



Local Government's Next Normal

Local governments across the United States, and of all sizes, have been experiencing rapid shifts in priorities and work as a result of COVID-19. This survey was designed to better understand how local government work and public service delivery will look different in the future.

There were 386 local government officials and staff who shared their perspective on the impacts of COVID-19 on public service delivery. While 76 percent of respondents represented municipalities, insights were also provided by county employees, state officials, utility executives, tribal nation representatives, and special district staff.

Uniquely, this survey captured the perceptions of local government leaders from small and midsize communities - a group that is underrepresented in public discussions, but very representative of most communities across the country.

Population Breakdown of Respondents

50%

<50K

18%

50-100K

22%

100-500K

5%

500K-1M

3%

1-2M

2%

>2M



32%

West

13%

Southwest

22%

Midwest

19%

Southeast

14%

Northeast

Importantly, insights were provided by individuals from a wide range of roles within local government. Respondents included mayors, city managers, planners, fire chiefs, communications directors, and chief innovation officers. To better understand the data, in some places this report groups individuals into functional roles:

Respondent Breakdown

- **28% External:** This group includes individuals who regularly engage with residents through their work in Communications, Economic Development, Emergency Response, Library, Parks & Recreation, Police, Fire-Rescue, and Courts.
- **25% Leadership:** This group includes individuals who are responsible for overall local government management, including City Managers, Town Administrators along with Elected and Appointed Officials.
- **21% Internal:** This group includes individuals who are responsible for making sure the local government itself runs smoothly through their work in Finance, Human Resources, IT & Innovation, Performance Departments.
- **15% Assets:** This group includes individuals who manage and maintain city assets through their work in Environmental Services & Waste, Public Works, Transportation & Water Departments.
- **12% Development:** This group includes individuals who are responsible for what the city will look like in the future through their work in Development and Planning.

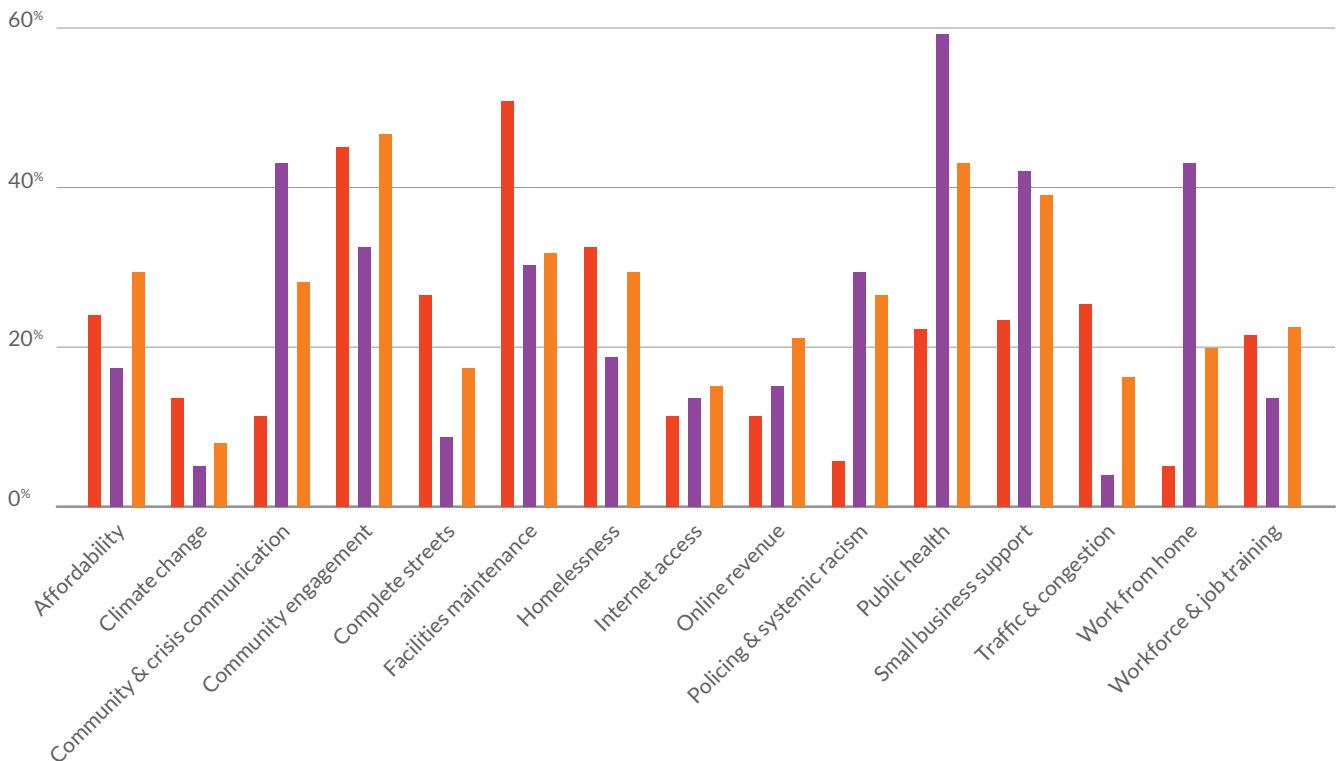
This survey and report are the result of a collaborative effort between ELGL, The Atlas, SeeClickFix by CivicPlus and Route Fifty.

Shifting Priorities

Rapid evolution of priorities reflect an immediate response by local government to address COVID-19 and social justice protests. Across the board, respondents signaled expectations that local government work and public service delivery have been permanently changed.

Impressions of the top 3-5 issues your local government was/is/will be focused on

■ ...6 months ago? ■ ...now? ■ ...one year from now?



Local Government's Next Normal Survey Findings

Things that seem to be highest priority for local governments right now and into the future?

Community and crisis communications, policing and systemic racism, public health, small business support, and enabling work from home.

	COMMUNITY & CRISIS COMMS	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	POLICING & SYSTEMIC RACISM	PUBLIC HEALTH	SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT	WORK FROM HOME
...6 months ago?	13%	44%	8%	22%	25%	7%
...now?	43%	30%	31%	60%	42%	43%
...one year from now?	26%	45%	27%	44%	39%	20%

Things that are likely to see less focus by local governments because of the pandemic? Climate change, facilities maintenance, traffic and congestion, and homelessness.

	AFFORDABILITY	CLIMATE CHANGE	COMPLETE STREETS	FACILITIES MAINTENANCE	HOMELESSNESS	INTERNET ACCESS	ONLINE REVENUE	TRAFFIC & CONGESTION	WORKFORCE & JOB TRAINING
...6 months ago?	24%	14%	23%	49%	32%	12%	13%	27%	22%
...now?	18%	4%	10%	26%	18%	14%	17%	6%	14%
...one year from now?	28%	9%	17%	28%	28%	16%	20%	16%	23%

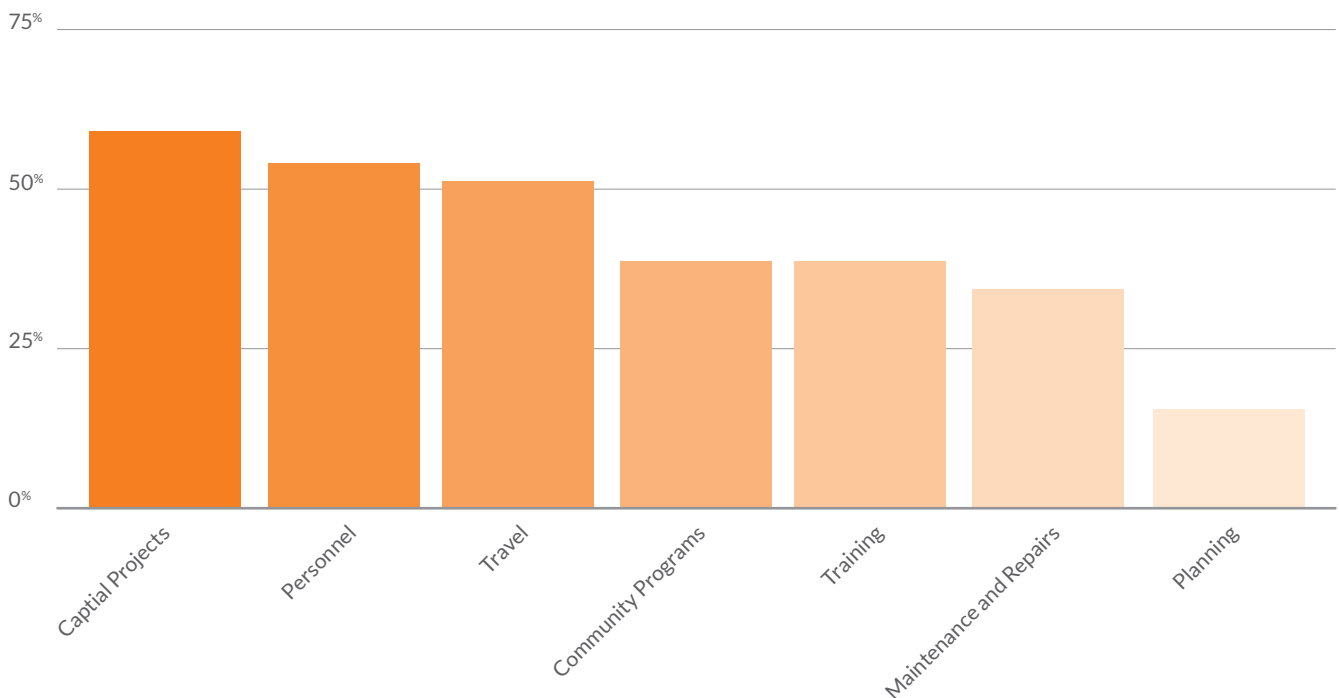
Budget Concerns

Local governments of all sizes are concerned about revenue shortfalls and budget impacts.

94%

94% of respondents believe that their local government budget will be significantly impacted by revenue shortfalls caused by COVID-19 economic impacts.

Top Budget Categories Impacted by Revenue Shortfall



Interestingly, individuals who fall into the leadership group were more concerned about capital project spending being impacted than others (70 percent identified in top three) and less concerned about community programs being cut (only 29 percent identified in top three).

Managing People

Survey findings show that there's a significant impact on local government employees and how they view their jobs and their roles in their organizations. These findings, paired with findings that local governments are seeking technology solutions, indicate that human resources, community engagement, and payroll and benefits should be included in the discussion about what technology can do to assuage the concerns raised about employee leadership development, benefits, and retirements, and morale.

>100K	YES	NO	<100K	YES	NO
Uncovered new leaders?	60%	40%	Uncovered new leaders?	46%	54%
Increased retirements?	50%	50%	Increased retirements?	30%	70%
Improved morale?	18%	79%	Improved morale?	9%	90%

A majority of respondents in smaller communities indicate that “new leaders” have been uncovered during the pandemic. A large percentage of respondents (70 percent) in larger communities say that planned retirements may be put on hold, likely due to concerns about the effects of COVID on the economy and retirement portfolios.

Responses from both large and small communities indicate that employees aren't doing well: morale has been significantly impacted due to concerns about COVID, constantly changing headlines and news, and new and revised working scenarios.

Silver Linings

While closed offices have exacerbated some existing challenges in local government, respondents report that they have also opened the door for new leaders and expanded use of data-driven decision making especially in mid-size and larger local government organizations.

>100K	YES	NO	<100K	YES	NO
Broken down department silos?	43%	57%	Broken down department silos?	31%	68%
Increased data-driven decision making?	58%	42%	Increased data-driven decision making?	49%	51%

Software and technology adoption has increased in the last few months and will continue to accelerate.

95%

More than 95 percent of respondents shared that their city used software to maintain service levels during the pandemic.

Types of software/tech used by local government during pandemic.

75%

Community engagement & communications

58%

Payment & revenue capture

56%

Forms

54%

Permitting

44%

Citizen request management

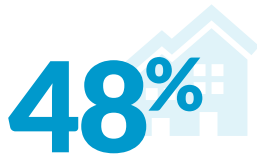
17%

Asset management

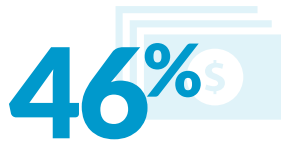
76%

Seventy-six percent say their cities will adopt more software to streamline public services moving forward. Respondents expect projects that move forward in the next twelve months will be focused on enabling work from home and flexible schedules, online revenue capture and payment, and community engagement and communications.

Anticipated future software/tech projects



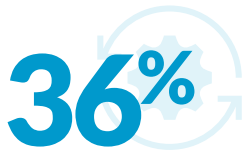
Work from home & flexible schedules



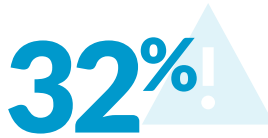
Online revenue & payment capture



Community engagement



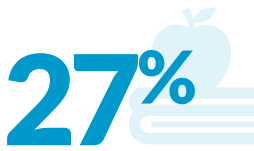
Public service workflow



Community & crisis communications



Internet access & digital divide



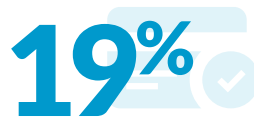
Public health & wellness



Workforce & job training



Small business support



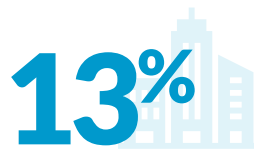
Affordability of services



Data privacy



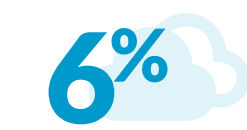
Facilities maintenance & modifications



Policing & systemic racism



Homelessness & affordable housing



Climate change & GHG emissions



Traffic & congestion



Complete streets

80%

Approximately 80 percent of respondents believe that the shift from paper to digital processes will be permanent and bolstered as a result of this global pandemic, with 80 percent believing that software that promises savings (e.g. staff time) has become more attractive since March. That sentiment is strongest when asking leadership.

When asked, “What do you hope will be a positive thing for local governments that comes out of this pandemic?” respondents had varied responses but many were optimistic.

“Piloting new ideas that previously were not widely supported by decision makers, such as on-street parklets. We’ll be able to gather more information about whether this is an idea to pursue after the pandemic.” - Community Development Director small midwestern city

“Better communication and collaboration with other nearby local governments.” - Community Development Director small midwestern city

“A desire to explore newer tech and take more risks.” Director of IT Innovation, a small northeastern city

“Focus on equity and vulnerable populations.” Director of Communications, midsize southeastern county

“Oh, and Zoom meetings—let’s keep those! And meetings that could have been an email are now emails, so also a good productivity shift.” - Director of Operations, a mid-size western city

Conclusion

Like much of the world, it's clear that local government and public service delivery will look a lot different because of COVID-19. While there are still many challenges ahead as local government organizations adjust to the next normal, there are early signs that local governments will come out of this stronger, smarter, and more sustainable.

Continue the Conversation

Share your takeaways from this report. What surprised you? What's consistent with what you're seeing in your organization? Tag us on Twitter and let's continue the conversation!

[@ELGL50](https://twitter.com/ELGL50)

[@TheAtlas4Cities](https://twitter.com/TheAtlas4Cities)

[@SeeClickFix](https://twitter.com/SeeClickFix)

Media contact: Elle Hempen elle@the-atlas.com

Sharing of results: survey findings may be shared freely with attribution.