The response to the spread of the COVID-19 virus has caused widespread strain on our communities, families and individuals. As humans, our natural response to dealing with collective stress is to come together and to support each other in community. The need to maintain physical distance during the spread of the virus can make this crisis a uniquely lonely one.

As such, our public realm has rarely been more important. It is now seen as an even more essential support system for physical and mental health. Our parks, streets, sidewalks and front yards are re-asserting themselves as the most important venue for social life. And yet, all of this must take place at a safe physical distance.

This moment requires us to find creative solutions to support the health of our communities by reimagining our built environment. The crisis caused by COVID presents us with unique challenges we must address, but also incredible opportunities to create a better world now and for after the virus subsides.

This rapid response toolkit, commissioned by Hennepin County, is crafted to support your provision of safe public spaces that foster healthy and active communities. In particular it provides:

- Specific and creative ideas for how to use public space, streets, and private spaces to solve problems and realize opportunities
- Processes to implement those ideas
- Tips for how to overcome obstacles
- Messaging for internal and external parties
- Links to additional resources and case studies

As the societal situations are constantly changing, the toolkit will be released in iterative versions to reflect emerging community needs. This is Version 1.0 of the toolkit. Version 2.0 will replace version 1.0 in the upcoming weeks with a final 3.0 version available in July. To ensure we are as responsive to your needs as possible, we've created a short survey for those involved with public spaces, parks, streets, bike and pedestrian transportation, and active living to fill out and guide future toolkit editions. And, last but not least, thank YOU for all that you are already doing and will do to support the physical and mental wellbeing of your community during this time.

3 | Create and expand bike and pedestrian pathways along existing streets

5 | Allow small scale, resident driven, street closures that can go on for days or weeks at a time

7 | Re-imagine the WHY behind your event(s) to repurpose them from destinations to traveling and dispersed (COVID safe) festivities

9 | The front yard offers the perfect venue to support COVID safe socializing, activities, and walking destinations

11 | General Resources
How can we provide enough COVID-safe pathway space to accommodate all the new walkers, runners, and bikers?

Create and expand bike and pedestrian pathways along existing streets:
Close streets and/or convert car traffic lanes to bike/ped only pathways

People staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a dramatic increase in pedestrian and bicycle activity. MnDOT has found a 51% increase in such activity over the past month with regional parks and parkways seeking increases between 140%-300%, paired with a 70% decrease in car traffic. With these increases most pronounced at regional parks, spatial densities between people are shrinking to distances not deemed safe for COVID-19 containment.

As such, more space for pedestrians and bikers needs to be created in order to reduce public health risks and support positive behaviors in doing so. This strategy should be applied both to existing regional destinations to handle current demand, as well as in more local contexts. This in turn will create more safe and appealing places that reduce the need to seek out regional destinations for walking and biking experiences.

Process/Action:

- For parkways and regional pathways: convert one or more lanes designated for cars into bike and/or pedestrian pathways. If the street needs to still have car traffic, consider converting it into a one way street and/or removing a lane in each direction if there are 4 or more traffic lanes to start
- For non parkways, identify streets that have been in closed in the past for things like Open Streets, 5k fun runs, parades, and block parties as a starting point
- If objections arise around public safety, advocate for a weekend specific pilot to test the concept on a route, rather than a longer closure
- Try to create loops for people to use, as these are more enjoyable and get more use - at a safe distance! - than spur paths
- With these path loops (or spurs if needed), connect useful destinations such as your commercial cores, parks, school yards, libraries, parking facilities, and senior living facilities
Create and distribute signage (yard signs will do) about which users can use which parts of the new alignment all along the pathway. Use clear, direct messages about how you want users to use the space and why the street is open.

Post information about the new network, either as a website link or as additional physical signs. Delineate closed traffic lanes and streets using construction cones. On existing busy pedestrian trails, consider creating one way routes to reduce proximity.

Delineate closed traffic lanes and streets using construction cones

On existing busy pedestrian trails, consider creating one way routes to reduce proximity

Engage with residents about where they wish the pathways would go

Collect data - even in a rudimentary way, as capacity allows. Do user counts at multiple one-hour occasions. The app CounterPoint is an easy platform to track your count.

Close lanes temporarily. Cities already have the procedures and equipment to do so since they close lanes temporarily for developers, tree trimming, etc.

Resources/Tips on Obstacles:

- List of street closures for COVID worldwide
- Minneapolis Parks and Recreation's Road Closure Guide
- City of Minneapolis' Stay Healthy Streets
- Streetsblog: How to Open Streets Right During Social Distancing
- Tactical Urbanist's Guide to Materials and Design
- NACTO
- Open Streets Initiative
- Slow Streets
- National Parks and Recs Association
- Rails to Trails Closing Streets Article
- Managing COVID uncertainty through walking
- Milwaukee Active Streets
- Minnesota Guide to Lane Closures
- Brooklyn Park's Resources for Parks

Messaging:

- We can’t force people to stay at home, if people want to do this relatively safe activity, we need to provide accommodations that make it safe
- Creating more bike and pedestrian pathways is a public health measure to reduce the spread of COVID
- Initial lane and street closures will take place on streets that the public (and public works) are used to having closed for events
- Signage will be placed at frequent intervals to educate pedestrians, bikers, and drivers
- Local traffic and emergency vehicles will maintain their ability to access all areas as needed
- Easy to move and remove equipment will be used, so that if any issues arise, adjustments can be made quickly
How can we provide COVID-safe places and activities for youth and seniors now that many programs are cancelled and dedicated spaces closed?

Allow small scale, resident driven, street closures that can go on for days or weeks at a time:

Make National Night Out into Every Night Out

With the widespread closure of community centers, camps, and public spaces, youth and seniors alike are in dire need for activity alternatives that are COVID-safe. For youth in particular it is unreasonable to expect them to stay inside their house and yard (if they have one) all summer. Providing accessible spaces for them to exercise and socialize safely is essential. If these needs are not met, it is likely that many will engage in far riskier behavior in order to have their exercise and social needs met.

To solve this challenge, one resource that every community can leverage are their low-traffic residential streets. At least once a year on National Night Out (NNO), thousands of block-long stretches of street are closed to through traffic and converted into places that support socializing, games, cooking, eating, and hosts of other activities. By using existing NNO presidents, residential streets can easily be converted into large public spaces that can support resident driven, COVID-safe distance socializing, physical activities, and entertainment like concerts and outdoor movies.

Process/Action

- Create a clear criteria for what streets are eligible for apply, guidelines for residents for these spaces while they are closed, and ongoing assessment metrics while the permits are in affect
- Reduce or eliminate street closure fees for this purpose
- Define eligible uses and activities within the closed streets
- Consider bringing programming that was to occur in public parks, libraries, and community centers to these locations
- Create a public announcement via email lists, Next Door, and other community channels. Be sure to have communications that are crafted and delivered in a manner that is relevant to all population groups. Also send out correspondence to apartment landlords
- Use and donate city-owned cones and signs to delineate street closures
Resources/Tips on Obstacles:

- Stay Healthy Streets
- Minneapolis National Night Out
- Open Streets Toolkit
- Play Streets Program in Los Angeles
- Edina's Activity Challenge

Messaging:

- COVID-safe spaces and activities are needed for our community's youth and seniors
- The safest spaces are those located outside, in close proximity to where people live, with ample space per user
- This program is based on the existing National Night Out model of street closure and permitted uses
- Local traffic and emergency vehicles will have uninterrupted access to all streets and residences at all times
- If these spaces are not provided, then youth (in particular) are far more likely to engage in riskier and unsafe behavior
- Social isolation for all people, but especially seniors, has serious negative side effects on physical health

- Have local police and regulatory officials check in on locations to ensure compliance and continued access for local traffic and emergency vehicles
- Create signage for these spaces that calls out the rules, safety guidelines, and a sense of invitation
One of the hardest hit sectors due to the coronavirus has been events. Every day more and more events are being canceled to keep as many people as safe as possible. However, many of the events that are being canceled are key to helping us stay connected to each other and build community.

While canceling or postponing your event may be the best solution, we also need to return to event design and ask why we started the event in the first place. That way, we can evaluate if it’s possible to reimagine our events to meet our attendee and community needs. By rediscovering the why, empathizing with attendees, and reimagining the experience, we can create safe and creative alternative events until we can return to the gatherings that are so important to our communities.

**Tips for shopping the Mpls Farmers Market**

1. Maintain Physical Distance
2. Shop quickly and efficiently
3. Avoid touching. Let the vendors serve you.
4. Wash and sanitize
5. No sampling or eating on-site. Take-away only!
6. Follow arrows indicating one-way traffic
7. Limit 1–2 people per household
8. Pre-order or order online for faster service
9. If needed, we will limit the # of customers allowed into the market
10. Wear your masks

Photos sourced from Minneapolis Farmers market

**Process/Action**

- **Gather your event team and stakeholders for a few hours to map out the following:**
  - Break your event down to its purpose:
    - Once you have defined your audiences, progress to empathizing with them:
      - What benefits are they seeking?
      - What would they lose if this event didn't happen?
      - What are their fears and obstacles?
      - What is worrying them?
      - What are their expectations about this event, what investments does an attendee make for this event beyond cost?
  - **Map out your event experience journey:**
    - What moments of interaction are there before, during and after the event?
    - How do each of these moments achieve your why?
    - What are make or break moments during your event?
• Events are all about change, you want an attendee, vendor, or partner to be different than before the event.
  o What change do you want to happen for the attendee based on your event?
• After you’ve reexamined your event’s purpose, now it’s time thinking creatively about how you can still achieve your goals, your re-clarified “why”:
  o The traditional event model that draws people to a single location at one moment in time likely doesn't work in COVID conditions, so how can event elements be adjusted so that they do?
  o Turn event features around: have the event go to where people are, lengthen the duration of the event to lower densities of people, enlarge the event venue size.
  o Reimagine parades as a mode of celebration - bring the party to the people!
  o Consider if your event can work as a drive thru/pickup only. Items can be purchased online before, and attendees can signup for pick-up and drop off times.
  o Drive-ins are returning - often as pop ups, consider this for events like movies or concerts.
  o Rethink of your event as linear/one way where attendees move through the event while social distancing instead of lingering
  o If awards are given, can those people and organizations be honored through signage, digitally, public art,
  o Fireworks offer a compelling experience for large groups of people at COVID safe distances
  o Assess if your event can go virtual and achieve all of its goals
  o If you can't reasonably meet your goals, think through whether you should cancel or postpone the event-
  o When able to have gatherings again, manage density with a ticket system

Resources/Tips on Obstacles:
• Virtual event Resources
• WHO Mass Gathering Resources
• Event Brite Coronavirus Event Tips
• CDC Event Planning Resources
• Event Design
• How the Minneapolis Farmers Market is Shifting
• Drive-in Brunch Concerts
• Minnesota Guidance for Farmers Markets

Messaging:
• Send out a community survey to community members and event vendors and stakeholders asking how people are doing and their thoughts on your event
• Be empathetic in any cancellation/change messages to show you understand the impact of the event.
• Communicate with vendors, key event stakeholders first before sending out messaging to attendees, and be transparent and clear.
• Express that safety is a priority and that the guidelines from the governor will inform all decisions.
• Inform attendees that you are returning to the “why” and purpose of the event before you make decisions about moving forward.
With people confined to their homes, how can front yards be used to create more social, vibrant, and healthy communities?

The front yard offers the perfect venue to support COVID safe socializing, activities, and walking destinations.

Create a vibrant COVID safe community one front yard at a time

With the stay in home order in place, we have lost the ability to easily congregate with neighbors out in our community. While the virus presents a significant health risk to society, so does the impact of the social isolation required to stem its spread. There has rarely been a more important time to get creative in how we create community to support each other and care for ourselves.

One of the easiest and most proximate ways we can safely foster social life is through reinhabiting our own front yards. Making just a few changes to your front yard with minimal supplies, you can turn your front yard into a welcoming community hub, where you safely stay connected to your neighborhood.

The front yard offers the perfect venue to support COVID safe socializing, activities, and walking destinations.

Create a vibrant COVID safe community one front yard at a time

Process/Action

- Promote the safe use of front yards through email and social media
- Use the Friendly Front Yard approach and toolkit as a free resource
- Hold and promote porchfest events
- Yards as a staging ground for new communal traditions like sing alongs, mini parade viewings, garden tours, socially distant socializing, play areas, grilling, and more.
- Expand upon the little free library concept to have pantries, cleaning supplies, PPE, and message boards
- Use them as a forum for creative and inspiring lawn signs
- Create mile markers along the boulevards to encourage walking and biking locally
- Host front yard movies and concerts that bring neighbors together at a safe distance
- Celebrate great front yards in your community to inspire others to act
- Encourage people to convert grass into more pollen and watershed friendly landscapes

Messaging:

- We all need to stay home and stay safe, however we can still connect with our neighbors through our front yards.
- No matter your resources or your time, if your yard is large or small, grassy or paved, a friendly front yard will help create community, safety and connection.
Many people focus on making their back yard an inviting space, but more than ever we need ways to safely connect to one another. Your front yard is an underutilized space that you can use to connect with your neighbors. You might be thinking, I don’t have the resources to make a friendly front yard! However, if you can do just one thing, put chairs in your front yard and sit outside. When people walk by, you can safely strike up a conversation or even just wave and smile! Use creativity to come up with your own ideas. We’ve seen rocks for kindness, chalk art messages, and custom lawn signs.

Resources/Tips on Obstacles:

- Friendlyfronts.com
- Little Free Library
- Metro Blooms
- Edina RE Ctivity boxes
General Resources
The best of what we have found to help you navigate this transition

Public Spaces

- CDC- Resources for Parks and Recreational Facilities
- Minnesota Safe Routes to School Newsletter
- Rails to Trails Conservancy
- National Parks and Recreation Association
- Walking Tour App: PocketSights
- Webinar: Who gets access to public space?

Placemaking and Design

- Friendly Fronts Toolkit
  - The Friendly Fronts Toolkit will inspire and guide you and your neighbors to turn your front yards into places where you serendipitously meet one another while staying safe.
- Placemaking for Main Streets Toolkit - The Musicant Group:
  - A step by step guide to generate positive social and commercial activity for any type of commercial center. With its focus on process, it provides useful frameworks that can help navigate this time of COVID and afterwards.
- Friendly Storefronts Toolkit - The Musicant Group:
  - A step by step guide to transform storefronts into activity centers that support businesses and community life. Similar to the Main Street Toolkit, its focus on process makes it relevant for these times of COVID and afterwards.