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State of Canadian Municipalities Amid COVID-19 Survey Results

Your World Amidst a Global Pandemic



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Executive Summary

Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of municipal governance, Municipal World, in partnership with The W Group, conducted a study of municipal leaders across the country to explore the unprecedented challenges, reactions, and solutions that have been experienced during the pandemic.

Over 850 municipalities participated, with 50% of respondents representing municipalities with populations of 10,000 or less.

50% of respondents were mid or senior-level management with more than 15 years of experience and 21% were elected officials. All provinces were represented with 52% responding from Ontario, 15% from Alberta, 10% from British Columbia, and 8% from Saskatchewan.

The objectives of this unique, open-ended question study were:

To Explore

Insights and innovations that resulted during these unprecedented times and through uncertain and uncharted waters are presented in this report.

Findings included examples of the resiliency of leaders, staff, and the public.

Examples that demonstrate flexibility and adaptability, and reflect the responsibility taken by all are key themes throughout.

New opportunities have been uncovered with some short-term changes leading to long-term impacts on policies and practices in a positive way.

To Learn

To Share

There was high agreement across the board that remote working policies, as well as flexible working arrangements, were going to be here long-term and those organizations that were skeptical in the past of the effectiveness of remote working are now advocates.

The question related to the impact on municipal budgets provided an interesting assessment of both negative and positive pressures on budgets – even without government grants.

The critical need for communication at all levels and throughout the pandemic was resounding, as was the need for improved and continuous planning and the adoption and leveraging of technology.

“Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste”

This statement, credited to Sir Winston Churchill when approaching the end of World War II where he found opportunities in the midst of crisis, has been used as a lead-off question in this very unique survey of municipal leaders.

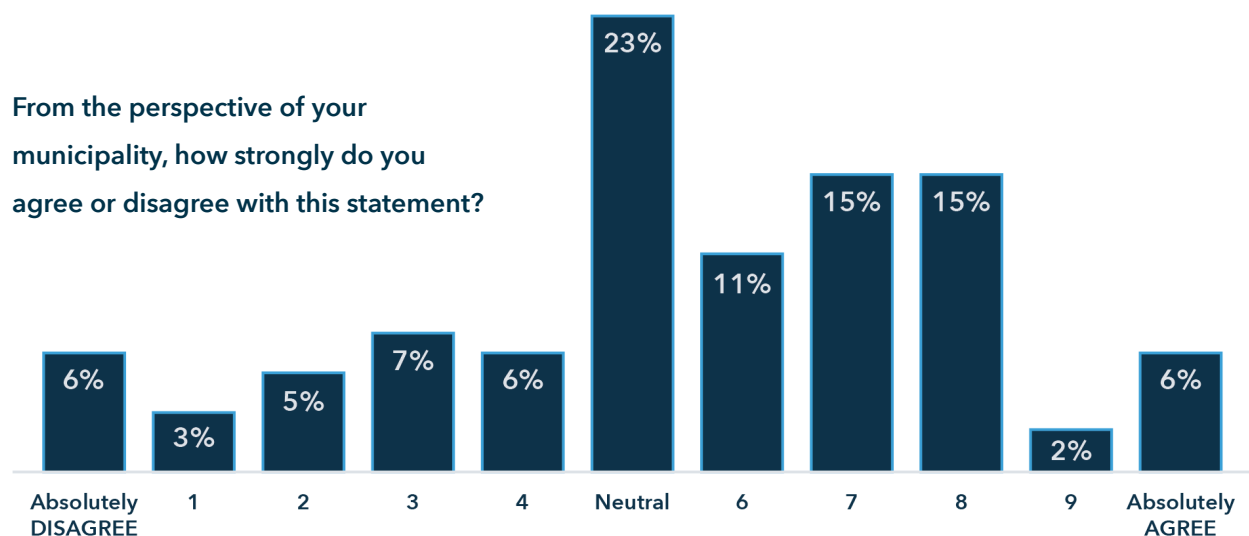
In response to whether leaders are using this current situation to move their teams to find opportunities that they would not have otherwise, 50% of respondents stated they “agree” to “absolutely agree” with this statement.





Evidence suggests that many leaders are putting the pandemic to good use by using the current situation as an opportunity to have tough conversations on policy, budget, or historic trends that would otherwise not be given the same administrative or political attention. The attitude of “don’t let a good crisis go to waste” is being applied to many areas of our municipal business. When the dust finally settles on COVID-19, we may find ourselves – organizationally – in a much better place.

From the perspective of your municipality, how strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement?



Total Respondents: 856. Excludes Not Applicable.

Tips for Action

Communications, flexibility, and adaptability proved to be the top three areas that participants felt their organizations had responded well to and that they would suggest to others as their “tip” or action item for responding to such a unique situation.

70% responded that communications were most important – in general; internally and externally; consistently; and regardless of the depth of message.

While some said there was not enough consistent communication as things unfolded, others said that there is better communication between departments and coordination “across silos” as a result of their organization’s communications activities during this time.

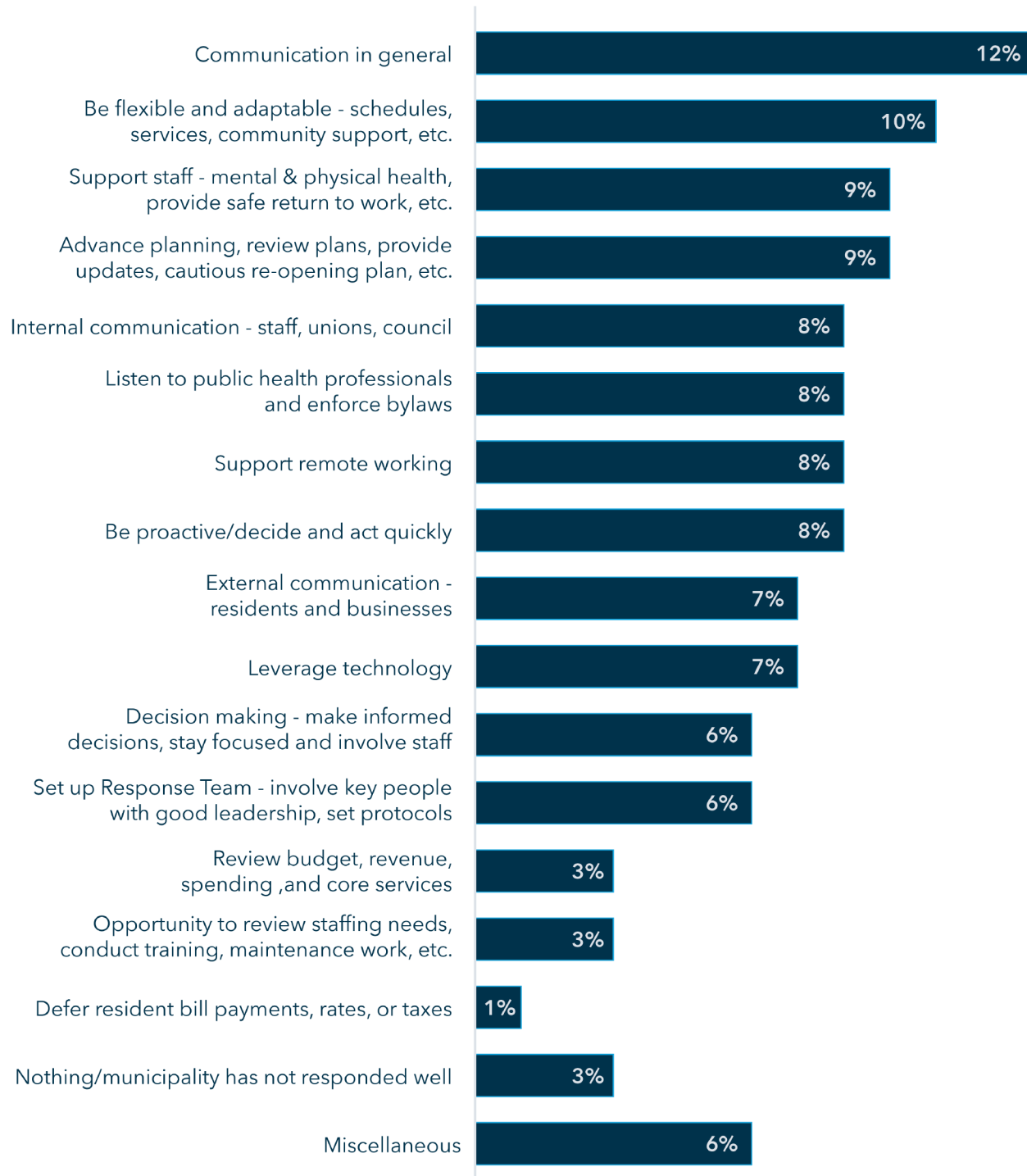
Statements that were made related to flexibility and adaptability mentioned key areas such as schedules, services, community support, remote work support, deferment of payments, and of course the importance of supporting staff from both a physical and mental health perspective and for planning and providing a safe back to work plan.

Areas where there could be additional opportunities were related to planning, decision making, and the leveraging of technology.

“Make sure you have a business continuity plan in place that will look quite different for a pandemic.”

“We have not embraced the technology that we have to virtually engage citizens or the organization beyond the legal minimum.”

Looking at areas where you feel your organization responded well, what one tip or action item would you recommend to others?



Total Respondents: 461

Will Any Short-Term Changes Become Long-Term or Permanent?

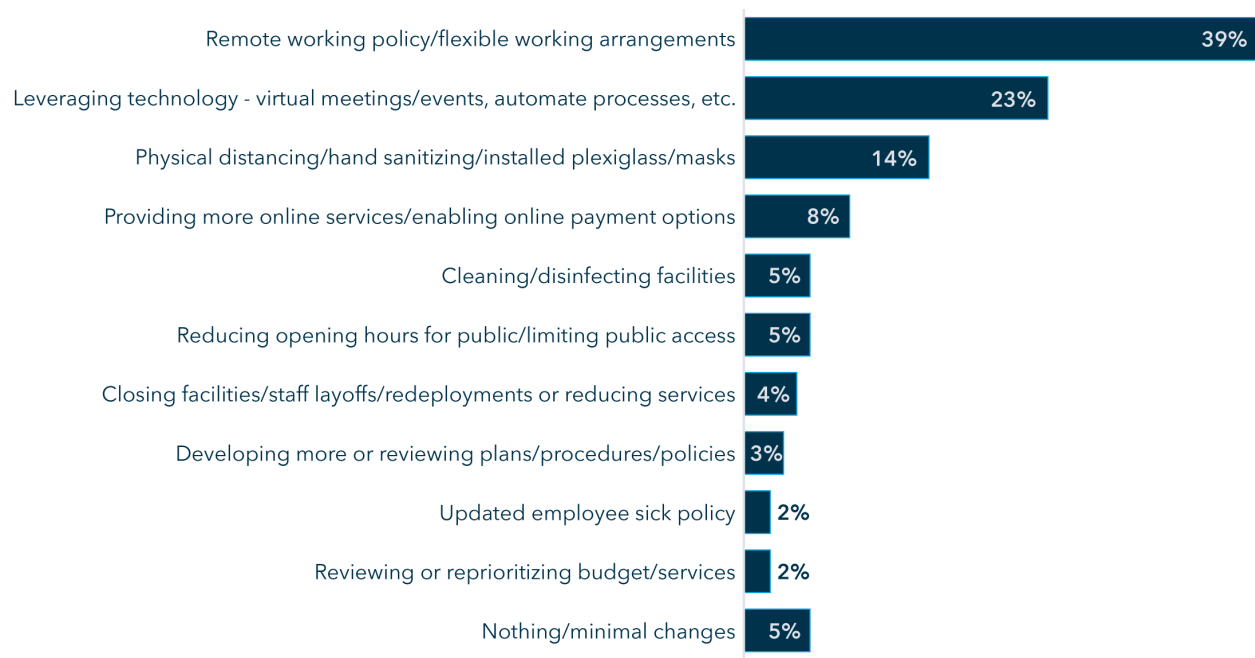
Unequivocally, remote working and flexible working arrangements were the response to what short-term changes will become long-term and/or permanent practices.

"How quickly our staff adapted to remote working was a welcome surprise. We anticipated that there would be some major hurdles, but none showed up."

Next considered to be of most importance is the leveraging of technology to hold virtual meetings and events and to automate processes and services throughout municipalities (government and administration levels).

"Early in the pandemic, the mayor conducted a series of live online Q&A events to discuss the situation and how the municipality was reacting. Uptake was very good."

What short-term changes you have made to deal with the pandemic environment do you think will become long-term and/or permanent?



How Has the Pandemic Impacted Your Budget?

“There have been huge impacts to budgets, many cuts have been made; however, savings have been realized as well.”

Inasmuch as this pandemic required an immediate response to changing circumstances, comments made related to the effects on municipal budgets were not as dire as expected.

Respondents reflected on favourable budget impacts caused by less travel, less paper, lower facility, and space requirements along with the rationalization or reduction in staff and the availability of pandemic-related government response grants.

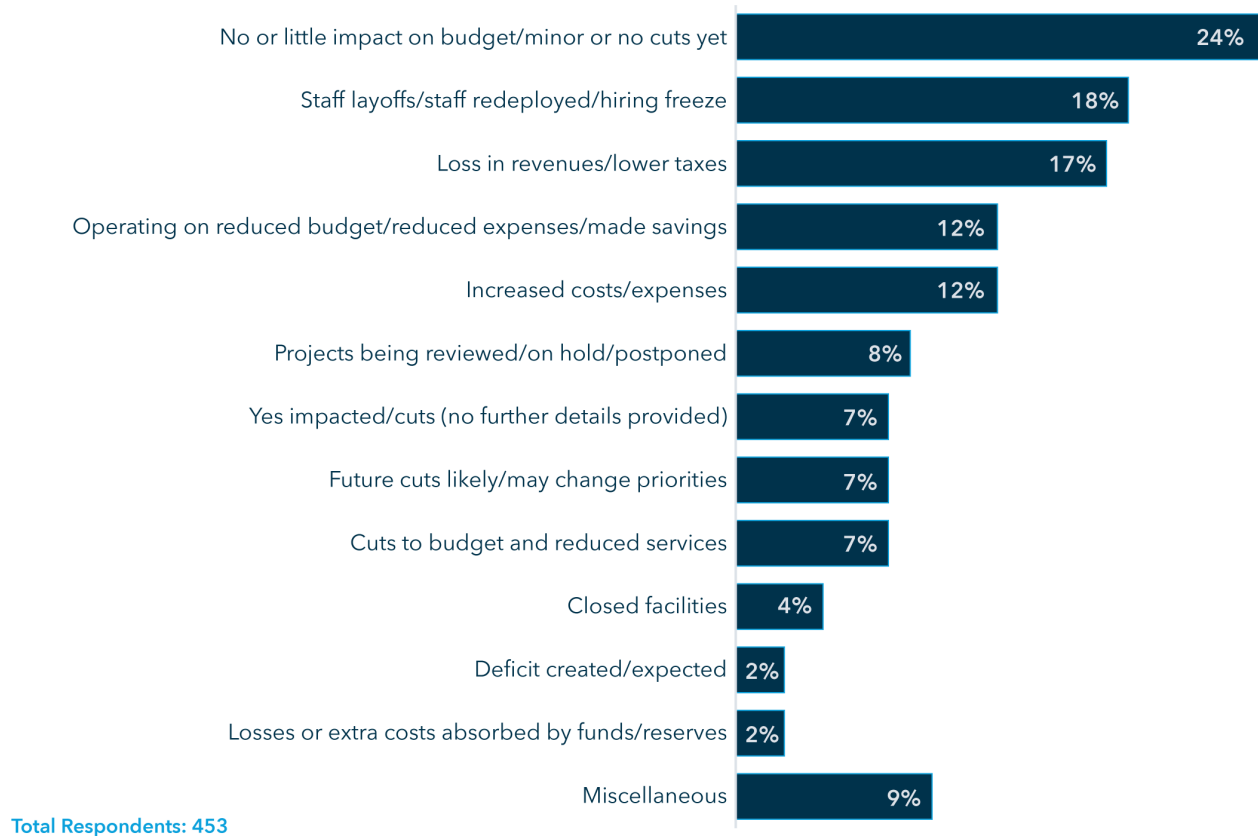
Unfavourable budget impacts were primarily related to the loss of project and program revenues and customers’ ability to pay and, to a lesser extent, the cost of enhancing technology onsite and at remote sites, increasing staffing (cleaning staff), and the requirement to purchase personal protective equipment.

“We applied for emergency response grants, which have really helped with the PPE expenses within our municipality, and also allows us to provide all of our businesses within the community signage, sanitizing cleaners, and disposal masks for all of their customers.”

For those municipalities without transit or recreation, the additional cost of providing all safety measures has been the largest impact on their budgets.

One respondent felt that the pandemic provided an overall opportunity as reflected in the comment: “municipal budgets needed to be reimagined – so it’s timely and I think the municipal structure is long overdue for an overhaul.”

How has the pandemic impacted the municipal budget and have you had to make any cuts?



Lessons Learned

Four key themes emerged in the question “biggest lessons learned.”

Communications

Internal Communications:

- the need for formal communications plans related to the issue of identifying the leaders responsible;
- the need for continuous communication throughout the event (regardless of the level of information); and
- the need for consistent communications within and amongst departments throughout the event.

External Communications:

- the need for alternative public meeting options (electronic); and
- the need for alternative public communications (email, social media).

Planning

All things related to advanced and regular planning was the second most important lesson, including:

- contingency plans;
- risk plans/playbooks;
- security planning;
- emergency response plans; and
- communications plans

Human Resources

The following key statements are reflected observations related to human resources:

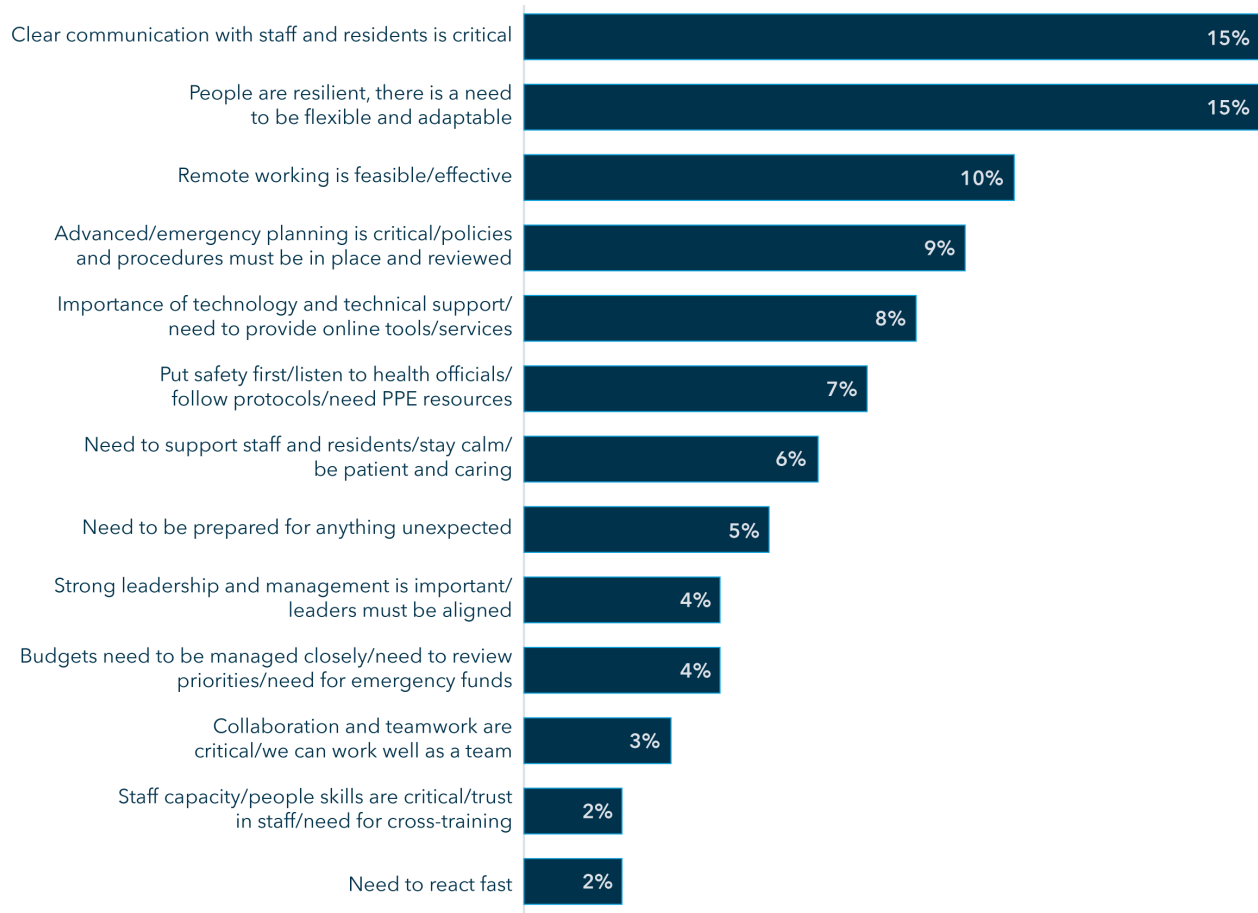
- Understanding how resilient staff is in the face of extreme challenges.
- Acknowledging how flexible and adaptable staff is and that the adoption of new practices, such as remote working, can be employed and trusted.
- The requirement for leadership to be aligned and to remain calm, patient, and caring.
- Due to the increased demands on staff, cross-training and broadening job portfolios, along with an extreme understanding of the impacts these changes will have on job performance, is critical.

Technology

Technology became a key driver throughout this pandemic, as reflected in these statements:

- The importance of technology and technical support.
- The importance of responding quickly to source and implement technology in new situations (onsite and remotely, internally, and externally).
- The importance of adapting to new ways of doing things using technology at all levels.
- The potential challenges faced with internet availability in rural areas.

Overall what do you believe are the biggest lesson(s) learned by your municipality through this experience (so far)?



Preparing for the Next Wave

Even though communication has been at the top of the “learnings” throughout the study, planning came out on top in terms of preparing for the next wave of the pandemic.

Developing new plans, reviewing current ones, and continuing the work of wave one while implementing lessons learned were top of mind for close to 50% of respondents.

The practice of remote work will remain in place as will the health practices and safety protocols as guided by the public health authorities in each province.

Staying informed, maintaining open communications, and staff training and education are also key steps in municipal plans.

What steps is your municipality taking to prepare for a possible second wave?



Total Respondents: 319

Final Thoughts

Do you have any other comments regarding how your municipality has responded to or managed issues related to COVID-19?

"We were able to turn on a dime and didn't miss a beat; we had a strong digital and technological presence already; a forward-thinking, strategic approach prior to the pandemic left us well-positioned during the crisis."

"Cannot stress enough that a clear, unified message to the public and your employees are crucial."

"There is no manual, everyone is learning at the same time."

"The Human Resource side was a learning experience. Adaptability was key for all staff in order to continue working through the pandemic. Without it, we would have laid off more staff than we actually did."

"While we are not sure what the municipal landscape will look like post-pandemic, it seems clear that it will have been permanently altered, both positively and negatively."

"It has highlighted our lack of resources."

"Proud of early response and continued safety measures for staff and public, willingness to adapt to constant changes in the world landscape."

"Interesting difference between elected officials and administration regarding the impact COVID has had on staff that have been expected to adapt and deliver services."

"Very impressed with the resilience of staff, council, and the organization as a whole."

"All said, it went fairly smooth. My next concern is PTSD and getting being back into the new normal."

Total respondents: 151