

COVID-19 Virtual Town Hall: Healthy Buildings & the Effect on Public Health During the Pandemic

August 25, 2020 | Session Overview

PANEL

Mahesh Ramanujam, President & CEO, U.S. Green Building Council and Green Business Certification, Inc. (GBCI)

Stephanie Carlisle, Research Scientist, Carbon Leadership Forum

Ruth Thomas-Squance, PhD, MPH, Director of Field Building, Build Healthy Places Network

Joseph G. Allen, Assistant Professor, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

MODERATOR

Vicki Worden, President & CEO, Green Building Initiative

COVID-19 VIRTUAL TOWN HALL: HEALTHY BUILDINGS OVERVIEW

On August 25, 2020, the National Institute of Building Sciences held its fourth in a series of COVID-19 virtual town halls, brought to you by the NIBS Consultative Council. The town hall received more than 855 registrants from across the building industry, universities, officials representing the federal, local, and state governments and more.

During this town hall, we learned that healthy buildings and resilience are intertwined. More than ever, as COVID-19 changes our life and ways of doing business, health and resilience are more important to our nation and communities.

“Everyone is concerned about reopening schools and all establishments in a safe way,” says NIBS President & CEO Lakisha A. Woods. “It is the people who have engaged in these calls who will take the new normal and turn it into a positive.”

The panel also covered racial inequity and disparities between communities with vulnerable populations and those that can afford and do invest in healthier buildings and greener living standards.

This virtual town hall was sponsored by Dell Technologies.

Site references:

- NIBS COVID-19 Virtual Town Hall Series: <https://www.nibs.org/page/covid-19-webinar-series>

LEED AS A LIVING STANDARD – NOT JUST AN ENERGY STANDARD

The U.S. Green Building Council is committed to a sustainable future through LEED, the leading program for green buildings and communities worldwide.

The impact of this pandemic will be felt for years to come, says Mahesh Ramanujam, President and CEO of the U.S. Green Building Council and Green Business Certification, Inc. (GBCI).

Remaining resilient in business and in life is an opportunity to form a resilient society.

“There is still much work to be done to effect a global change,” he said. “We have an epidemic of natural disasters in this decade.”

What’s currently playing out in California – and its fierce wildfire season – is a clear picture of needing all hands-on deck with regard to climate change and reducing emissions.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Centers for Environmental Information, the U.S. has sustained 273 weather and climate disasters since 1980 where overall damages/costs reached or exceeded \$1 billion. The total cost of these 273 events exceeds \$1.790 trillion.

“We must face a new reality,” Ramanujam said. “The world may not look like anything we’ve left behind. Because of the

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pandemic, the most vulnerable among us will feel the greatest impact. In fact, they already do. Healthy people in healthy places is the fastest way to build a healthy economy.”

Site references:

- U.S. Green Building Council: USGBC shares the actions and priorities that will shape a healthier future for all: <https://www.usgbc.org/articles/healthy-people-healthy-places-equals-healthy-economy>
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Overview: <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/>

WHAT DOES GREEN RECOVERY LOOK LIKE?

Recovery and safely getting back into schools and work is much bigger than space planning and systems design.

“Public health is a powerful lens through which we can work for change,” said Stephanie Carlisle, Research Analyst with the Carbon Leadership Forum.

COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting Black communities, who must face environmental racism as many of these communities are close to fossil fuel power plants and other sources of air pollution. In the U.S. Mid-Atlantic, half of minorities can’t pay their utility bills, Carlisle added.

“These are not new problems, they are systemic problems,” she said. “They define how we define green buildings.”

It’s with this mindset that school officials, communities, and building officials consider social injustice and sustainability when reopening the nation’s schools.

“These issues are not someone else’s problem, but they are at the heart of ethical design practice,” Carlisle said. “We might need to change how we talk about green buildings to rise to present challenges.”

Projects must also be vetted for long-term health. The building industry doesn’t do schools any justice if we build things we can’t maintain.

Site reference:

- Carbon Leadership Forum, The Carbon Challenge: <http://carbonleadershipforum.org/the-carbon-challenge/>

ZIP CODE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN GENETIC CODE IN DETERMINING HEALTH

The U.S. spends a great deal on healthcare, but we don’t see proportionate benefits, says Ruth Thomas-Squance, PhD, MPH, Director of Field Building of the Build Healthy Places Network.

“Zip code is more important than genetic code in determining health,” she said. “Traditional healthcare methods focus on treating individual maladies. We are more effective when we are not working in traditional silos. Public health can contribute great knowledge for determining community needs.”

Take for example, the city of Richmond, Virginia. As you travel across the city, life expectancy goes down by 13 years. This is true of most cities across the U.S.

We must partner to make change. Flexible organizations who may be able to partner with nontraditional groups or agencies will lead to more effective responses. This places equity at the center of our recovery.

We need to build cross-sector partnerships that foster resilience; the connections are already there.

“Health starts in our homes,” Thomas-Squance said. “This won’t be the only coronavirus that will develop.”

Site references:

- Build Healthy Places Network, COVID-19 Response and Resources: <https://www.buildhealthyplaces.org/bhpn-covid19-response-and-resources/>
- Build Healthy Places Network, Principles for Building Healthy and Prosperous Communities: <https://buildhealthyplaces.org/principles-for-building-healthy-and-prosperous-communities/>

BEYOND COVID: GOOD LEADERS HAVE THEIR EYES ON WHAT'S NEXT

There have been many epidemics that were near-pandemics, and buildings play a key role in either protecting us or exacerbating the problems.

“This is not rocket science, we’ve long known how to operate our building effectively,” says Joseph G. Allen, Assistant Professor with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

It looks like this: addressing transmission with healthy building control strategies, proper ventilation and filtration, universal mask-wearing and protective face coverings, and physical and social distancing. Prioritizing work from home also helps.

“Good leaders have their eye on what’s coming next,” he said, mentioning the importance of indoor health, economic health (healthy buildings drive business performance), and resource health (i.e. chemical exposures and the toxic legacy of pollutants).

Green buildings alone have been responsible for a number of positive changes, namely, reduced numbers of missed school days, missed work days, and tens of thousands of fewer asthma attacks.

Site references:

- Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, COVID-19 Response: Public Health in Action: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/coronavirus/>

REOPENING SCHOOLS WILL NOT BE BUSINESS AS USUAL

From a public health perspective, the headlines next year will be horrific, with decisions around school reopening being all over the map.

Virtual learning will further exacerbate inequities, Allen says. He pointed out that 18 million youth do not have access to high-speed internet.

But physically opening schools should not happen if COVID numbers are high.

“You cannot open when community spread is raging,” he said. “It cannot be business or schools as usual. You have to put

in systems in place.”

Some communities have been able to consistently keep their COVID numbers down. These include YMCAs in New York and childcare centers that have solidly stayed open to the children of essential workers and healthcare professionals.

Investments such as proper filters and reworking ventilation are investments worth making, Carlisle said. The benefits of those improvements will persist and lead to more resilient communities.

“When we focus on vulnerable communities, we will raise up everyone,” she said. “As designers, we have an incredible role to play. If we believe the built environment is important, we have a duty and an obligation as an industry to see that through.”