limited capacity,” said Kingston. “We can deal with the normal summer population. But not when you’re dealing with the virus.”

V. COMMUNITY

LIKE THE RESIDENTS OF CHARLOTTE CHEERING ON THE GARBAGE COLLECTORS AND THE POLICE CHIEFS AWESTRUCK AT THE COMMITMENT OF THEIR OFFICERS, THE CORONAVIRUS HURRICANE DID NOT TOUCH DOWN IN NORTH CAROLINA WITHOUT LEAVING A SILVER LINED TRAIL OF CHARITY AND GOODNESS. IT IS THERE, CLEAR AMONG WRECKAGE BOTH SEEN AND UNSEEN. IT IS A SIMPLIFYING EVENT. AND IT IS A RE-ALLOCATION.

Stoneville was not going to lay-off its parks and rec director Jackie Blackard, despite it being a part-time job, despite the parks being closed and financial worries bearing down.

Instead of lose him, they opted to move him.

Town manager Lori Armstrong came up with an idea: a phone tree, or check-in program, where the
town would call its residents to get an update on their wellbeing. Not only would it keep Blackard on staff, but it would establish a link to the community that would have been lost through the quarantine. That link was no small asset. Stoneville is the kind of town where residents go to city hall to pay their utility bills in person, not because it’s convenient, but because they can catch-up with the person at the window.

“We had to let them know we were still here,” said Armstrong.

At first, they considered calling everybody. The idea was then narrowed to only keep a line of communication with the local population most susceptible to the virus, and thus most likely to be quarantined for a long time. Blackard would call the town’s 55-and-older population once or twice a week, just for five or 10 minutes to chat. They got the numbers through the utility database. People that wanted to opt out could.

What’s resulted is a series of weekly phone calls looked forward to not just by the recipients, but by the caller, too.

“I feel like I know them,” said Blackard. “I feel like they know me. I told Lori, ‘Whenever this pandemic stops, we need to keep doing this.’ Some of these people, I’m the only person they talk to, maybe that whole week.”

Armstrong agrees—it will keep going—and has plans to evolve it from a pandemic check-in to an emergency check-in that will allow the town to help in case of future crises, such as if the power goes out on a citizen that relies on an oxygen machine.

At the beginning, Blackard opened each introductory call with a speech about who he was, and what Stoneville was doing. He added in a common, “and let me know if you need anything,” which led to stories both humorous (one resident jokingly asked Blackard to fetch him some pork and beans) and sincere (Blackard was able to secure a package of toilet paper for residents of an apartment complex that had run out.)

Most encouraging, Blackard recalls, is his most recent call:

“I called her and she said, ‘I appreciate y’all calling so much. I love Stoneville,” Blackard said.

“‘Well,’ I told her, ‘Stoneville loves you.’”

The Raleigh police department continues to creatively support the community. Photo credit: City of Raleigh
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Governments at all levels have a tough balancing act – expected to keep residents’ costs low while delivering all the in-demand services that keep communities not just running but structured for a fine quality of life, too. That takes planning and consensus, but at the end of the day it’s the resources that bring it all home — revenues that cover the operations of police and fire response, public works, utilities, amenities and more.

In the mix, local governments, like others, keep “rainy day” funds on hand to keep essentials running in emergencies or after natural disasters, like hurricanes.

But COVID-19 is another story. The response to the deadly coronavirus brought about measures to guard public health and safety, including stay-at-home orders and limitations on business operations. But the circumstances opened up revenue chasms that have turned new focus to how the governments closest to the people function and provide for their communities.

“People think cities have deep pockets; most have lint in them,” said William Pitt, outgoing League president and a longtime member of the Washington City Council. In his city, like many others, the biggest chunk of the municipal budget goes into public safety, a 24-hour operation that pretty much anyone would agree is essential.

Municipal budgets will face significant challenges following COVID-19. Photo credit: Shutterstock
The funding for these must-have services — understand subsequently that most of a municipal budget covers employees who deliver those services — isn’t meager and comes from sources including the property tax and sales tax.

In North Carolina, sales and use taxes make up the largest amount of tax revenue outside of the property tax, bringing in more than $1.2 billion in annual revenue. For the median North Carolina municipality, 28 percent of municipal revenue is sales tax, according to the League’s latest Projections for State-Collected Local Government Tax Revenue, published in March as the pandemic was on the rise. Typically, the report forecasts what cities and towns can expect, based on analyses of economic conditions and adjustments that may sway here and there year to year. This time, “if there is one common thread that runs among recent analyses, it is that this period of economic activity is unlike any seen in recent decades,” League Research Strategist Caitlin Saunders and Director of Research & Strategic Initiatives Chris Nida wrote at the outset of the document.

With consumers staying home to avoid the virus and businesses limited in what they can do, budget impacts are certain but, as of this writing, untold in extent.

While some might point out that spending continues on grocery food as households shift from restaurant dining to home-prepared meals, and while online spending are subject to local sales tax, it’s unlikely they’ll make up for what’s lost in consumer spending.

Council Member Pitt expects his city to deal with COVID’s budget shockwaves for fiscal years to come. He said he’s already heard from some local businesses that are having to close for good due to lack of traffic.

“It’s very hard for small businesses, and we don’t have major industries in a small town like Washington,” Pitt said. What’s tougher is the city’s biggest industry — tourism, a driver for so many North Carolina communities — depends on people not only being out and about but in a good position to spend.

With transactions dropping off, taxes aren’t being collected that fuel government coffers. The only tax that municipal governments get to set themselves is the property tax, which local boards aspire to keep as low as possible, keeping the pressure off of it with best use of other, though less-substantial resources available.

Other state-collected revenue sources distributed to local governments are the electricity sales tax, local video programming tax.

“Ultimately, the only way even larger cities are going to be able to weather this without some federal or state help is going to be by making cuts in their budgets.”

– Scott Mooneyham
NCLM Director of Political Communications & Coordination

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telecommunications sales tax, piped natural gas sales tax, solid waste disposal tax and alcoholic beverages tax, which were all the subject of projections in the League report from March.

A number of authorized governments also depend on occupancy taxes, like from hotel stays or vacation rentals, often in support of a tourism industry that fuels the economy but requires government services. An industry report published on HotelBusiness.com said that sector’s challenges under COVID restrictions and consumer behavior was making for a “severe decline” in revenue collected on rooms. Coldwell Banker Richard Ellis, the world’s largest commercial real estate services company, estimated a 37 percent decline in 2020. Prior to COVID in the U.S., the company had forecasted a 0.1 percent decline.

Back in Washington (and all other communities), the coronavirus pulled a hard turn for the city’s spending plan, having landed right in the middle of budget season. Council Member Pitt said his board had to rethink and cancel a number of initiatives it wanted to put out there, now unsure of how to support them, not to mention any new responsibilities unforeseen.

Clearly an issue, the Raleigh News & Observer wrote a lengthy piece in early April about COVID-19 and local government revenue struggles, quoting heavily from League Director of Political Communications & Coordination Scott Mooneyham.

“Ultimately, the only way even larger cities are going to be able to weather this without some federal or state help is going to be by making cuts in their budgets,” he told them as the newspaper also pointed out that utility budgets like for water, sewer and electric services — running 24 hours a day and core to public health — have also seen declines under the pandemic. It may be especially difficult on those utilities run by small or rural towns — distress-relief measures implemented under executive orders have given customers a grace period to pay their bills.

Mooneyham emphasized, however, that North Carolina has some of the most financially responsible local governments around, and their leadership over the years has put them in decent standing to weather the crisis, in part with available emergency funds. “...but for how long?” Mooneyham posed in the N&O article. “That’s the question.”

Hurricane season begins June 1.

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It was budget time in Fuquay-Varina, and though the COVID-19 pandemic had shaken up the pace of the world, kinked revenue streams and created all manner of pundit-beloved “new normals,” the public spending plan would still be due for approval by July 1.

Diligent as ever, town hall officials shaped, refined and balanced the draft budget in workshops with 14 department directors and meeting after meeting with the finance staff over a period of about a month and a half.

“And there wasn’t a single meeting where I sat personally in the room with another staff person,” said Adam Mitchell, Fuquay-Varina’s town manager. “Which is the first time that’s ever occurred.”

Instead, they did what so many other local governments have had to get used to lately, in sometimes crash-course fashion – telework: describing work done from outside of the office, often from home, via internet connection, the safer alternative during deadly coronavirus times to working in shared office space, where contagion could occur.

“And to be honest with you,” Mitchell said, “it worked as good or better than when we were sitting physically in the room with one another. That was a surprising outcome for me from this whole process.”
Teleworking is not an invention of the COVID-19 lockdown — it’s been around a long time — but the world is a whole lot more practiced with it as a result. And it may be a forced preview of the future of work.

“There’s a sense that this is a permanent shift,” said Tony McEwen, assistant to the city manager at the City of Wilmington, where many employees are connected from home in adherence to social distancing. McEwen said teleworking shouldn’t fully redefine how local governments do business — “there’s a sense of duty to be somewhere where people can physically get to you, face to face,” he said — but he pointed out the level of comfort that newer generations of employees have with web-based work, and that it’s kept departments running smoothly for his city during the pandemic.

It’s obviously not practical for all employees — a law enforcement officer can’t properly investigate a crime from his or her own living room. But, generally, things are changing.

“Basically, everyone is doing telework now,” Route Fifty quoted of Leslie Scott of the National Association of State Personnel Executives. States have shown an easier time shifting to it, according to research, but municipalities are on the heels.

On April 30, the Washington, D.C.-based Center for State and Local Government Excellence released the findings of a workforce-trends study that found an increase in telework among state and local government employees. “The increase may relate to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that overlapped with this research,” the group said in a press release, noting that it could “change dramatically” going forward.

At Fuquay-Varina, Mitchell’s team went ahead and wrote a policy specific to it — the Pandemic Recovery Plan Telework Policy, laying out measures to minimize risks, reduce exposures and ride on ability to work from home over secure connections that the town’s information technology department enabled on work-issued laptops.

It wasn’t a careless and quick embrace of teleworking, Mitchell noted. His team carefully evaluated whether employees could achieve the duties of their job descriptions adequately from remote locations like home.

“I personally was a bit reluctant and hesitant to want to even discuss the topic of work-from-home prior to COVID. But my eyes are open to the fact that it can work, it does work.”

- Adam Mitchell
  Fuquay-Varina Town Manager
“But my eyes are open to the fact that it can work, it does work.”

While not all towns are equally equipped, town halls of all staffing sizes have given it a go during the pandemic. About 115 miles south of Fuquay-Varina is the town of Bolton, whose town hall has two full-time employees, including League Board of Directors Member Jackie Hampton, Bolton’s clerk.

“I know, myself, I couldn’t have pictured in my lifetime that this would be happening,” said of her work-from-home ability. Before, she said, staying home was for the odd sick day; it wasn’t the habitat for government processes.

“To the point where this is the norm and not the exception has been eye-opening,” Hampton said.

The possibilities are encouraging there. They’re accomplishing their work. But it’s not a perfect system.

“In our area, being as rural as it is, your signal is liable to go out at any minute,” Hampton noted.

That needs to change, and the COVID-19 teleworking live-drill is yet another demonstration of how important it will be to have reliable broadband internet across the state, said William Pitt, the League’s outgoing president and council member at the City of Washington.

During his presidency and prior, he’s been vocal about policy changes needed to bring modern-speed connections to all sorts of towns, as many parts of the state are unserved.

“The internet is no longer a luxury... It is now a necessity,” Pitt said.

Teleworking is “very practical” for the City of Washington amid the coronavirus, he said. “It’s been pretty seamless. You really couldn’t tell that our finance division had even felt a bump.”

Pitt said in the longrun it may lead to new flextime policies for municipal employees, “because if you can do it seamlessly at home, there are employees that need time at home for childcare or elder care,” among other things.

Mitchell offered similar observations at Fuquay-Varina. That “could be a good recruitment and retention tool to our workforce. In a time period where there is so much negative related to COVID-19, this is potentially a positive that has come from it.”

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through much of the 20th century, the City of Rockingham’s economy—like those in a number of North Carolina towns—was tied to the textile industry. Located in Richmond County, Rockingham once was part of one of the wealthiest areas in the state and the county’s textile mills employed thousands.

In the latter half of the century, its fate again looked not so different from a number of towns dependent on textiles. The mill jobs began to disappear. The city faced difficult decisions.

“The story of textiles is that they exited out. So, we had to go to work like a lot of communities did,” said City Manager Monty Crump.

In many ways, its story is one of perseverance, finding ways to keep Rockingham economically vital by leveraging some of its own unique advantages—whether through its history of motorsports, its partnerships with longstanding and new industries, or its location along Interstate 73/74.

Crump and other town leaders acknowledge the construction of the interstate beginning in the late 1980s was a boon, enabling them to pursue economic development opportunities. One of those, Perdue Farms, continues to expand its

This article originally was published by WRAL in March 2020.
A chicken processing plant and today employs more than 1,000 workers in Richmond County.

"With the investment in the highways and the water and sewer system, we were able to attract and build with folks in wet industries — water and sewer users," Crump explained. "It has proved to be a good call."

Additionally, the city is making infrastructure investments to revitalize its downtown district, announcing a $14 million project last year. The project is funding the construction of a new satellite campus for Richmond Community College, and is a collaborative effort between RCC, Richmond County and Rockingham.

"It’s so important to have relationships with local industries... That was key to us being able to make investments that would not only provide the service that was needed for the industries, but also such that we didn’t go into excessive debt."

- Gene McLaurin
Former Rockingham Mayor and State Senator

LIKE ROCKINGHAM, WILLIAMSTON FACED an impossible choice: Do you neglect industrial infrastructure needs and, while avoiding excessive debt, all but guarantee the departure of your top job creator? Or do you make the upgrades and, by doing so, accept a great deal of financial risk?

Williamston, as with many other rural communities across the North Carolina, opted for the latter. A similar to those other towns, they’re still working their way back.

Kerry Spivey, public works director for Williamston, wonders what would have happened if stakeholders had not invested in that water system, though he acknowledges the difficulty of the town’s situation.

“The town and the county felt like they had to take action pretty quickly and some decisions had to be made,” Spivey said. “Everybody did the best they could.”

Williamston and Martin County leaders hope to secure a large company or industry partner that requires a high volume of water to help remedy its situation, and hope that residents will be understanding of its current predicament.

At the least, with a quick glance around the state, they can know they’re not alone.

The project has resulted in 10 new downtown businesses and $30 million in public/private investments.

“The [RCC] project is another opportunity to bring people back to downtown and further reinvigorate Rockingham’s core commercial area,” Rockingham Mayor Steve Morris said in a press release.

Already, the downtown is home to Discovery Place Kids satellite museum, a regional attraction for school children which has acted as an anchor institution for other downtown businesses.

Local officials see the museum as a big draw for children and families. Now they hope the RCC project will do the same for millennials and young adults. It’s all about building blocks of success.

While it has made infrastructure investments, Crump acknowledged Rockingham was not left with “a bag of debt,” lots of excess water and sewer capacity, or deferred maintenance needs like some North Carolina towns that saw the mills close. To a large degree, it has been the decline of textiles, furniture and tobacco – and the accompanying population losses — in many towns that have led to water and sewer infrastructure needs estimated in the billions across the state.

Rockingham has had another advantage key to its development –
partnerships with business and state leaders that have developed over decades.

“It’s so important to have relationships with local industries ... to be aware of their plans, to understand how their business is dealing with changes in the economy. I think that’s something that Rockingham in particular did a really good job of,” said former Rockingham Mayor and state Sen. Gene McLaurin (D-Richmond). “That was key to us being able to make investments that would not only provide the service that was needed for the industries, but also such that we didn’t go into excessive debt.”

Rockingham’s downtown community projects were partly the result of partnerships with two private foundations that helped provide funding. And by leveraging partnerships with state and federal agencies, the town has received a number of grants.

“I’m proud of Rockingham,” McLaurin said. “I think it’s a great place to live and that we have a good community. I’m optimistic. I think when rural communities do the kinds of things they need to do, then the future is bright for rural communities across North Carolina.”

The new Richmond Community College campus is part of Rockingham’s development efforts. Photo credit: WHN Architects

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In this issue, we are expanding Talk of Our Towns to include the many practical and creative ways cities and towns across North Carolina are supporting their citizens, business partners and each other during this unprecedented time of crisis.

Their solutions are many, and their resolve is inspiring. The stories featured here are just a small sample of the impactful work happening around the state.

Washington Offers Financial Relief to Utility Customers

Attorney General Josh Stein today announced that Casey Cooper, CEO, Cherokee Indian Hospital, Cleveland County Sheriff Alan Norman, Franklin Mayor Bob Scott, and Highlands Mayor Patrick Taylor have received the Attorney General’s Dogwood Award. These awards are given annually to honor North Carolinians who are dedicated to keeping people safe, healthy, and happy in their communities.

On April 13, the City of Washington’s Council voted to approve a one-time 30-percent reduction in the electric utility rate for all customers for the April billing cycle. The City of Washington’s administration recognized the economic effects facing all residential and business utility customers and proposed the reduction as a step towards relieving the burden. Considering the possible financial hardships and financial insecurity this crisis brings, the City of Washington has also indefinitely suspended all disconnections of utilities due to nonpayment.

In April, the Knightdale Parks and Recreation staff, Knightdale Police Department, and Knightdale Fire Department put on a mini Bunny Hop Parade for Knightdale residents in lieu of the canceled annual Easter Egg Hunt. The Easter Bunny gave more than a dozen Knightdale neighborhoods and their kids an exciting surprise outside while still practicing responsible social distancing.

Fayetteville Partners to Make PPE, Deliver Meals as Part of COVID-19 Response

For the City of Fayetteville, partnering within the local community is nothing new, but the current partnerships have taken on a new focus in the face of the Coronavirus pandemic. The Fayetteville Police Department is working with local teachers to build filter masks using 3D printers. Brian Thompson, a science teacher at Terry Sanford High School, had the idea of using the printers while students are learning at home to help first responders—the Fayetteville Police Department is providing the materials and teachers are manning the printers and assembling around 60 to 70 masks a day.

In addition to working with local teachers, police officers are sewing masks to use while responding during the pandemic. Additionally, Fayetteville Parks and Recreation is partnering with the Cumberland County Council on Older Adults to deliver “Meals on Wheels” meals to 70 homebound senior participants each day. The program typically relies on senior citizen volunteers to deliver the meals, but because they are...
considered a high-risk group as a result of COVID-19, the Council on Older Adults needed help delivering these meals. The city’s Parks and Recreation staff stepped up to fill the need, continuing to work despite recreation facilities being closed in the wake of social distancing measures.

#LoveHendo Campaign Supports Local Businesses in Hendersonville

Difficult circumstances often bring out the very best in collective efforts, and the #LoveHendo campaign is a shining example of what can happen when a community comes together to support small businesses impacted by the Coronavirus. Within a very short time after restrictions were placed on restaurants, the Friends of Downtown Hendersonville, Henderson County Chamber of Commerce, and a group of concerned citizen volunteers launched LoveHendo.com, a platform that allows the community to purchase gift cards, merchandise, and take advantage of the many businesses which are offering curbside pick-up and delivery services. The City of Hendersonville Public Works and Downtown Program collaborated to create dedicated ‘Curbside Pick-Up’ spaces to help facilitate the new operating guidelines.

“There is a lot of uncertainty for small business owners right now, especially in light of the recent restrictions for dining establishments,” said Lew Holloway, Downtown Economic Development Director for the City of Hendersonville. “We know this is scary for small businesses, and we hope this effort brings awareness to that fact and make things just a little bit better for our business community.”
Positivity on Display in Reidsville

The City of Reidsville, its business and artistic communities have all joined together during this unprecedented time of COVID-19 to be a positive force within the community. In a City that loves its high school football, the “team” concept has risen to a new level during this healthcare crisis—go Team Reidsville!

The Team Reidsville Business Community Huddle is a weekly Zoom meeting hosted by the Reidsville Chamber of Commerce. The Huddle idea was a joint effort between Chamber and City of Reidsville staff when the initial business shutdown was put into place and the first round of federal and state resources became available. Staff fielded dozens of calls from local businesses who were concerned, confused and curious about how to capture grant monies, sustain their employee base, deal with the crisis, etc.

As staff gathered information from local, state and federal sources it was prudent to convene and disseminate information all at once to a wider group. Since then, the Huddle has evolved into a chance to escape from the crisis, breathe a little, laugh a little, learn a little, see familiar faces and have something to look forward to amidst these trying times. Huddle discussions are led by the Chamber President and City of Reidsville economic development staff.

In addition to the weekly Huddle, the City of Reidsville has stressed keeping the public informed via the City’s website and social media. Reidsville Mayor Jay Donecker has recorded weekly updates via the CodeRED system and mid-week appearances on the local television station Star News.

#WeAreRaleigh Campaign Highlights Stories of Support and Encouragement During Pandemic

The City of Raleigh pivoted quickly during Covid-19 in an effort to provide the same level of service to our residents, while also protecting employees. The City adjusted services, introduced aid initiatives, and worked to keep citizens informed during this challenging time. Much of the information has been delivered with a rallying cry: “We are strong. We are together. We are Raleigh.”

In addition to allocating $1 million to support small businesses affected by Covid-19, to be administered through two local partners—the Carolina Small Business Development Fund and Wake Technical Community College Targeted Microbusiness Grant—the City Council has provided guidance for allocation of federal CARES Act Funding that will focus on assisting homelessness/eviction prevention, including rent and utility assistance. The City Council voted unanimously to allocate $100,000 to two nonprofits, Passage Home and Triangle Family Services, to assist members of the community living in hotels.

City staff across many departments have adjusted to accommodate the new norms—creating special curbside pick-up zones to accommodate restaurant and shops; repurposing city staff, such as theater stage hands, to sew masks and help do health checks at City buildings for employees; offering remote inspections for single family and limited commercial
inspections (non-life threatening inspections; delivering meals to families in need, in partnership with Wake County Public Schools and Rocky Top Catering; and more.

To support families who are at home with children, the Raleigh Parks and Raleigh Arts have launched activities to boost morale and help parents, including Tiny Sculpture Scavenger Hunt and the “Play Anywhere Raleigh” that shares ideas and resources for activities people can do from home to have fun, stay active, and keep learning.

**City of Oxford Joins “Light It Blue” Campaign**

The City of Oxford has joined the “Light It Blue” campaign in order to recognize, show support and bring awareness to healthcare professionals and first responders who continue to fight the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. “We are immensely grateful to frontline medical staff and the first responders who continue to serve our communities every day to keep others safe and healthy during this critical time.” The Oxford Fire Department has volunteered to display this “symbol of support” for our essential workers and front line heroes and can be seen each evening after sunset. “Thank you to all those delivering essential services during this unprecedented time.”

**Town of Davidson Faces Gnome Invasion**

To help support businesses in the Town of Davidson, Economic Development Manager Kim Fleming created a program called Gnome Town Hero, where residents could print out a drawing of gnome to add a photo, color and write a special note to post at businesses around town. The town also added #GnomeTownHero to use on social media. Gnomes have a special place here in Davidson, thanks to Tom Clark and Cairn Studios.

The town also shared a story about one of its Public Works employees being a Gnome Town Hero. Streets Crew Leader Jason Pace was at lunch in Cornelius and saw someone in need of a meal, which Jason provided on his own dime. On a
separate occasion, Jason ran into the person again and voluntarily gave the person a sleeping bag, some toilet paper, a reusable bag in which to carry items, and a life straw. Not only does Jason serve his community every day by making sure Davidson is a safe, clean place to live, work, and play, but Jason’s generous heart and his gifts of time and goods proves he’s a true Gnome Town Hero outside of his role with the town as well!

**Fuquay-Varina Raises $121,000 for Local Businesses**

The Fuquay-Varina Angel Fund, a community fundraising project, raised $121,000 to assist the local business community combating the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic in just 14 short days! Grant funds distributed to 56 local, independently owned businesses will be used to pay rent, help with payroll and other critical operating expenses.

The project was started by Scott Quilty, a graduate of the Fuquay-Varina Chamber Leadership program. The Angel Fund launched March 18, thanks in part to a donation of $2,000 by Quilty and more donations from his friends. But as word of the campaign spread – through various forms of communication, including a strong presence on Facebook and daily emails – the fund began to grow.

A $25,000 donation from Bob Barker Company, the nation’s largest detention supplier whose headquarters are based in Fuquay-Varina, helped the cause, as did opening up online donations. The goal had been to raise $100,000, but donations kept coming in – to the tune of $121,000 by the time the campaign ended on April 1.

**Wake Forest Stays Strong**

The Town of Wake Forest started a campaign centered around sending a positive message to area residents. It all began with the hashtag #StayStrongWF which was included on banners throughout the town. The Town organized a series of events to engage the community during the current Stay-at-Home order, including a spirit week, “chalk your walk” week, and window week where residents shared images on social media of themselves dressing up, coloring their sidewalks with chalk and decorating their windows.

**Rural Hall Eggs Homes Across Town**

On Good Friday, the Town of Rural Hall egged 110 yards! Five teams of staff, council members, volunteer firefighters, and their families were blessed to bring a little bit of joy to children, and their parents, in the midst of the pandemic. In less than three days, staff announced “Egg My Yard” inviting residents with children to register their yard; bought and stuffed 2,500 eggs; developed zones and routes; and egged homes bringing Easter cheer to 240 children.
Think Apex Day Turns into a Monthlong Service Project

The Town of Apex typically holds Think Apex Day—a day of community service—on the last weekend in April. But when the Coronavirus stay-at-home orders cancelled the in-person event, the town asked residents to share how they were able to “Think Apex Now.” Residents were encouraged to share their community service projects under the hashtag #ThinkApex, and the town then shared 8-10 stories in a “scrapbook” theme more widely to its Facebook and Instagram accounts during the entire month of April. Residents shared how they were making face masks to donate, supporting local businesses and healthcare workers, and spreading cheer in their neighborhoods. At the end of the month, the town posted a video, narrated by Mayor Pro-Tem Nicole Dozier, that compiled all the Think Apex Now stories and highlighted how residents have come together through their community service. Residents and local leaders #ThinkApe during the pandemic. Photo credit: Town of Apex.

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Southern City 2ND QUARTER 2020 41
The Local Elected Leaders Academy offers programs, workshops, and courses designed to instill needed leadership skills in today’s municipal and county elected officials. Participants will learn how to set and achieve strategic goals, strengthen existing bonds, and facilitate new connections as elected officials.

UPCOMING COURSES AND WEBINARS

Legal Competency for Local Elected Officials
August 12 • Concord

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Coronavirus in the Workplace: A Primer for NC Local Governments
Available free on-demand at sog.unc.edu/coronavirus.

Teleworking Guidance: Best Practices, Sample Policies, and Cyber Security
Download for free at sog.unc.edu/teleworking.

For additional guidance, resources, and pertinent Office Hours discussions with faculty, visit the School’s continuously updated microsite at sog.unc.edu/coronavirus.

REGISTER AT cplg.sog.unc.edu/courses/local-elected-leaders-academy-lela

THINK CREATIVELY ACT COLLABORATIVELY LEAD STRATEGICALLY

Thank you to Prudential for their support of training for elected officials.
## 2019 NCLM HIGHLIGHTS

### Legal
- 200+ legal consultations from 120 cities and towns

### Workers' Compensation
- $22M Total Premium Booked as of 7/1/2018
- 99% Renewal Retention
- 469 Workers' Compensation Trust Members

### Business & Membership Development
- 540 municipal members served by 5 field consultants
- 900+ face-to-face-visits
- 726 CityVision 2019 attendees
- 83 total meetings and events
- $4,549,742.65 delinquent debts collected for 350+ municipalities

### Naturally Slim
- 108 HBT members who signed up for Naturally Slim classes in 2019 lost a total of 444lbs

### Teladoc
- 1,668 individuals have used Teladoc in 2019

### Public & Government Affairs
- Represented cities and towns on 330 bills filed, with over 60 of them critical
- Town and State Dinner: 96 legislators and 373 League members
- Rebrand: all new League collateral
- Municipal Operations Consultants: consulted with cities and towns on finance and budgeting, utility system integrity, etc.

### Property & Casualty
- $22M Total Premium Booked as of 7/1/2018
- 99% Renewal Retention
- 403 Property and Casualty Trust Members
- Total Insured Values increased 14.81%, from $7.2M to $8.3M

### Law Enforcement Training
- Dangerous Crossroads Training: 5 classes, 93 municipalities
- Use of Force Risk Management Training: 5 classes, 68 municipalities
- Active Shooter Training: 6 municipalities

### Risk Management Claims
- 3,483 total claims received in 2019
When the history is finally written, those writing it are likely to conclude that this COVID-19 pandemic and its economic effects posed the greatest challenge to North Carolina municipalities since that created by the Great Depression.

Those living this crisis now have little time for such reflection, as the day-to-day decisions related to how life should proceed and how each community responds to the resulting financial problems ahead leave people focused on the moment.

If there is a silver lining to all this, it is that great leaders and great leadership are revealed and forged amid crisis. Lincoln and FDR did not lead through periods of calm and prosperity, but instead in times of upheaval and great challenge.

I am confident that our towns and cities can and will emerge through this period, despite the current pain, eventually stronger and more resilient. And that result will be because of strong local leadership.

And as you lead your communities through this time, I want you to know that the League is here, committed to helping in every step along the path.

Even as our staff has been forced to do more work remotely, we have connected in ways that further our advocacy and services to our members. A COVID-19 web page, https://www.nclm.org/coronavirus, provides a range of resources and updates designed for members to find advice and contacts that can help better navigate the different issues arising as a result of the crisis.

These include answers to frequently asked legal and human resource-related questions, as well as links to state agency programs and other resources created to help respond to COVID-19.

From mid-March into April and May, we have also arranged a number of virtual meetings – both series and one-off meetings, covering topics from our insurance programs to those involving newly arising personnel issues. A new weekly virtual meeting series, Advancing Advocacy, keeps members up to date on all of the state and federal COVID-19 related legislation and executive actions coming at us in waves, and has seen huge participation by League members.

Finally, speaking of advocacy, we know that making the case for cities and towns before state and federal policymakers has never been more important.

Revenue shortfalls — whether caused by declining sales tax, occupancy tax or utility payment revenue — will be significant, and the effects will not stop with reduced municipal services. Local economies depend on local governments, and their investments affect the health of private sector contractors and other employers.

The National League of Cities, where I sit on the Board of Directors, is working on a national campaign with a North Carolina focus that will make the case for federal dollars to help plug local revenue shortfalls. Here, at NCLM, we will be working closely with our counterparts in D.C. to help them advocate for the necessity of that funding, while also working locally to influence both the North Carolina congressional delegation and state legislators and policymakers.

The goal will be two-fold: Secure new federal funding to going directly to municipal governments to address local revenue shortfalls; and free up previous funding provided by Congress so that it can go to that purpose, while pushing state legislators to make sure that municipalities are then treated equitably when those dollars are allocated by the state.

Doing that, together, with your help, we can ensure the best outcome for North Carolina cities and towns, and allow you to lead your town or city to a better tomorrow.
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LGFCU is invested in what we do here in Kannapolis. I tell every city employee the reason they want to join is because [membership] is a partnership. This Credit Union is for you.”

Addul E.  /  Member since 2016
Kannapolis

A member of more than a dozen community groups, Addul E. supports organizations that want to see his community thrive. After seeing LGFCU help sponsor a city event, he knew there was value in becoming a member.

Visit lgfcu.org/join.