



Public-Sector Working Space May Never Be the Same



Katherine Barrett & Richard Greene

One way the pandemic has changed the way state and local governments do business is that many are reconsidering past capital plans and strategizing for future changes in facility and office needs. “In my world, this is the topic of 2021,” Brian DeForest, the chief administrative officer for the State of Oregon, said. “We’re now putting together a basic framework and rubric as to what our buildings need to look like and how many we need.”

“People are starting to question—do I really need this space? Everyone is trying to figure this out,” said Keith Fentress, president of Fentress Inc., which has performed facility planning and office pre-design services for 1,500 local, state, and federal government facilities for more than 33 years.

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governments are currently studying these issues and surveying managers and employees to see how the future of remote work will change real estate needs. There are clear incentives: the significant savings that can flow from reducing necessary maintenance; cutting the size of custodial and upkeep staff; whittling down energy costs; and—where buildings are not owned by states or localities—eliminating rent.

Some initial signs of change are coming in cancelled building or expansion projects.

Pine County is a small county in Minnesota. Tight budgets and a revised review of telework led leaders there to abandon \$3 million in courthouse expansion plans last year. Before the pandemic, the county planned to add office space in its 12-year-old courthouse to accommodate approximately 60 human service

workers who were being moved out of a 100-year-old former courthouse building.

The expansion plan was ditched following the county's experiences in 2020, which led to a greater acceptance of telework and newly revised state rules that reduced the need for in-person meetings. Now, only 20 of those human service workers have assigned space in the new courthouse, and the rest will work remotely and come into the office when needed.

The decision has not only helped the county avoid costs but also improve recruitment and retention through the increased flexibility offered by remote work, according to David J. Minke, Pine County administrator

Similarly, a little more than a month after stay-at-home orders went into effect in March, plans to build a new \$39 million parking garage in Salem, Oregon, were cancelled. Even in its early stages, the pandemic had provided a "proof of concept" that not all workers needed to drive into their office jobs every day. "If we don't have to commute everyone down to Salem on a daily basis, a new parking garage is not necessary," DeForest said.

The drive to cut down on office space is not new. Many companies in the private sector have embraced the idea, giving up individual employee offices and setting up "hoteling" space—providing workstations, lounge areas, and conference rooms that can be used by teleworking employees when needed.

The State of Tennessee has long been the best-known proponent of this new approach to work life in the public sector. The state undertook its "Alternative Workplace Solutions" initiative in 2016, with select departments agreeing to allow employees to work from home or in the field. Central offices were transformed to eliminate most individual personalized office spaces,

and lockers were provided for the personal possessions and employees who were coming into central offices only when needed.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, the state had eliminated approximately 375,000 square feet and saved \$5 million in real estate costs. Even so, many Tennessee agencies were reluctant to jump in, preferring to keep their teams operating full-time from a central office location.

This reluctance has now ebbed away, as it has in many organizations that were leery of having employees who could only be supervised from a distance. Early in the pandemic, a gubernatorial order required all Tennessee departments to cut their budgets by 12 percent. Faced with the directive, previously reluctant department directors began to see this new way of operating in a different light.

"No one wants to reduce their staffing or their programs," Christi Branscom, commissioner of the Department of General Services in Tennessee, said. "Many agencies saw real estate as an opportunity. They realized that they could reduce their facility footprints, and this would help them get to their budget cuts, as well."

Reducing the number of employees who spend 40 hours in an office setting has advantages other than aid in balancing budgets. These include a reduction in a government's carbon footprint and the appeal to employees—and new recruits—of a more flexible, autonomous work environment and better work/life balance.

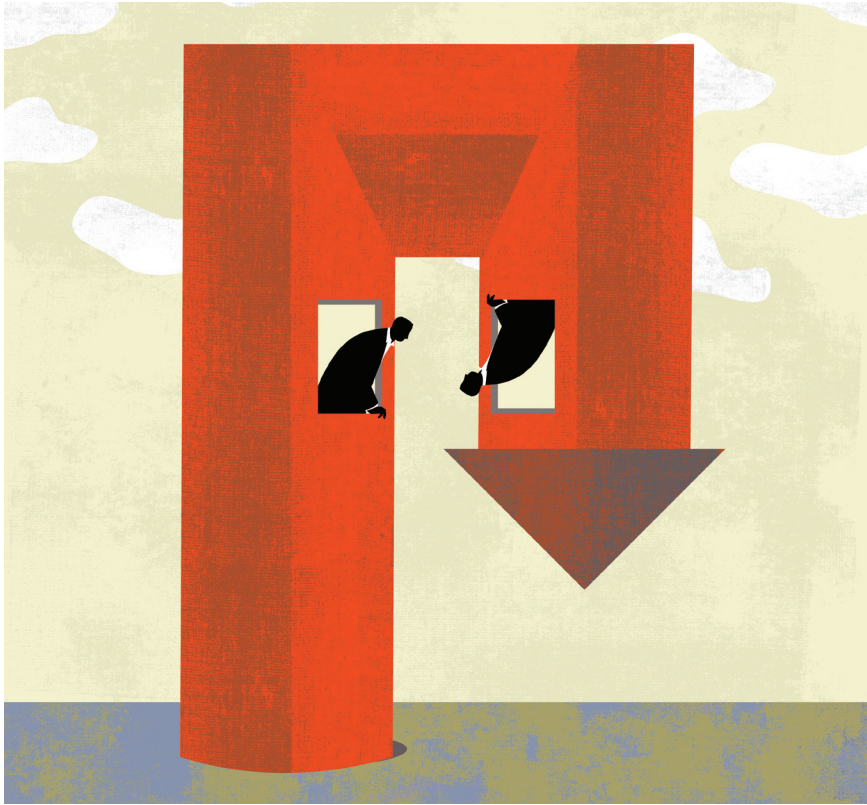
For Wake County, North Carolina, the seeds of change were planted before the pandemic. The fast-growing county was dealing with office overcrowding, especially in its downtown office spaces. For this reason, the county manager's office began to focus on relocating some administrative staff members out of downtown, and a study was budgeted and planned to begin in 2020.

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After the experiences of 2020, the county began to consider a bigger transformation, under an initiative dubbed "Wake 2.0." "With the pandemic, Wake County has, by necessity, had to work remotely, and everybody has learned how to do that," Mark Forestieri, director of the Facilities Design and Construction Department, said.

Currently, multiple Wake County departments are being surveyed to find out how managers and employees envision their post-pandemic work life—who can work purely remotely, who would do best in a hybrid environment, and who needs to be in an office setting full-time. "Our goal is to develop an organizational framework that encourages departments to reimagine future work," Forestieri said.

Changes in office design don't just apply to public sector workers, according to Keith Reester, the public works director in the City of Littleton, Colorado. During the pandemic, city residents have become far more accustomed to interacting with government digitally. This means there is less need for large waiting areas and the kind of counter space where residents have previously



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applied for permits or come in to pay utility bills. Now, older residents are joining younger ones in either logging in to government websites or seeing government staffers by appointment.

“Will we have as much public traffic in the building? Probably not,” Reester said. Part of the remodeling that’s taking place in Littleton involves a shift in location for the permit center and a reduction of counter space by about half.

Reester emphasizes the need for flexibility lasting long beyond the exigencies of the days of the pandemic. “We’re going to try stuff and see what happens, and then we’ll try something else.” He noted that modular furniture creates more ease in changing the interior of government office environments as times change. Larger contingency budgets will also be needed in

recognition that there will be a need to adapt and change in remodeling office space. “We’ll need to plan to have a little more of the budget that is unallocated—some capital improvement or maintenance dollars that are not assigned,” he said.

Despite all the benefits, as might be expected, the path to a new future in public-sector work environments isn’t without challenges. Dealing with the problems that come from a decentralized and more autonomous work environment is high on the list of issues that must be confronted, as are questions of the best way to use technology. How many virtual meetings can one person fit in a day without experiencing a syndrome that has come to be called Zoom Burnout?

There are more unresolved questions: How much should governments pay for office furnishings or technology in the home? Will lower-paid employees be equally able to work from less well-equipped houses? Will office culture be damaged when water-cooler conversations and shared lunch hours are a thing of the past?

As Reester said, “People miss the interpersonal action with their peers in the office. People want that human interaction. No matter how we do it, there will be a craving for that physical space-sharing during the week, and as facility planners, we need to inherently keep that in mind.” ■

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