



Photo Credit: Patrick Perkins

Roanoke Strong

Response - Recovery - Resiliency

July 6, 2020

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Three Stages

On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. On March 12, 2020 Governor Northam declared a State of Emergency for the Commonwealth of Virginia. On March 17, 2020 a local State of Emergency was declared by the City of Roanoke and so began the first stage related to the pandemic. Roanoke is approaching this unprecedented public health and economic crisis within the context of three stages – Response, Recovery, and Resiliency. While each are unique in their challenges and necessary actions, overlap is expected as the community transitions from one stage to the next. Each stage is further explained in the following:

Response

With the enactment of the local State of Emergency on March 17, the City of Roanoke officially initiated its response to COVID-19. As of the preparation of this document, the City remains in the Response Stage while preparing and planning for the Recovery Stage. The Response Stage has included a number of significant actions designed primarily to address the public health needs of the community and the City workforce and secondarily to mitigate economic impacts associated with the virus. Notable actions in addition to the State of Emergency declaration have included activation of emergency operations, closure of municipal facilities and cancellation of most civic events and public meetings, implementation of community-wide extreme physical distancing, alterations in public service delivery, COVID-19 testing and contract tracing, emergency financial support to small businesses and vulnerable populations, municipal expenditure controls, and various policy adoptions.

Recovery

Though we remain in the Response Stage, it is certain that the community will progress into the Recovery Stage at some point in the not too distant future. It is therefore appropriate and necessary to initiate planning for recovery even while continuing to respond to the immediate health and safety needs of our community. The Recovery Stage will be informed by data and guidance from local, state and federal sources. The primary focus of the Recovery Stage will be the “re-opening” of the local economy and municipal operations in a safe manner. The secondary focus will be on supporting recovery of local businesses and impacted individuals. The Recovery Stage itself will likely occur in phases, each building upon the other.

Resiliency

As has been the case historically, Roanoke will face similar challenges in the future that place the community’s health and well-being at great risk. Most immediately is the risk of resurgence of the COVID-19 virus over the upcoming months or even years. Once recovery is well underway, steps should be taken to fortify our community and local economy against similar future shocks, to the extent practical. As the current pandemic has demonstrated, such crises rarely limit their impacts to a single jurisdiction or geography. Actions in this stage therefore must be fully integrated in similar efforts at the regional, state and national levels.

Response

With the arrival of COVID-19 in our community and declaration of National, State and Local States of Emergency, Roanoke began its response to the Coronavirus. As of the preparation of this update nearly 3 million U.S. citizens have contracted the virus and more than 132,000 have succumbed to its affects. Locally, the health impact has been more modest than in many other locales, yet hundreds are known to have contracted the virus and some have perished as a result. Economically, with the temporary closure of all non-essential businesses and the near-complete halt to most economic activities – all a necessary aspect of the extreme physical distancing; the impacts in our area have been as severe as any place in the Commonwealth.

The response in Roanoke has been oriented around the following practices:

Community-based extreme physical distancing – Guided by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and a set of Executive Orders from the Governor, non-essential economic and social activities were halted, residents were encouraged to maintain at least six feet of distance from one another and gatherings in excess of 10 were generally prohibited. These steps were taken to help “flatten the curve”, i.e., lower the number of people exposed to the virus and therefore lower the potential demand for hospital beds and Intensive Care treatment, matching the available capacity.

COVID-19 related testing and contact tracing – Led by the Roanoke-Alleghany Health District, tests have been performed on symptomatic patients seeking care at area hospitals and those engaged in health care work, first responders or long-term care providers. In most instances Health District personnel sought out individuals that may have had contact with someone that tested positive for COVID-19 to alert them and enable self-isolation. Over the course of the Response Stage, the amount of testing has increased and the speed of delivery of results has accelerated.

Enhanced hospital capacity/PPE supply – A primary concern associated with the virus was the anticipated high number of patients needing access to hospitals and Intensive Care services that exceeded the availability of such facilities. This concern is the reason extreme physical distancing practices were employed. An additional concern throughout the Response Stage has been the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers and First Responders. The Governor’s Executive Orders included prohibitions against elective medical procedures to ensure availability of hospital beds and increase the supply of PPE. Though the area initially struggled with the adequacy of PPE supplies, the capacity of hospital beds has not been exceeded throughout the entirety of the Response Stage.

Altered municipal services – Concurrent with the declaration of the local State of Emergency, municipal offices were closed to the general public. Additionally, most public meetings and events were cancelled and municipal employees began working remotely, alternate schedules, and varied work assignments. These steps were taken to ensure essential public services would continue to be provided while contributing to the objectives of physical distancing and employee safety.

In addition to the public health crisis, our community is experiencing an unprecedented economic crisis, where a majority of local economic activity has ceased. This crisis has placed the viability of businesses and the livelihood of residents at great risk. The response in Roanoke to this aspect of the crises has been oriented around the following practices:

Support of Federal Aid – Within weeks of the beginning of the COVID-related economic crisis Congress initiated unprecedented action to support individuals and businesses. These actions included loans and grants to support payroll and other business expenses, increased and enhanced unemployment benefits, increased and enhanced social service benefits, etc. The City has provided support (technical, financial, workforce, and communication) to each of these efforts.

Direct support to individuals, families and businesses – The rapid loss of business activity and income has placed at great risk, our most vulnerable residents for even the basics of safe housing, access to health care and food. A coordinated response to these challenges has been underway for weeks, led by the local United Way. Actions have included food delivery, securing of PPE, emergency assistance with utility bills, etc.

Continued municipal services – Even in the midst of the public health crisis and the economic crisis, it is necessary for the City to ensure uninterrupted delivery of essential public services. Public safety services such as E-911, Fire-EMS, and Police are often top-of-mind when thinking of essential services, however solid waste collection and disposal, social services, and financial management are no less essential in such critical times. These services have continued, altered but uninterrupted, even as municipal tax revenues declined by as much as \$10 million in just three months and as employees faced their own health concerns.

Based upon guidance provided by the CDC and the Governor’s Office, Roanoke is likely to remain in the Response Stage until new cases and hospitalizations begin a sustainable decline. Even as the State reaches this benchmark and the community moves into the Recovery Stage, it will be necessary that many of the actions taken in the Response Stage remain in effect for the near-term.

Recovery

Even as the community continues to respond to COVID-19, it is appropriate and necessary to begin addressing recovery. The primary focus of the Recovery Stage is the “re-opening” of the local economy and municipal operations in a safe manner. The secondary focus will be supporting recovery of local businesses and impacted individuals. The Recovery Stage itself is occurring in phases, each building upon the other. The Governor has issued his “Forward Virginia” blueprint to help guide the Commonwealth on when to safely begin easing public health restrictions and begin moving from response to recovery. Actions, such as those recommended by the Governor are further guided by additional information provided from the White House, the CDC, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (*Public Health Principles for a Phase Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors*), American Enterprise Institute (National Coronavirus Response: A Road Map to Reopening), The National Governor’s Association (*Roadmap to Recovery: A Public Health Guide for Governors*) and adjacent jurisdictions (Maryland Strong: Roadmap to Recovery and Washington, D.C. *ReopenDC*). Roanoke intends on relying upon these and other similar resources to plan for re-opening of the community and municipal facilities in a manageable and safe manner.

The Governor has moved Virginia through the phases of Recovery based in part upon the following:

- 14-day downward trend in confirmed cases as a percentage of overall tests and in reduced COVID-19 hospitalizations
- Testing of at least 10,000 individuals (in Virginia) per day with the capacity to perform the associated necessary contact tracing
- On-going stable PPE supply chain across all sectors of healthcare
- Continued capacity of healthcare system (personnel, beds, ICU, etc.)

As a result the following has occurred:

- Lifting of many restrictions (latest noted in Phase 3 Reopening Guidelines)
- Continued physical distancing
- Continued recommendations for teleworking
- Face coverings required indoors in certain circumstances

The Governor has used task force to develop general guidelines and specific recommendations to assist in implementation of the phases of Recovery.

In Roanoke our Recovery plans have both inward facing and outward facing components. Inward facing components include such considerations as necessary operational and physical adjustments to municipal facilities, budget concerns, etc. Outward facing components include such considerations as individual, non-profit and business support during recovery.

Step 1 Recovery

Inward Facing

Preparing Municipal Facilities for Reopening - A staff working group was assembled to assess what operational and physical changes to municipal facilities may be necessary to reopen to the general public. This working group relied upon the best-available information from public health officials and guidance provided by the CDC and the Governor’s Office and is worked under the Supervision of the City Manager’s

Office and closely with Division Directors, Appointed Officials and Elected Officials. Additionally, the working group accounted for any changes necessary due to expense reductions associated with the FY20 and FY21 budgets.

A reopening plan has been developed with a schedule and action steps identified and included as an Appendix to this document.

Securing the Funds Necessary to Deliver Services – The Budget Committee led by the Director of Finance and under the Supervision of the City Manager’s Office has assembled and worked to balance the current budget, in the face of revenue reductions approaching \$10 million when compared to the adopted budget. This has been largely accomplished through freezing all non-contractual expenditures, implementing a limited hiring freeze, pursuit of targeted savings, and limited furloughs of personnel. Assuming there are no further revenue reductions from the State, FY20 will end balanced with no further reductions necessary.

FY21 Budget Presented – The City Manager presented the recommended budget to City Council and the Public Hearing has been conducted. Adoption of the budget occurred June 15. The proposed budget has been placed on the City’s website.

Operational and physical changes at Municipal Facilities – A staff working group led by the Fire-EMS Deputy Chief, assembled and assessed current municipal facilities and operations to determine alterations necessary to limit the size of gatherings and ensure physical distancing may be maintained by employees as well as customers. This work was informed by any operational adjustments that are required as a result of budget decisions associated with the FY21 budget. This reopening plan has been approved and its recommended actions has been implemented. The plan is incorporated as an Appendix to this document.

Recovery resources identification and implementation – A staff working group led by the City Manager’s Office has begun researching the availability of resources (financial and technical) from governmental and philanthropic sources that may aid our ability to deliver municipal services. This group will continually report their findings to various municipal departments for implementation, where appropriate.

Outward Facing

Small-Business and vulnerable population support – A staff working group led by the City Manager’s Office has begun researching the availability of resources (financial and technical) from governmental and philanthropic sources that may aid in the stability and recovery of local small businesses and those that may struggle financially in our community. This group is securing funds and developing a wide-range of initiatives that will support these interests. To date, this has included funding assistance for small-businesses, homeless assistance, various housing and social service assistance programs, and technical support.

Economic conditions monitoring – A staff working group led by the City Manager’s Office in collaboration with the Roanoke Regional Partnership in supporting an Economic Advisory Panel consisting of representatives from a variety of local economic sectors. This panel is aiding the group in understanding how the local economy is performing through the Recovery Stage, where challenges remain and how we may be able to support recovery and address challenges. The work of the panel will also aid the group in

keeping the City Manager's Office and the City Council apprised of key revenue trends that impact the FY21 budget implementation.

Council Community assessment – The City Council engaged in a direct assessment of community conditions. This assessment involved personal (virtual) conversations with business owners, non-profit leaders, faith leaders, and others to gain a more informed understanding of how those in our community are doing and what struggles they are facing. This assessment will assist the Council in tailoring its responses during the Recovery Stage. The Council reported its findings at its June 1 meeting. The notes from those meetings have been included as an Appendix to this document.

Boards & Commissions – Various Boards and Commissions have begun meeting in a combination of virtual and where practical and safe, in person.

Communication & Engagement – City staff will continue to manage and update the COVID-19 related web page for as long as appropriate. Further, a Recovery-oriented webpage has been developed and will be managed offering relevant information about the City's recovery efforts enabling residents and businesses to communicate and engage with the City.

Step 2 Recovery

Inward Facing

Monitoring and reporting on FY21 Budget – The City Manager's Office will at least monthly present key revenue performance indicators to the City Council related to the FY21 Budget. These indicators will be informed by the work of the Economic Conditions Work Group initiated in Step 1. This information will enable City Management and City Council to determine trends and offer an early-warning system that will enable more dynamic budget management, should additional expenditure controls become necessary.

Service expansion – Based upon continued guidance from the Governor, the CDC, VDH, and others, municipal facilities and programs will continue to reopen and offer additional programming.

Outward Facing

Recovery Fund Task Force – Chaired by the Mayor and Vice-Mayor with Council-selected representatives from a collection of interests, this Task Force will make recommendations about the use of a newly established Recovery Fund (this Fund will consist of at least \$1 million from municipal funds, CDBG-CV funds, State funds, philanthropic funds, etc.) to assist the community in its COVID-19 recovery efforts. This group will be informed by the work of the Council Community Assessment and the various Working Groups initiated in Step 1. The recommendations of the Task Force will be presented to Council for action. This Task Force was established and the Council appointed members at the June 15 meeting. The Task Force has been meeting and it is anticipated they will make their recommendations to Council at their July 20 meeting.

Resiliency

The final stage in the City's efforts advances the community toward resiliency. How will we work to prevent or mitigate similar crises in the future? How will we prepare our community and municipal operations for shocks that might accompany similar crises? How can we continue to strengthen our most vulnerable citizens? How do we reclaim the trajectory we were on before the pandemic – one with a vibrant downtown, strong regional economy, growing reputation as a center of outdoor activities, eclectic local business offerings, etc.?

History unfortunately indicates that a resurgence of COVID-19 is likely and with it, a return of restrictions and enhanced physical separation, just experienced. One recent study, produced by the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota (*COVID-19: The CIDRAP Viewpoint*) highlights that COVID-19 emulates influenza pandemics – four of which have occurred since 1900. This study further outlines three potential scenarios for the future of the pandemic over the next few months to two years. These scenarios range from an on-going pattern of transmissions and cases with no discernible peaks to one that portrays a significant peak in the fall or winter of 2020. Perhaps most significant is the study's statement that even with the presence of medical treatments and a vaccine, it is highly probable that some type of response to COVID-19 will be necessary for the next 18 to 24 months.

This simply highlights the need to prepare for and manage any future outbreaks in our community. Much of what is necessary rests at the State and Federal level and involves our local health care system but it will be necessary for us to support locally any identified public health guidance or requirements – such as enhanced physical distancing, general testing, temporary closures, etc.

Key to building our public health resiliency will be a thorough debriefing of our most recent response – what worked and what didn't? What gaps were noted and how can they be avoided in the future? These efforts will be undertaken by the City's Emergency Management personnel and provided to City Management and City Council. Additionally, in response to the virus, we have radically altered the way we provide municipal services through the use of teleworking, digital access to services, etc. Each of these have the potential of reducing future risks associated with pandemics and may be worthy of retaining as we move beyond the current crisis.

The City guides its actions via a Strategic Plan with strategic priorities accompanied by an Organizational Plan designed to make progress on these priorities. Many of these priorities and their associated initiatives and actions were borne out of the Great Recession and intended to make the community more resilient to economic downturns. These efforts were bearing fruit and it is essential to determine how best to regain our footing and continue progress on these. Our efforts at supporting a vibrant downtown, a new economy built upon health care, bio-medical research, higher education, advanced manufacturing, hospitality and tourism and outdoor recreation must continue. Likewise our efforts at strengthening each of our neighborhoods, business districts and corridors. Progress must continue addressing inequities and poverty – disparities in health outcomes are more important now than even before. Protection and enhancement of our local environment and continued progress toward sustainability must not become a casualty of the virus or the economic crisis. Conversations about how to "reclaim" these efforts should begin as soon as practical and should increase as the community moves through the Recovery Stage, drawing upon our deep network of partners.

Conclusion

COVID-19 and the on-going response to and recovery from remains dynamic and so will the City's approach. This document provides a beginning point for a framework to guide that approach and itself will need to adapt and be revised as more information becomes available and as the situation evolves. Over the course of its 100+ years, the City of Roanoke has faced many challenges, though few as great as that we are currently dealing with. In each instance, we prevailed – we are stronger, more vibrant, more equitable and have greater wealth than any time in our history. The challenge is great but our resources and commitment are as well. By developing a framework, retaining our strategic approach and pulling together, we can be Roanoke Strong!

Appendix:

Municipal Facilities Reopening Plan - The Municipal Facilities Reopening Plan has been included as an Appendix to this document and will be amended from time to time as necessary

Council Community Conversation Notes – The Mayor and City Council conducted a series of focus groups with a diverse set of stakeholders across a variety of sectors in the community. The findings of those focus groups were presented at the June 1 Council meeting and the notes from the conversations are included as an Appendix to this document.

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Resolution – On June 15 the Council approved formation of the Task Force and made their appointments. This Resolution is included as an Appendix to this document

Star City Strong Recovery Fund Task Force Bylaws – The Task Force approved their Bylaws at their first meeting – June 26. The Bylaws are included as an Appendix to this document.