

# the PACOG News

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Pennsylvania's Keystone for Intergovernmental Cooperation

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## PACOG

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## COVID-19 Pandemic Effects on PACOG

### PACOG 2020 Annual Conference Canceled

In an abundance of caution, the PACOG 2020 Annual Conference, that was to be held at the Wyndham Hotel in Gettysburg October 16 & 17, was canceled. Our conference was going to be held in conjunction with the PSAB Fall Leadership Conference, but the PSAB Conference was also canceled.

This was a difficult decision, but the health and safety of our conference attendees, speakers, and staff was primary. We made the determination based on medical data and hopefully, to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The annual conference was our yearly opportunity to reconnect with old friends and make new friends. We shared success stories and applauded each others' successes. We also commiserated with one another over challenges that many times did not quite meet the definition of success. But we always came away from the conference with new-found knowledge and a sense of camaraderie.

Even though there was no conference, we can still continue building relationships, working together, helping one another, and living up to the PACOG tenets of Communication, Collaboration and Cooperation.

### PACOG 2020 Spring Board of Delegates Meeting Canceled

The Spring PACOG Board of Delegates Meeting, originally scheduled for April 17 at the Centre Region COG building, was also canceled.

### No PACOG Summer 2020 Newsletter

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, access to the PACOG Office to produce the PACOG Summer 2020 Newsletter was restricted, and no Summer Newsletter was issued.

### PACOG 2020 Fall Board of Delegates Meeting to be Remote

The Fall PACOG Board of Delegates Meeting will be held via a telephone conference call on Friday, October 16, 2020 at 1 PM. Additional information, including dial-in instructions, will be sent in an email.

**Let's embrace the PACOG 2020 Conference Theme – "Facing the Future" – and move forward into 2021 with renewed determination.**

## COG Talk... What's Happening in Our COGs?

**Capital Region COG (CapCOG)** has been active. They applied for a 2020 SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) grant which would provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter organizations to help them increase or maintain the number of trained, "front line" firefighters in their communities. They also held another successful Annual Surplus Equipment and Vehicle Auction in July. The COG is currently sending 2020-2021 Salt Bid Participation forms to members, with an August 28 due date. Their annual Picnic and Golf Tournament will be held in September.

**Beaver County Regional Council of Governments (BCRCOG)** held conference call training and posted applications on their website for the Municipal Support Program of the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) County Relief Funding. A comprehensive PowerPoint presentation detailed aspects of the CARES Act that provides funding for a variety of programs intended to alleviate the impact of COVID-19. It also detailed PA Act 24 of 2020 that distributed CARES Relief Funding money to the 60 PA counties that did not receive it directly. In August, BCRCOG held an in-person, socially distanced Delegates Meeting in a local park, with guest speakers talking about Beaver County's broadband and infrastructure initiatives.

**Warren County Municipal Secretaries/Administrators** September meeting will feature four presentations: Warren County Broadband Task Force and COVID 19 Update; the Warren County Visitors Bureau; Internal Financial and Management Controls for Small Organizations; and a Homeowners Guide to Stormwater Management.

**SEDA-COG** is helping businesses, nonprofits and small businesses in their area counties to apply for COVID-19 relief funds. It is also reminding residents that CARES funds to repair or replace their home heating units were available to income-qualifying residents. In addition, Centre County has contracted with SEDA-COG to administer its Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. SEDA-COG's Community Development program had administered its competitive CDBG funds, and this new contract allows the agency to administer Centre County's entitlement CDBG and Coronavirus Response funds.

The **Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC)** has a new executive director, Vincent Valdes, who replaced Jim Hassinger who retired. Mr. Valdes brings to the job more than 20 years of experience with the Federal Transit Administration. His experience will enable him to take over a federally mandated agency that is required to review and prioritize transportation projects in 10 counties and the City of Pittsburgh.

## Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR)

DCNR has undertaken a phased reopening of Pennsylvania state park and forest facilities in keeping with Governor Wolf's guidance and direction. All DCNR lands including trails, lakes, rivers, streams, forests, roads, and parking areas are accessible statewide for recreation; however, the availability of facilities and offices varies.

A number of state parks and forest recreation areas are seeing significant crowding during the weekends and when the weather is warm. The extraordinary number of people is causing these places to turn away visitors. Overflow parking also may be closed to help ensure proper social distancing. Visitors planning to go to these areas are encouraged to find other less crowded locations for recreation.

The Bureau of Recreation and Conservation is updating their Communications and Outreach Plan for 2021. They are asking municipal officials and other persons to complete a brief survey about their outreach efforts and professional development needs.

## **PennDOT Allocations**

Letters were mailed in July to counties and municipalities who were eligible for the following PennDOT allocations: County Liquid Fuels Tax Fund; Act 89 (Counties); \$5 Fee for Local Use (Counties); and State Police Fines and penalties (Municipalities).

These letters notified the parties of the date of the payment and the amount. Municipalities and counties should have received their payments in June.

## **Personally Identifiable Information**

It is very important to protect personal information in the office and at home, in order to reduce the risk of data breaches or identity theft. Be careful who you share information with, be sure you know the people you are sharing with, and ask questions before sharing. Store and dispose of personal information securely and maintain appropriate security on your computers and other electronic devices.

Personally Identifiable Information (PII) is any data that could potentially identify a specific individual. Examples of PII are: Social Security number, Driver's License number, Passport number, Tax ID number, financial account information, passwords, credit or debit card numbers, etc.

PII should NEVER be used in the subject line or body of an email, an attachment, or a scanned document. When sending an email, you don't know how many networks/servers the message will pass through, or who has access to them (e.g. hackers), on the way to the recipient. Emails on your computer could potentially be accessed by a third party or, you could send the email to the wrong person. Anything containing PII should be sent encrypted, mailed via the post office, or sent via fax. Many fax machines reside in public areas within an office environment and they are not secure. You should always confirm that the recipient of your fax is the only person who can see it. Additional security tips can be accessed at <https://cybersafework.com>.

## **New Telephone Area Code**

Area code 582 will be the new overlay area code for the current 814 area code, covering all/parts of 27 counties across Central and Northwestern Pennsylvania. The 582 area code number will be assigned to new telephone numbers once the available supply of number in the current 814 area code is exhausted.

The Public Utility Commission (PUC) noted that the biggest adjustment for residents and businesses in the 814 area will be switching to "10-digit dialing," which will be require to dialing the area code plus the 7-digit telephone number for all calls.

The PUC approved a timetable to implement the change. Residents and businesses should voluntarily start 10-digit dialing for calls in the 814 are code on October 3, 2030, and 10-digit dialing will be required by April 3, 2021. The new overlay area code will be placed into service on May 1, 2021.

The 814 are code was established in 1947 and is one of PA's four original area codes. It is the largest area code in the state and the last to undergo changes because existing phone numbers have been exhausted.

## **PA One Call**

During the COVID-19 shutdown, the Pennsylvania One Call System has remained fully operational to provide support to their members and construction and design partners. Most staff are working from home, including the call center, which continues to take calls for dig tickets.

The liaison team is working together on a series of team calls to improve programs and presentations to make sure they include the most up-to-date information and are as user friendly as possible. The team has also hosted almost 60 webinars, which have had over 900 participants. More webinars are planned for the future.

Pennsylvania 811 is announcing the launch of their new newsletter **B4 U DIG**, that will highlight best safety practices and provide information on how the PA 811 System can assist members with managing underground construction projects and dig notifications, from project conception through design and construction.

## Enacted Legislation

- **Act 9 of 2020** – required the state Department of Labor and Industry to **waive the 1-week waiting period, job search, and work registration requirements for unemployment compensation under the governor’s COVID-19 declaration.**
- **Act 10 of 2020** – **extended payment and filing deadlines for the state personal income and local earned income taxes until July 15.** Also provided monies for the purchase of pandemic equipment and supplies to applicable entities.
- **Act 20 of 2020** – provides **disability benefits to first responders who contract or are diagnosed with COVID-19 or are subject to quarantine due to exposure to the virus.**
- **Act 26 of 2020** – amends Title 35 providing a special \$50 million COVID-19 grants for Fire and EMS.
- **Act 34 of 2020** – **amends the Sewage Facilities Act changing the approval process of alternative sewage systems.**
- **Act 46 of 2020** – **amends the Assessment Code to provide for the assessment of manufactured homes.**
- **Act 57 of 2020** – requires creation of **a database to maintain records on law enforcement officers.** An employer must disclose applicant employment information when a law enforcement agency is conducting a background check of a potential new hire.
- **Act 58 of 2020** – amends the Urban Redevelopment Authority Act **to provide municipalities with the ability to create a redevelopment authority.**
- **Act 59 of 2020** – **requires the Municipal Police Officers’ Education and Training Commission to train police officers on:** suspected child abuse; the use of force, including deadly force, de-escalation and harm reduction techniques; trauma, including PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder); and an evaluation of PTSD by a licensed mental health professional.
- **Act 61 of 2020** – allows local taxing authorities to provide a tax exemption for up to 10 years for any improvements and new construction on **blighted properties in mixed-use areas.** The amount of the exemption would decline by 5 to 15 percent per year, before expiring after the 10<sup>th</sup> year.
- **Act 69 of 2020** -creates a new program establishing the **Statewide Critical Incident Stress Management Program;** providing for duties of the Secretary of Health and the Department of Health; further providing for immunity from civil liability; and, an emergency medical services system, further providing for support of emergency medical services.
- **Act 76 of 2020** – amends Act 511, **Local Tax Enabling Act,** prohibiting the levying, assessment or collection of an amusement or admission tax based on a charge imposed for the movement of passengers by a for-profit railroad based on certain criteria.

## Pending Legislation

- **SB 494** – would provide a process for a municipality **to contract for services after the municipality has advertised a bid for services but the municipality did not receive any bids.**
- **SB 1068** – would amend the PA Constitution to allow the General Assembly **to remove an elected municipal official for neglecting their duty to attend meetings.**
- **SB 1110** – would require the Secretary of Health or local health authority to **release identifiable health information** to 911 centers, law enforcement officers, fire department personnel and emergency medical services personnel in a county under a proclamation of disaster emergency by the governor that is based on a communicable disease, and for those public safety entities to follow all applicable laws, regulations and confidentiality standards.
- **HB 1069** – would amend the Sunshine Act to require a public agency (including boroughs, townships and cities) to **post public meeting agendas no later than 24 hours prior to the start of a meeting.** The agenda would have to be posted on the municipality’s website (if applicable) and copies would have to be

made available to meeting attendees. The bill would also prohibit municipalities from acting on official items that are not on the agenda unless added by a majority vote.

- **HB 2536** – would authorize local governments to **issue tax anticipation notes for two years, rather than just one year**, so they can maintain operations.
- **HB 2619** – would clarify provisions of Act 15 of 2020 to ensure that **municipal boards and commissions, in addition to municipal governing bodies, would be allowed to meet remotely during emergencies**.
- **HB 2672** – exempts traffic signal contracts, paid for with Liquid Fuels dollars, from bidding requirements.
- **SB 1222 & HB 2743** – would allow local governments to utilize their website for public notices in lieu of a newspaper of general circulation.

### Disaster Declaration

Governor Tom Wolf signed a second renewal of his 90-day disaster declaration for the COVID-19 pandemic August 31. He originally signed it March 6. This emergency disaster declaration provides for increased support to state agencies involved in the continued response to the virus and recovery for the state during reopening.

The declaration allows for waivers and extensions to continue, including: waiving the one-week waiting period for unemployment compensation, work search requirements, and the registration with PA CareerLink for applicants; suspending numerous training requirements/certification/ licensure renewals for health care professionals, child care workers, direct care workers, direct support professionals, among other professional groups who provide life-sustaining services to our children, seniors, and vulnerable residents.

The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) has been able to assign the National Guard to provide various types of support for long term care facilities, including providing direct patient care support, ancillary support, and testing, and at community-based testing sites. It also provides PEMA with the ability to leverage continued federal support such as non-congregate sheltering.

The renewed disaster declaration will continue to support all of these efforts, as well as allow PEMA to rapidly scale response efforts and employ new intervention tactics, such as the administration of a vaccine.

The Department of Health's Department Operations Center at PEMA continues to be active, as is the CRCC there.

### Policy Committee Hearing

On Monday, August 31, Representative Joe Ciresi hosted a House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing with a focus on local governmental efficiency and shared services. PACOG was invited to serve as a panelist, and PACOG 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President, Gary Myers, from Capital Region COG, participated.

During the teleconference call, Gary shared with the policy committee the value of COGs throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He explained how joint ventures, shared ideas, and shared resources all create a significant savings for municipalities, and ultimately, the taxpayer. He noted that legislation to encourage and offer financial support to intermunicipal joint efforts would further strengthen and enhance COGs.