“THAT’S THE WAY WE’VE ALWAYS DONE IT” IS AN OFT-QUOTED response to questions about well-entrenched processes or policies. However, COVID-19 is creating a huge paradigm shift as public professionals are questioning antiquated policies and procedures, changing tactics to address proper social distancing and looking to the future for flexibility as health and safety needs may change. Municipalities are leading the way to a spectacular shift in existing policies and practices. In this “new normal,” the questions regarding how it has always been done versus how it needs to be done in the future is promoting creativity in addressing problems.

The Youth, Parks & Community Enrichment Department for Sacramento, Calif., has embraced many changes due to COVID-19 impacts. As the state of California activated shelter-in-place, city park employees embodied the essence of “making it work.” From the onset, the team is involved in determining which operations — public bathrooms and open space maintenance — could remain open; which could move online, such as classroom activities for seniors and children; and which would be closed due to public health recommendations like playground equipment and team sports. Navigating ever-changing mandates, the team increased their communications through daily internal briefing sessions and weekly meetings with counterparts at nearby municipalities.

With an overall mission to provide as many services as possible, Director Mario Lara stated, “City staff was onboard immediately with impending changes and become a big part of creating new solutions. Their mindset is recreational activities are especially critical during these times, for both physical and mental health.”

One innovative solution was the launch of a free Essential Worker Childcare program for first responders, health care workers and Sacramento’s essential employees. As school districts closed, licensed caregivers were reassigned from shutdown after-school programs to a much-needed child care program in city-owned community centers. Implementing necessary safety measures, children are kept in separate groups of 10 or less.

Mayor Darrell Steinberg stated, “I am proud of our city during this moment in time. We are an organized and committed city, committed to helping everyone through this extraordinary experience known as the coronavirus crisis.”

Automation is key to success
Telecommuting, with a limited return to the office, may be a way of the future for government teams. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, 29% of surveyed organizations will maintain work from home policies for the rest of 2020. On the other side of the
counter, customers are expecting services to be accessible online, as physically entering a public office is no longer the preferred option.

Procurement procedures and contracting for goods, services and construction is an area experiencing great change. Although the city of Pasadena was using an online eProcurement system — PlanetBids — when the pandemic hit, it had not yet been rolled out to the entire organization. The pandemic fast-tracked and condensed a multiyear plan into a four-week timeframe where all bids, RFPs and purchases are conducted online throughout 18 city departments. Combining the capabilities of their eProcurement system with other systems — ProcureNow, Adobe Sign, TylerMunis — additional challenges were addressed, such as wet versus electronic signatures, electronic bid bonds versus paper submittals and site visits being replaced with additional specifications and photos.

According to Erika Estrada, purchasing administrator for the Department of Finance, Purchasing Division, “Our team has worked continuously from the emergency operations center. Having an emergency management module as part of the eProcurement system helped us hit the ground running. We were able to allay our customer departments’ concerns and respond to ever-changing needs with our online systems.”

Pasadena First Buy Local is an ordinance to increase local business outreach activities for participation on city contracts. The online eProcurement system allowed even greater outreach as other agencies using the system openly shared their supplier database. As a result, the city was able to expand new vendor relationships for PPE products and services.

Further up the coast, toward the bay area, the city of Richmond found huge benefits in moving its procurement activities to the PBSys- tem online platform. Prior to the emergency, vendor proposals were submitted in paper formats, bid openings were held in person and contracts were routed manually for signature.

According to Ofelia Alvarez, senior buyer, “We made changes to our policies to address procedural issues caused by the pandemic, while also adhering to ethical public procurement practices. Newly implemented changes have produced positive results. No longer does it takes weeks to route a contract for signature and many paper intensive processes have been eliminated. I can’t envision going back to the former way of conducting city bids.”

Changing cyber-security needs

Most governments have spent a great deal of time and resources to secure their online systems. As public employees now work from home, there is a new focus on security of data and transactions in diverse networks. For example, a common misconception is a password-protected home Wi-Fi network is secure enough to keep transactions and data safe. However, many wireless routers have default settings that can easily be cracked by hackers. A virtual private network for employees to connect to, as well as provide a secure link by encrypting data sent and received, is a new modification in securing a home office. While VPN is one layer of a required security strategy, it does not protect against malware and viruses, phishing attacks, theft, ransom ware and DNS spoofing.

According to Marc Biga, regional director, public sector for Konica Minolta, “There is a pressing need to secure data and agency confidentiality standards as municipalities change their system security tactics. Key considerations may require support for virtual health checks, thermal temperature checks, workplace monitoring, contact tracing, cloud storage and retrieval, incident management tools, security reporting and IT assessments and support.”

To assist municipalities, Konica Minolta created a “Rethink the Future of Work” platform to help employees move into a remote workforce with a toolkit to support collaboration and security.

Budget deficits drive need for new revenues

With the pandemic still raging across the country, a new challenge has emerged — reduced revenues due to the economic shutdown. Many government teams are looking toward proactive ways to continue supporting ongoing operations, maintaining new disinfection and safety standards to address ever-changing demands, all while facing budget reductions.

One typical approach to address budget deficits is to reach out to contracted suppliers and request a unilateral 5-10% cut in contract pricing. A better strategy may be to set up meetings for those larger contracts or areas of spend and share the budget situation with those suppliers. They may offer unique or creative ideas to bridge that gap. For instance, longer warranties, discounted volume pricing, delivery reductions, or possible substitution of certain products lines may serve the same purpose. Small allowable changes in your contracts, not just pricing, could still result in savings.

Municipalities are also becoming creative to further leverage existing revenue sources. Morris County Park Commission has over 3 million annual visitors to New Jersey’s largest park system. With 38 specific sites across 18,704 acres and 150 miles of maintained scenic trails, its mission is to provide memorable experiences. The Commission brought in a professional surplus property company — GovDeals — to create greater efficiencies in disposing of surplus property, while striving to maximize the revenue for no longer needed items. The GovDeals virtual website allows buyers from across the nation to view retired items such as ATVs, golf course equipment, compressors, electronics, tractors, mowers and woodworking equipment. The results? The Commission’s listings have received hundreds of visitors, and it has experienced greater success in selling items upon initial listing.
Elie Aboukhater, client account manager for GovDeals, noted the breadth and depth of items for sale by governments may require a level of expertise to professionally auction for higher revenues. Aboukhater stated, “You would be surprised at some of the items offered for surplus sales. While most items fall into predictable categories like fleet vehicles or electronics, occasionally, we will be tasked to auction special items like artwork or antiques. Requiring special expertise, we often obtain much better pricing than the government entity who may try to sell them on their own.”

**Renting instead of purchasing**

With tighter budgets on the horizon, higher-priced items such as heavy equipment used by park maintenance crews, may be opportunities for leasing options instead of purchase. Renting tools and equipment results in reduced overhead by eliminating the need for storage, maintenance and costly repair. Renting also provides the flexibility to perform seasonal, temporary or specialized work without purchasing equipment that may be used sparingly. Professional rental companies often provide 24/7 support to advise and can train customers on the use of general or specialized tools and equipment.

Natalia Welch, director of government sales at Sunbelt Rentals, said, “As budgets have shrunk in the current environment, we’ve witnessed more government agencies seeking rental equipment information. The idea of renting has become a more appealing alternative to purchasing since it affords flexibility in equipment and tool choices — without the overhead of ownership and maintenance.”

**Cooperative purchasing drives efficiencies and savings**

Finally, exploring the concept of cooperative contracting could be a potential solution. The idea is simple — to use an already solicited and awarded national contract to take advantage of better pricing as more entities leverage their organizational spend across the one contract.

The city of Allegan, Mich., sought to revitalize its riverfront plaza area with a 2,100-square-foot splashpad and over 30 ground sprays and 24 LED lights. To save costs and streamline the process, the entire water infrastructure — $150,000 — was obtained through a NPPGov cooperative contract with Vortex Turnkey. The Perrigo Splash Pad ribbon cutting celebrated the opening of a 100-person splash pad, a zip line over the Kalamazoo River, an 18-foot-long fireplace, additional pedestrian plaza and landscaping. Winning Project of the Year for 2019 from the American Public Work Association, the city recognized that families are pursuing more opportunities for outdoor activities.

As municipalities have been stretched to the limit, the paradigm shift to using cooperative contracts is increasing. Bill DeMars, executive director of NPPGov, a national cooperative organization, stated, “Since the first part of 2020, we have seen a dramatic increase in the use of cooperative agreements. With municipal resources being decentralized and increased volume of pandemic related items being purchased, our NPPGov team has received significantly more calls from procurement professionals to help find a contract vehicle to replace their own RFP process.”

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