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# Infrastructure, Technology and Mayors' Priorities for Confronting a Health, Economic and Societal Crisis

 **The Harris Poll**  
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# Infrastructure, Technology and Mayors' Priorities for Confronting a Health, Economic and Societal Crisis: Executive Summary of Survey Results

## The Harris Poll

**Amid nearly universal expected budget declines attributed mostly to the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. mayors are under unprecedented pressure, centered on reinvigorating their city's economy while curbing the spread of the disease.**

**To achieve this goal, their immediate and long-term top investment priority is infrastructure with a focus on technology.**

Most mayors agree they are under more pressure now than ever before (96%) and that the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed how mayors are viewed on the national stage (94%). In addition, reviving/protecting small businesses (85%), declining operating and capital budget(s) (69%), safely reopening schools (64%), COVID-19 cases rising or surging in their area (58%), unemployment rates in their area (57%), and protecting citizens from evictions (56%) are keeping more than half of U.S. city mayors up at night. As they attempt to juggle multiple crises, about half of mayors (52%) say that right now, rebuilding their city's economy is all that matters, and all other priorities will just have to wait.

Nearly all mayors (98%) expect their city's operating budget to decline over the next 12-18 months, with 2 in 3 (66%) attributing all or most of the decline to the COVID-19 pandemic and more than 1 in 3 (35%) attributing all of the expected decline to the pandemic. Most mayors agree that their city's economic recovery depends on containing the virus and preventing/lessening community spread of COVID-19 (94%).

**Mayors' immediate top investment priorities for economic recovery are investing in infrastructure to generate jobs and for economic growth (69%),** expanding delivery of virtual/online city services (63%), finding new tax revenue streams (52%), crisis preparedness and recovery (52%), and creating jobs for the "workforce of the future" (49%). Long term, these priorities

look largely the same, with a notable exception that long-term investment priorities include investing in renewable energy solutions (45% consider it among their top five long-term priorities, versus just 22% who consider it among their top five immediate priorities). Specifically, mayors' top long-term investment priorities are in infrastructure (71%), finding new tax revenue streams (60%), creating jobs for the "workforce of the future" (57%), expanding delivery of virtual/online city services (46%), and investing in renewable energy solutions/meeting carbon neutrality goals (45%).

**Mayors accelerate prioritizing investment in virtual/online city services expansion, smart technology deployment, and creating 'workforce of the future' jobs.**

**As compared to the beginning of the year, mayors have significantly / slightly accelerated many of their priorities:**

- Expanding delivery of virtual/online city services **(90%)**
- Crisis preparedness and recovery **(83%)**
- Reimagining the role of police **(71%)**
- Creating jobs for the "workforce of the future" **(69%)**
- Deploying smart technology citywide to enhance public health and safety (e.g., contract tracing) **(68%)**

**Investment in buildings/facilities still seen as necessary despite the move to online and virtual services. Coupled with a focus on technology and sense of urgency to implement smart infrastructure initiatives to help curb the spread of the virus, reimagining commercial building use will be a priority for many.**

The vast majority of mayors (84%) agree that as people continue to work remotely, it is more important to dedicate financial resources to technology (e.g., 5G, universal WiFi) rather than to commercial buildings. Still, more than 9 in 10 mayors agree that investment in technology to reimagine, rework, change, or adapt how commercial buildings are being used is necessary for the future of their city (97%) and that investment in buildings/facilities is still necessary for their city despite some tasks being conducted online during the COVID-19 pandemic (94%).

Most mayors feel that implementation of smart technologies that connect systems and buildings to enable automated energy distribution, contactless body temperature measurement, improved air quality, bacteria reduction via ultraviolet technology or occupancy density monitoring for safe distancing, among others, throughout cities (including in buildings), will be key to helping curb the spread of the virus and helping employees return to work with confidence when their states ultimately reopens:

In fact, 60% say their city is accelerating the implementation of smart technologies to help them quickly respond and advance healthy and safe workplaces for COVID-19 recovery and re-openings. However, many are looking to the federal government for assistance, with 89% saying that their city needs federal resources in order to implement smart technologies to the degree needed for COVID-19 recovery. And, while these initiatives may be accelerated, actual implementation is still fairly low. Over half of mayors (56%) are interested in implementing sensor technologies for social distancing, though many who express interest are unsure when they could implement it (48%).

Specific investment priorities for buildings/facilities are primarily focused on the basics of keeping people safe from the virus – nearly all mayors (97%) say that ensuring social distancing measures for employees and patrons is a medium or high priority for their operating budget over the next 12-18 months.

In fact, 75% say it is a high priority. Three-quarters also say that being able to monitor employee and patron vital signs (e.g., take their temperature) (73%) is a medium or high priority, though fewer say it is a high priority (31%).

## Mayors:

- *86% agree that it is essential that cities accelerate the implementation of smart technologies to help curb the spread.*
- *89% say that cities need to implement smart technologies to help employees return to work with confidence.*

## Among multiple crises, focus on sustainability/ environmental goals remains, though adjustments had to be made for some.

More than 3 in 4 mayors (78%) say that reducing energy costs/emissions from buildings is a medium or high priority. For roughly two-thirds of mayors, achieving their city's stated carbon emissions goals (68%), investing in electric vehicle infrastructure to support increase in electric vehicles for public transit, commercial, and personal use (68%), and implementing resilient energy projects to respond to power outages and/or weather-related outages (66%) are a medium or high priority. Deploying more sustainable sources of power generation is a medium or high priority for slightly fewer (61%).

While about 2 in 5 mayors (39%) say COVID-19 hasn't impacted their city's sustainability/ environmental goals, roughly 1 in 5 say it has caused them to adopt new measures for these goals (22%), caused them to decelerate their timeline for these goals (22%), or caused them to shift these goals (19%). Few report that COVID has caused them to accelerate their timeline (15%) or increase their budget (5%) for these goals.

## For many, now is the time for investment in transit-related capital projects to address longer-term needs, likely linked to job creation – proving all roads lead back to economic recovery.

Two-thirds of mayors (67%) agree that now is the best time for their city to invest in transit-related capital projects to address longer-term needs, likely linked to a majority (92%) who agree that updating roads, signaling, sidewalks, or tunnels/bridges will help bring back jobs and revitalize their city's economy.

Underscoring this, mayors primarily report that to prevent the spread of infectious disease, their biggest transportation investment priority over the next 12-18 months is roadways (41%). In fact, about 6 in 10 report being interested in creating, expanding, or better protecting bike lanes (60%) or pedestrianizing streets to promote social distancing (59%). About a third (31%) say they are planning to implement the creation, expansion, or protection of bike lanes in the next 12-18 months, with 13% planning to implement it more than 18 months from now and 17% unsure of when they could implement it.

## The COVID-19 pandemic highlights cities' vulnerabilities, but also sparks innovation.

When asked about the vulnerabilities the pandemic has revealed in their city's operation, the most common themes among mayors were:

### 1. Over reliance on sales tax revenue

- "Reliance on sales tax has proved problematic as the revenue has declined when we need it the most" – *Mayor in the West*
- "Tax revenue supported operations receive direct, negative impacts as a result of pandemic-induced job losses" – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- "Lack of diversity in funding sources; dependence on retail sales tax and business taxes and property taxes" – *Mayor in the South*

### 2. Lack of readiness for a work from home workforce

- "So many. Just the lack of staff. We are so flat. Also how we as an organization were not ready for remote working. Finally lack of child care options in our community" – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- "Need to be better equip with technology and ways to complete our function remotely" – *Mayor in the Northeast*
- "We have found that we need to be more flexible with our work force and their schedules" – *Mayor in the Midwest*

### 3. Inequities related to race, homelessness, employment, access to services, etc.

- "Disconnect between police department and minority communities" – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- "The lack of access to Wi-Fi and connectability in our underserved neighborhoods, including the lack of access to tablets and laptops. The general discrepancy between our communities of color and white communities and how they have been impacted by the pandemic" – *Mayor in the Northeast*
- "Infrastructure/equipment age, broadband lack, too many residents at risk of eviction, lack of high paying jobs and too many working part time in service industry" – *Mayor in the West*

And, when asked about the greatest innovations that have emerged from their response to COVID-19, answers ranged from increased participation in board/town hall meetings, to technology innovations, to helping vulnerable populations:

- “Virtual meetings of boards, commissions, and town hall meetings. Participation has skyrocketed” – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- “Implementation of a COVID Risk Dial to gauge spread in the community” – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- “The creation of a dashboard available online that pulls in the data from the four health departments serving our City, so that residents can see the up to date COVID rates” – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- “Virtual recreation programs. We had hundreds of children and their families participate in on-line recreational programs including music classes” – *Mayor in the Northeast*
- “Formation of an effective working group drawn from municipal departments, schools, healthcare providers, and public safety - and public health agencies, so that the local pandemic response was coordinated at all levels and all available resources were committed to the task” – *Mayor in the Northeast*
- “Our Fighting Chance Fund to help small businesses. It has not typically been a role of local government to issue emergency grants to businesses, but we felt it was important that our small business owners did not wait on state or federal assistance” – *Mayor in the South*
- “Scalable technology-based ride share transportation service that we are expanding City wide with Via. It is COVID friendly and we can increase or decrease the service, so we do not have fixed costs, when COVID or some other disaster strikes. Great help in getting citizens to work or school economically and conveniently. One of most successful innovations in transportation in the nation and it began here” – *Mayor in the South*
- “Standing up an emergency homeless shelter in less than 1 month that now houses, feeds and protects more than 60 previously homeless individuals. The broader impact is an inclusive strategy to address homelessness going forward with new facilities and resources” – *Mayor in the West*

**Mayors suggest that help from the federal government and corporations to assist their economic rebound are not only welcome, but necessary to ensure a timely recovery.**

The vast majority of mayors agree that the federal government should be doing more:

- 94% agree that the federal government should provide emergency fiscal relief for America’s cities to mitigate the budget shortfalls resulting from COVID-19’s impact on their local economies.
- 86% say that without financial assistance from the federal government, the ability of their city’s economy to bounce back will be significantly delayed.

All mayors (100%) report that corporations have a role to play in helping to rebuild/revitalize their city's economy, most commonly through capital investments (69%), start-up and small business funding/incubators (61%), and job training (56%).

When asked how, if at all, the role of corporations should change to help meet the infrastructure needs of their city, a common theme was more public-private partnerships or investments:

- "...Corporations can, and should, view public entities as partners to create private developments through, in part at least, public investments in infrastructure" – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- "Willingness of business to sit down and examine our common interests to improve opportunity for growth and sustainability" – *Mayor in the Midwest*
- "Setting agendas for corporations and cities to work together on a shared vision. This would help with future successes and buy in from the start. Having a balance between business interest and city strategy could go a long way in helping cities meet their needs" – *Mayor in the Northeast*

In addition, access to the Internet was another common theme among mayors in regard to how corporations could help meet the infrastructure needs of their city:

- "I think corporations have a role to play in creating the digital infrastructure needed to ensure that everyone in our city has access to broadband and internet" – *Mayor in the Northeast*

Grant funding and paying their fair share of taxes also were common responses for how the role of corporations should change to meet city's infrastructure needs.

#### About the Study:

#### Method statement:

This survey was conducted online by The Harris Poll on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and Siemens U.S.A. between August 24 - September 1, 2020 among 124 mayors of U.S. cities with a population size of 30,000 or more. Results were not weighted and are only representative of those who completed the survey.

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