



**CLOSED DUE TO
CORONAVIRUS**

FEATURE | Asher Kohn, AICP Candidate

Planning for Essential Workers

Whenever I leave my apartment, as rare as that is, I see signs in windows thanking essential workers—the care, food, and safety labor that keeps my community alive in terrifying times.

These signs are inspiring reminders of how we are all interconnected. They are, or at least should be, a promise to support these workers when it is our turn as non-essential workers to do our share.

As a planner, I am in part responsible for the safety and happiness of the community that turns to me for my expertise. COVID-19 has made it clear that the community includes not only the traditional categories of “residents and business owners,” but also the workers that provide key labor to support those who planners conventionally see as community stakeholders. If we are to thank essential workers, we are also to include them in the communities we work in as we plan for the future.

This might include new and necessary outreach to find what we can do for super-commuting nurses and senior care workers to stay safe. It could also mean taking more active steps to enact code modifications that require social distancing and Personal Protective Equipment in and around the workplace.

Safety, however vital, may be only part of what our community members are asking from us. In order to reimagine what a vibrant community might look like during and after the pandemic, we can ask workers what could

make our communities good places in which to work. The amenities that workers seek may overlap or may contradict what the “usual suspects” at public meetings request, but if we are to include their visions we can at least take their desires seriously.

One of the deep ironies of a planner’s work is how much of their labor is hidden from the people who enjoy it most. How tempting it can be to go down a street and tell people walking their dogs that those building setbacks didn’t just design themselves, you know. The irony goes even deeper during the state’s shelter-in-place orders, when I am physically removed from the places I seek to improve.

This might lend me to a solidarity of sorts with essential workers, who invisibly support a community and its individuals, keeping them alive in the hopes that we can meet each other as strangers in public again one day soon. My work isn’t as death-defying as theirs, even if it can be just as anonymous. What we can do for them, or at least what I seek to do for them, is to thank these essential workers by giving a platform for their voices as members of the communities they serve.

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housing at both the scale and income levels we so desperately need. In metropolitan centers like San Francisco, for example, a decrease in speculative office development could result in more opportunity sites available for multifamily housing, while traditional brick-and-mortar retail spaces could be repurposed as new ground-floor civic facilities.

Though the opportunity to facilitate higher levels of affordable housing development exists in principle, implementing that process may prove difficult in practice. Across the country, municipal revenues are quickly drying up as sales taxes continue to plummet dramatically. A study conducted by the National Association of Counties (NACo) forecasts that the pandemic will result in \$114 billion in lost revenue for counties and require another \$30 billion in response costs through fiscal year 2021.² As municipalities scramble to generate revenue, elected officials may find new housing less appealing given that it is often considered a fiscally neutral land use.

If we are not careful, we may soon find ourselves engulfed in a rift that pits the will and welfare of our communities against bureaucratic fiscal considerations. Our communities require affordable housing, and affordable housing requires significant public investment. When we plan for equity in housing, then, articulating high-level policy objectives and zoning changes is simply not enough. We need to overcome the structural constraints imposed by our tax policies so that we may build resilience and finance improvements at the scale our communities need.

This crisis has laid bare the fragility of municipal governance systems, and as practitioners, we must now enter a period of radical self-reflection to strengthen them.

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References

- ¹ Work situation of adults in the United States during the COVID-19 outbreak as of April 2020 (April 2020).
- ² National Association of Counties, analysis of the Fiscal Impact of COVID-19 on Counties (May 2020).