The University of Texas at Austin
LBJ Urban Lab
Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Getting Urban Economies Back Up and Running after Covid-19
A Ten-Point Action Plan for Economic Development

RICHARD FLORIDA
School of Cities
University of Toronto

STEVEN PEDIGO
Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs
University of Texas at Austin

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As the dreaded Coronavirus rips across the globe, city after city has locked down, transforming urban business centers and suburban malls alike into veritable ghost towns. Our cities can't stay in lockdown indefinitely. The economic costs - never mind the toll on our society and our mental health - is just too devastating.

But the reality is we can't just hit a reset button and revert to how things were before. This pandemic, like all great pandemics, will not end quickly. It threatens to reappear in subsequent waves over the next year to eighteen months, until we find a vaccine or develop herd immunity. The historical record shows that the cities that enforced this kind of social distancing most aggressively in 1918 experienced far fewer cases and had far fewer deaths. Social and physical distancing can work to flatten the curve of the first wave, which will hopefully end in a couple of months, maybe less. Subsequent waves and flare-ups may continue into and beyond next year's flu season, until we develop a vaccine or develop the herd immunity required to fight off this virus.

Even as cities focus on a full-out mobilization of required health and medical resources to cope with the first phase of this pandemic, it is important that economic developers mobilize all available resources to get their communities ready and prepared safely and securely.

To help with this mobilization process, we have developed a 10-point plan, based on detailed tracking of the current pandemic and historical accounts of past pandemics, and conversations with city leaders, health care professionals and economic developers across the country.

1. **Assess Leading Industries and Clusters:** It's not just individual firms but clusters of industry and talent that drive economic development. Some of those clusters are at greater risk than others. Sectors such as transportation, travel and hospitality, and the creative arts will be hit the hardest, while sectors such as e-commerce/distribution, advanced manufacturing for healthcare, food processing and distribution, may grow. Economic development organizations must assess the industries and clusters that are most vulnerable in the short to medium run, evaluate the impacts this will have for their labor markets and communities, and plan accordingly to make their economies more resilient and robust.

   - Create a working group or SWAT team, including economic

development leaders, business representatives and academics and other experts, to work with clusters to identify critical "pain points", supply chain needs, workforce issues and capital gaps, and connecting them with appropriate resources.

- Develop an immediate cluster assessment plan, informed by survey data, roundtable discussions and other data sources, for the industries and clusters. Engaging key partners and understanding immediate gaps will be essential work for the first 30 days of recovery.
- Identify and create appropriate support programs for each cluster and initiative, realizing that these will differ depending on the cluster. A one-size fits-all approach will not yield effective results.
- Reorient staffing resources to support direct cluster outreach. EDOs should have a single-point person or lead for each cluster.

2. **Enlist and Ready Anchor Institutions:** Medical centers and hospitals are on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19, and many are already overtaxed. In the current mobilization, universities and colleges are being called upon to dedicate their dormitories to house medical professionals or even to serve as temporary hospitals and clinics. Together, these eds and meds are key anchor institutions that drive local economies, as innovation engines, as large employers and through their local purchasing.

Economic developers need to be thinking about and planning for how universities and colleges can re-open safely and function in the interim period. One can imagine that universities and colleges may be forced to switch to on-line learning for a longer period. With their dormitories, dining halls, and large classrooms, they are highly vulnerable to the secondary waves of contagion. The key issue is how can we prepare them to open safely? This will require a range of redesigns and retrofits, including temperature checks and health screenings and redesign of dorms, dining halls, classrooms and other infrastructure to ensure adequate social distancing. University researchers can also be enlisted to track local economies and help design the needed retrofits.

- Work with state, federal, and military officials to review and develop plans for converting university facilities to assist with the current health crisis.
- Convene university and anchor representatives to develop an action plan for reopening their facilities safely for on-campus research, in person course instruction and on campus living.
- Engage local anchor institutions to boost local purchasing, to limit unemployment and layoffs, and to eventually boost local employment hiring, to mitigate economic impacts of the crisis.

3. **Pandemic-proof Airports:** Airports are a critical component of regional economies. They connect places to

the domestic and global economies; they move people, good and ideas; are key elements of regional logistics and distributions systems; are key drivers of regional economic growth and development, and are large local and regional employers. They cannot be idled indefinitely. It is critical they are up and running again as quickly as is feasible. To do so will require a mobilization effort like that of the terrorist attacks of 9-11 economic development. That will likely entail adding temperature checks and necessary health screenings to the security measures already in place. It also means thinking about how to reduce crowding and design for social and physical distancing. This can be simple things like stanchions or painted lines on floors, check-in areas, TSA screening lines, baggage areas, pickup and drop-off areas, and redesigning seating arrangements in waiting areas and restaurants to ensure adequate physical distancing. It may also mean making personal protective gear like masks and other items available to airport personnel and ensuring that hand sanitizer is available.

- Partner with local airport authority officials to develop an action plan for redesigning airports for necessary social distancing (adequate spacing for waiting areas, check-in lobbies, and security lines) and health and temperature screenings.
- Engage medical professionals to develop protocols for wellness and health checks and appropriate safety measures,

including use of masks and gloves.
- Evaluate policies for handling of baggage, security checks, boarding and on-ground transportation (public transit access, passenger pick-up, ride-sharing).

4. **Prepare Large-Scale Civic Assets:** Urban centers are also home to other forms of large-scale infrastructure: stadiums, arenas, convention centers, performing arts centers, and the like. Many communities have made extensive public investments in them. Because they bring together large groups of people, city leaders must pandemic-proof these assets as much as possible, too. Audience sizes may need to be reduced in theaters, with seats left open. Masks may need to be required and made available to patrons as needed, and temperature checks carried out. This will be critical for communities that are dependent on such attractions. The sooner such large-scale civic infrastructure can be safely reopened, the faster our urban economies will be able to rebound in the aftermath of a pandemic.

- Create a taskforce to ready regional civic assets for the transition period.
- Bring together local economic development and destination marketing organizations to develop a public awareness campaign about safety procedures and the reopening of assets.

- Consider combining EDOs and DMOs to support community placemaking efforts, in a time when there's dire budget and fiscal constraints.

5. **Prepare and Modify Vital Infrastructure:** As we've seen during the first phase of the COVID-19 crisis, buses, subways, and trains need emergency infusions of cash to keep the systems solvent when ridership is low or nonexistent. When they are back in service, design changes in stations and seating will be needed to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Streets may need some retrofits too. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has called for pedestrianizing some New York City streets to promote social distancing during COVID-19. Some of these changes should be permanent. Cities need to expand and better protect their bike lanes too, while refining bike- and scooter-sharing programs for when public transit is compromised. Sidewalks, especially those in crowded business and commercial districts, may need to be widened to promote needed social distancing. Parks and open spaces have provided a much-needed escape during the current period of social distancing. Play areas and paths may also need some retrofitting to ensure social distancing and safety as we emerge from the shutdown.

   - Partner with transit authorities and state and federal officials to mobilize a retrofit of public transit assets – busses, subway, commuter rail, and stations as required.
   - Create a working group to focus stimulus dollars on required retrofits and redesigns.
   - Address open space retrofits and redesigns and ensure required sanitation and cleaning.
   - Focus place-making initiatives for health and safety. Pedestrianizing downtown areas and neighborhoods, including opening streets for walking, limiting vehicle traffic and widening of sidewalks.
   - Partner with providers to increase bike and scooter shares as needed.

6. **Prepare for More Remote Work:** We are in the midst of a massive experiment in remote work. Most people will eventually go back to their offices, but some workers and companies may find remote work to be more effective. Tulsa, Oklahoma has leveraged this concept through its Tulsa Remote initiative, which pays remote workers a small grant to relocate there while helping them forge community and civic connections. Cities can learn from one another about how to best support the growing cadre of remote workers and make them connected, engaged, and vital parts of their communities. For economic developers, this means that in some cases it may be more effective in the medium run to recruit remote workers more than companies.

   - Create a remote work task force of economic development

organizations and private-sector leaders, especially smaller businesses, and provide access to resources for attracting and managing a remote workforce, with a focus on building social and civic connectivity.

- Focus talent recruitment and retention efforts on remote workers as a key priority for economic development for the upcoming budget cycles.
- Convene telecommunication providers to assess broadband strength and capabilities through regional communities, especially those on the outer edge or in rural settings.
- Develop and promote "virtual placemaking" and networking efforts to ensure remote workers can create a sense of network and community.

7. **Ensure that Main Street Survives:** The restaurants, bars, specialty shops, hardware stores, and other mom and pop shops that create jobs and lend unique character to our cities are at severe economic risk right now. Some projections suggest that as many as three-quarters of them may not survive the current crisis. The loss of our Main Street businesses would be irreparable, and not just for the people whose livelihoods depend on them, but for cities and communities as a whole. The places that have protected their Main Streets will have a decisive competitive advantage as we return to normalcy. Loan programs from government, foundations, and the private sector as well as support

from small business and technical organizations will be essential for ensuring these businesses survive. But communities and economic development organizations will also need to provide technical assistance to these vital small businesses so they can safely reopen and weather the storm of any future lockdowns. Restaurants and cafes will need advice on proper spacing for social distancing and on required compliance with health and safety provisions. Small shops and retailers will need to employ design modifications for spacing and may need to acquire protective gear for some front-line employees like cashiers. Hair and nail salons will need to develop health and safety protocols and also deploy adequate spacing and outfit employees with protective gear as required.

- Establish a small business task force of local, state, private and philanthropic leaders to pursue the creation of innovative small business loan and support programs; at minimum, a two-year horizon should be considered for these programs.
- Create a working group of independent medical professionals (dentists, dermatologists, pediatricians, family doctors, etc.) who are developing and implementing leading-edge health and safety procedures to reopen their own office safely to provide advice and healthy and safety protocols to small business owners especially those in personal care

businesses such hair and nail salons

- Execute a direct marketing and outreach strategy to local businesses and entrepreneurs to ensure they are aware of federal, state and local loan programs, including those from the SBA.
- Deploy a "Made in …" campaign as a means for promoting local businesses and services. Community residents are very much inclined to help local businesses weather this crisis.
- Develop an immediate platform or hub (wiki page or website) for sharing entrepreneurship and small businesses resources throughout the community. Entrepreneurs need a one-stop shop.
- Deploy a business technical resource team to provide assistance on the design retrofit and health checks required to reopen safely.
- Partner with local anchor institutions and larger businesses to commit to temporary local purchasing goals, using the size and scale of these entities to increase demand for local goods and services.

8. **Protect the arts and creative economy:** The creative economy of art galleries, museums, theaters, and music venues—along with the artists, musicians, and actors who fuel them—is also at dire risk. Cities must partner with other levels of government, the private sector, and philanthropies to marshal the funding and expertise needed to keep their cultural scenes alive. Once they are allowed to reopen, these places will also need to make interim and long-term changes in the way they operate. As with Main Street business, cities and economic development organizations must mobilize to provide technical advice and assistance on necessary procedures—from temperature screenings, better spacing for social distancing, and other safety measures—for these venues to continue as part of the urban landscape.

- Establish a creative economy team to assess the impact on the creative economy, to marshal funding for arts and cultural organizations, and to provide technical advice to smaller galleries, independent theaters, and music venues on how to get back up and running safely.
- Convene philanthropic organizations, private donors, and large-scale anchors to create budget support gap measures for creative and arts organizations.
- Create a micro-funding mechanism, similar to Pittsburgh's former Sprout Fund, to support small-scale community arts-based initiatives.

9. **Upgrade Jobs for Front-line Service Workers:** Nearly half of Americans work in low-wage service jobs. A considerable percentage of them—emergency responders, health care aides, office and hospital cleaners, grocery store clerks, warehouse

workers, delivery people—are on the front lines of the pandemic. They need better protection, higher pay, and more benefits. States such as Vermont and Minnesota have paved the way by designating grocery store employees as emergency workers, making them eligible for benefits including free child-care. Having a well-paid cadre of front-line service workers who can keep our communities safe and functional will help protect us from future waves of this pandemic and others that may follow. Having a service workforce that is healthy and protected is likely to provide a vital competitive advantage in attracting business and talent to cities in the future.

- Mobilize, in partnership with employers and state officials, to provide protective gear now and for the long-term for frontline service workers.
- Create a task force of large-scale service employers, grocery stores, delivery services, to provide appropriate wages and benefits, as well to identify best-practices in design for social distancing and the use of protective gear for front-line employees. Work with these groups to disseminate best practices to smaller businesses and organizations.
- Work with employment offices and workforce providers to mobilize to fill employment openings at grocery stores and warehouses and for delivery workers.

10. **Protect Less-Advantaged Communities:** The economic fallout of pandemics will hurt most for the least-advantaged neighborhoods and their residents, who lack adequate health coverage and access to medical care, and who are the most vulnerable to job losses. This, too, is a fundamental issue of both safety and equity. Concentrated poverty, economic inequality, and racial and economic segregation are not only morally unjust—they also provide fertile ground for pandemics to take root and spread. Economic inclusion and more equitable development are critical factors for the health, safety, and economic competitiveness of our places. Cities and local leaders can work with federal and state agencies, community development organizations and local foundations to target needed funds, support services and technical assistance to these areas.

- Partner with economic development officials, community development groups, anchor institutions and local social service agencies to develop a coordinated strategy for addressing and mitigating the health-care vulnerabilities of less advantaged communities.
- Focus the efforts of related initiatives and working groups for anchor institutions, small business and arts and cultural institutions on the challenges of less advantaged areas.
- Focus workforce and placement initiatives on developing training

and job opportunities for residents of less advantaged neighborhoods.

There is light at the end of the tunnel. In a matter of months, our cities will begin to come back to life. In a year or two, we will see a return to a new normal.   Eventually, we will go back to work and school and send our kids on play dates again. We will gather in restaurants and theaters and sports stadiums. In time, our great cities will rise again, as they always have after great health crises and pandemics.

Things however will not just pop back to normal. We need a readiness and preparedness plan for getting our cities and communities back up and running and the time to start is now. What we do over the course of the next twelve to 18 months will matter greatly to the safety of our cities, the public health of our workers, and to our economic rebound.

Economic developers have much to offer to help ready and prepare our communities, businesses and nation to get back up and running safely and securely. We need to mobilize all our resources and capabilities for this effort.

Richard Florida is University Professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and School of Cities, and a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at NYU's Shack Institute of Real Estate. His books include The Rise of the Creative Class and The New Urban Crisis.

Steven Pedigo is a Professor of Practice at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin and the Director of the LBJ Urban Lab.