

IUC-NA Webinar Series | Session 5

Cities facing COVID-19: Redefining Public Spaces

The public realm has shifted dramatically as physical distancing dictated by the COVID-19 health emergency has pushed cities to close roads and expand sidewalks. In many places, city parks, nature trails, and beaches remain closed. These changes have had a profound effect on planning public spaces while ensuring social cohesion and promoting economic recovery.

Our panelists from **Austin**, **Merida**, **San Diego**, and **Strasbourg** will explore what this shift in public space means for the future of living in cities.

Wednesday, 10th June, 2020

11:00 EDT / 17:00 CET



Laura Dierenfield
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Director of Municipal Planning Institute (IMPLAN)
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Alyssa Muto
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San Diego, USA



Jean-Marc Penner
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Strasbourg, France



Tricia Hackett
Sustainable Urban Development Advisor
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Moderator

Questions and Answers:

Question:

How are you planning to organize cultural/recreational activities this summer? i.e. festival, music .. etc?

Edgardo Bolio, Mérida

Due to the need to reallocate public budget to solve basic needs, many cultural public events have been postponed or cancelled this coming summer.

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

Currently, festivals and gatherings of more than 10 people are not permitting. Our Public Health Authority has indicated that large special events are unlikely to return anytime soon.

Question:

I am not a city official, but I am interested in hearing about different ways that panelists are currently engaging citizens in redefining public spaces and what kinds of engagement they are planning for the near future and long-term future?

Edgardo Bolio, Mérida

We have a participatory design program for public spaces, that is on hold for the moment. In fact, some of the processes had to be re-designed to introduce virtual conferences, chats, and Facebook meetings in order to finalize design processes.

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

We plan to do outreach through email, yard signs and direct coordination with community-based organizations.

Question:

In this stage, in addition to being a municipal initiative, are there independent groups that are aware of these projects, or support the projects? like cycling collectives or non-governmental organizations?

Edgardo Bolio, Mérida

The most important citizen initiative comes from Laboratorio Urbano de Universidad Modelo. They have made a mobility urban study and made recommendation to authorities. They even called a press conference to present the initiative to all.

Question:

Is any city going to plan purposefully to achieve "non-motorized mobility environments" (15/20-minutes walking from homes to reach public spaces and facilities)?

Edgardo Bolio, Mérida

We are not looking to prohibit cars but to improve conditions for non-motorized environments in certain neighborhoods. Since last year we have been doing so in a specific urban district but now we had the opportunity to present 3 new proposals to the federal government for regenerating neighborhoods, including sustainable mobility design criteria.

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

Given the large land area in Austin, we are very far from that idea in many places in our City. Given this deficit we are looking at areas where we have a lack of public parks for street space measures such as Healthy Street to offer a space for people to get daily physical activity.

Question:

Are citizens already using more bikes instead of cars and or public transportation in your cities?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

Motor vehicle trips are still the majority mode of transportation, but we have heard anecdotally that more people are bicycling. Our public transit system was running on a free service for many weeks following the initiation of orders to stay home, however it has since resumed taking fares. Service is still modified from current levels.

Question:

Most of the new public space - bike and pedestrian lanes - are a result of removing road lanes. What is and will be the impact for traffic?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

There is no operational impact yet. Austin began with 49% reductions in traffic volumes in the early days of our City's "lock down", or more accurately, our "Stay Home, Work Safe" Order from the Mayor. That has increased into the 30% range. As volumes increase, configurations will need to be adjusted.

Question:

Have special measures been implemented in the vicinity of health centers/hospitals? Any spatial restriction for pedestrians or public transport changes?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

We have a route that stops short of a hospital but includes bike lanes to the facility. We have also established a modification for transit whereby the closure allows for buses to navigate through the closure.

Question:

Thank you, Laura. May I ask how you dealt with the issues of theft of barricades in the early days in Austin?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

We did unfortunately have a few of our traffic control set ups (barricade, cone, barrel, signage) go missing. We replaced the missing items within a few hours, and a few days later replaced that set up with a smaller barricade and signage indicating local business access. The missing items mysteriously reappeared on the side of the street a few days later.

Question:

1. Are these changes of the public roads usage being shared with navigation providers vg. Google Maps or Waze? 2. How are these modifications being connected to Emergency Management / Disaster Risk Reduction goals?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

Yes, we coordinated with Google and Waze both. We also coordinated with our public safety partners.

Question:

I would be interested to hear Laura's thoughts on why a lot of the responses to her support poll were either strongly agree or strongly disagree? Was any follow up done to understand the strongly disagrees?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

In Austin we usually do a lot of public consultation with any City initiative, but this time there was zero at first. I think that is reflected in the ~20% of those who do not support the initiative, in many ways understandably so in terms of being taken by surprise in a culture that is more participatory. Austin also has very active engagement generally and to see something supported at 75-77% is unusual. We often have 50-50 on many issues.

Question:

Are you expecting specific investments through urban planning after the covid crisis?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

Yes, our City Council has asked that measures be considered for permanency where necessary and feasible. We anticipate incorporating the concept of "shared streets" into our pedestrian planning efforts which are initiating now in the form of a five-year update to the Sidewalk and Urban Trails plans.

Question:

Are there any other changes are you seeing in citizens' habits?

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

We did see immediate use of the streets as intended. We also took baseline counts and will recount to understand how the street closures have changed use, if at all.

Question:

All new urban plans are good and compliant with environment, my question is: do local government already have enough financial resources to redesign the city? Thanks

Laura Dierenfield, Austin

Funding for implementation of most transportation related planning efforts come from a variety of sources including voter-approved transportation bonds, grants, user fees and proportions of sales taxes to support transit.