

GATEWAY AND NATURAL AMENITY REGION NETWORK

September 15, 2020 Listening Session

What Have We Learned? Community Reflections on
6-months of COVID-19



GATEWAY AND
NATURAL AMENITY
REGION INITIATIVE

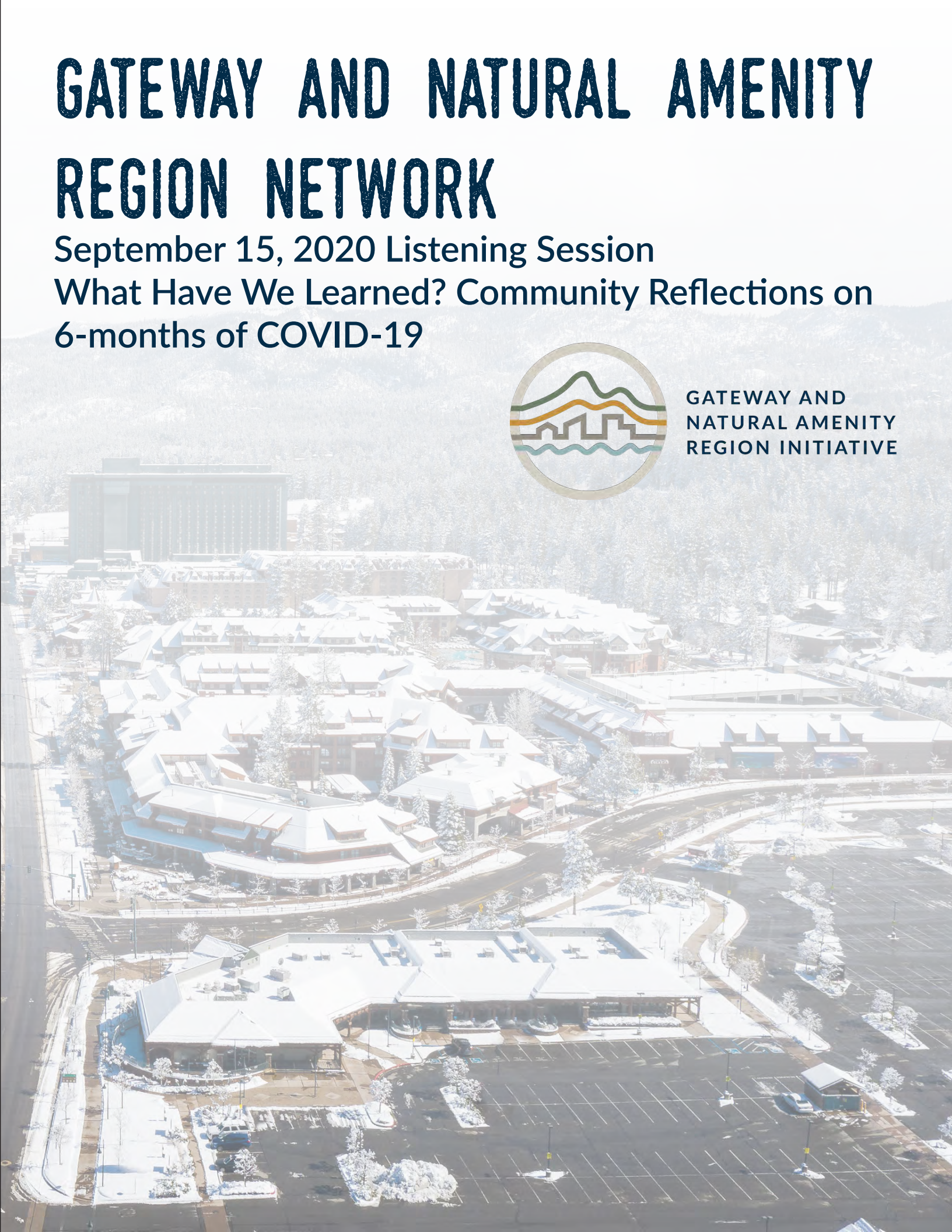


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OVERVIEW

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic, upending life and causing crises for many GNAR communities around west.

This peer-to-peer learning session was an opportunity for gateway and natural amenity communities to get together, discuss what the last 6-months have looked like for their towns and regions, share lessons learned, and work on strategies for moving forward.

ABOUT THE GNAR INITIATIVE

[The GNAR Initiative](#) leverages research, education, and capacity building to assist communities, land managers, and others in gateway and natural amenity regions throughout the West in preparing for and responding to planning, development, natural resource management, and public policy challenges, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. The Initiative is an affiliation of university faculty, government and state agencies, non-profit organizations, and community leaders. It is based in the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University.

QUESTIONS ASKED INCLUDED:

How has COVID affected your community in:

- * Public health and wellbeing?*
- * Taxes, revenue, public services?*
- * The number and types/ownerships of establishments?*
- * Future planning?*
- * Relationships with other regional entities?*

CURRENTLY:

- * What are some things you think your community has done to address the impacts of COVID-19 that have worked well?*
- * What are some things you think your community has done that haven't worked well and what has been the result?*

LOOKING FORWARD

- * What do the next 6-months look like for your community? What are you planning?*



SESSION GOALS & OBJECTIVES

When asked what they hoped to get out of the session, participants expressed a desire to gain a sense of community and camaraderie with other gateway communities.

There was also a desire to discuss the upcoming winter season, and get advice for how to manage either the “off-season”, or the busy season, depending on the community.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Thinking about the impacts (positive and negative) of COVID on your community or communities you work with, what have been the greatest surprises?

- Science seems to be a fluid thing now and politics play an evil role in misguiding people’s opinions (i.e., masks).
- Public health is used as a political football
- Flexibility of Zion National Park to change and adapt to limitations.
- How many first time visitors are coming. How do we educate them?
- The continued amount of visitation. We have tried for years not to market our trails, but with Denver only an hour away they are extremely crowded.
- The fragility of our nationwide systems.
- Surprised at how health requirements quickly became politicized - masks vs. none.
- The diversity in perceptions of the virus across the state.
- We thought we would have to reduce our budget and started preparing for operating at 40%, however we are still at 90% which is mindblowing.

Participants then broke into small groups to discuss what they saw in their individual communities, when they came back, they were asked to share one “Ah-ha” moment from those conversations:

- What is happening in other towns is more similar than different than what is happening in my town.
- All of us have experienced the fragility of systems.
- We are united in thinking health should not be a political issue.
- Utah is not unique.
- There is no rhyme or reason for anything right now.
- The shared experiences from other locations.
- COVID Fatigue is real.

What have been the most notable impacts (positive and negative) on your community or communities you work with in terms of: Public health and wellbeing?

- Having a mask mandate in a county where masks are highly politicized and continuing it despite case load decreases.
- More people finding alternative ways to utilize the outdoors as a means for well-being
- Unified approach (City, Businesses, and Chamber) to surviving as a gateway economy.
- Increased recreation/ trail demand that is difficult to accommodate

GROUP DISCUSSIONS - CONT.

- Appreciation for the role of the local hospital. We only have one, but are very grateful for it.
- General malaise and negative attitudes due to COVID pandemic -- people don't understand where this is going or when it is going to end.
- Health issues were a negative, but there was community support. For first time in recent history the town council has divided (after the monthly mask requirement vote).
- Strong negative economic impacts were felt due to small businesses closing down.

What have been the most notable impacts (positive and negative) on your community or communities you work with in terms of: Taxes, revenue, and public services?

- Public revenue is down. Prison labor was cut off which was important to town. Future cuts in services are projected.
- We hopefully have learned the deep connections of health and well-being and safety to positive economic development-systems of communities and inter-reliability.
- Workforce Services has seen the monumental demand for unemployment and housing services/ support.
- Hotels lowering their prices have created a price war environment, which severely impacted transaction tax revenue.
- Surprised at the continued strength of revenues during summer months. There is concern about winter months in ski communities and how the community will fare.
- None notable yet. Revenues are down 30% but town has sizable rainy day fund. Got comfy living

off the good years... The future will be interesting.

- At one point 30% of the police and fire department were out with COVID. Businesses took a pledge to follow certain health priorities. Despite Arizona's lack of state guidance, we haven't had bad case numbers.

What have been the most notable impacts (positive and negative) on your community or communities you work with in terms of: Residential and commercial development?

- Development is pivoting as many commercial sites do not want to be THIS rural (in Page).
- Residential properties up in value, rehabilitation of older houses is up. Commercial properties are distressed as small businesses continue to go out of business.
- Residential home prices are on the rise - there is increased use in these areas and outsiders searching for a higher quality of life - outside cities, in areas with amenities - fostering new company strategies.
- Outlandishly strong residential sales ("Zoom Town"), despite some residents being unable to make rent.
- Mixed commercial real estate sales based on business strength. Some businesses have had to close, however other businesses are JUST opening based on what they think is going to happen in the future, not what is happening now.
- Development has slowed but not stopped. Restaurants are struggling with lowered revenues. E-Bikes are booming business. Real estate has not changed.
- The whole public process seems to be taking longer to get permits, etc.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS - CONT.

What have been the most notable impacts (positive and negative) on your community or communities you work with in terms of: Economic development?

- The transition to all online work has been hard on our internet infrastructure due to increased usage.
- A lot more people know what Economic Development means now. That is positive.
- Increased pressure on public land managers, again with limited resources to facilitate addressing issues.
- Clarified that we are a tourism-based economy.
- Rural internet capacity (or lack thereof) has been brought to light during COVID.
- Just more stress on the fact that economic diversification is more critical than ever for many tourism-based economies

What have been the most notable impacts (positive and negative) on your community or communities you work with in terms of: Relationships?

- Relationships that were not already questionable, grew bridges. But relationships that were questionable, the divide grew wider.
- People have looked for ways to talk or meet, including remotely though they feel the isolation. We are 65% Latin with many multi-generational homes which is hard.
- Subdued experiences for visitors, no more community get-togethers. It started with canceling St. Patrick's Day Parade and hasn't stopped yet.
- Negative, politically divide and health; positive, more comfort with electronic meetings, technology to communicate like today!
- More divisive than ever before between visitors and locals, which is unfortunate. Strengthened relationships between local leaders.
- I'm seeing a lot of people getting involved in community based improvement efforts (e.g. dark skies) that the virus has given them the time to pursue.



GROUP DISCUSSIONS - CONT.

What are some things you think your community or communities you work with have done really well to address the impacts of COVID-19?

RAPID COUNTY-WIDE COMMUNICATION PLAN

GREGG MARTINEZ, PAGE, AZ: One key thing instituted right away was a network to communicate with each other since in person wasn't happening. The typical chain of command was broken and the office routine gone. Felt a lot of anxiety, but knew a lot of community business owners felt the same way.

Contacted chamber of commerce about hosting hour-long weekly meetings because information was shifting so quickly, and the ended up hosting hour-long sessions throughout the week:

- Monday - Lodging,
- Tuesday - Restaurants,
- Wednesday - Tour Operators,
- Thursday - Workforce Development,
- Friday - Post COVID Think Tank

Monday through Friday anywhere between 70-100 different businesses were engaged this way. They weren't all gateway businesses either, the local community college got involved too. Focused on the county at first, then, state and federal representatives became interested in the success and started getting involved.

One program implemented that came out of these conversations was a customer service training based on an emotional intelligence course hosted at the community college.

While not all meetings are happening Monday - Friday anymore, weekly meetings for all interested businesses are still being held on Mondays. This was the single most powerful tool implemented, since those early conversations were critical. Shifting gears from just being a businessman to being a human was so important.

INTER-COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION PLAN

JIM SCHENK, SUPERIOR, AZ: Our town manager did really well on the communication front. We were able to go after and receive multiple grants, and there was a lot of good communication between organizations like ours which helped ensure us all viewed the problem the same way.

The first issue that hit people was COVID numbers. The numbers coming out of the county were not always up to date, there were lots of rumor on Facebook as to what the status actually was. To combat this, our mayor took over posting updates on Facebook for everyone to see.

The Mayor then set up a series of calls directed toward small business owners and local senators and the governor so that the community knew what leaders knew and didn't know. We were also able to get grants from the state to do things in the town that were different from those nationally. Real care has been taken to try and protect the first responders. They didn't respond to everything.

Lots of shared pain as well. Graduates of the local high school threw a party that raised the death rate. There was also some, "This business isn't doing what it should you should stop them," however town council has very little power and so there was a lot more trying to get stuff done with the carrot vs. the stick.

RENTAL ASSISTANCE & AT COST PPE

SCOTT REID, BRECKENRIDGE, CO: We had a quick response and shut down on March 13. We then quickly went with a walkable main street. It was very successful and revenues are higher than expected (were bracing for 40%, but are close to 90% still).

City supported businesses with rental assistance programs, town paid landlords and leasers trying to help keep them afloat. Also worked hard to quickly get masks, gloves, etc. and passed along to businesses at cost in order to help get them into the community.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS - CONT.

What are some things you think your community or communities you work with have done poorly, and what has been the result?

- Failed to anticipate the amount of visitors they were going to get.
- Failed to anticipate the political divide and rancor, but we were able to lobby the governor for a mask mandate even as a small town in a big state.
- Didn't communicate with residents or business very well in the beginning – most information was disseminated in private meetings without minutes. This caused mistrust in the community. Communication got better, but have struggled to come up with a shared goal to be optimistic about.

Looking ahead for the next 6-months or so, what are you most concerned about and what are you doing to prepare (or what would you like your community or communities you work with to do to prepare)?

SCOTT REID, BRECKENRIDGE, CO: Pursuing two tracks right now:

- 1) What if everything has to be shut down again – budget, planning, what does that look like. Easy because went through it in March already.
- 2) Ski area on a busy day gets 25k+ skiers. This can usually be handled on typical years, but this year the resort is doing a reservation system and anticipating people coming without reservations anyways. So, if only two members of a family get into the ski area, what do you do with the rest of them?

Breckenridge is trying to create more outdoor safe recreational options in big snowy areas. We're adding a new sledding hill, broom ball spaces, guided hikes, snow shoes, fat bikes, and creative arts. What can they do in an outdoor socially distant environment that is low cost or free?

SUZANNE ELGER, SPRINGDALE, UT: They were doing a flu shot clinic in town. Not sure what the plan is beyond revisiting the mask mandate. The park will end shuttle season after Thanksgiving weekend. The shuttle used to carry 100, now carrying 33, and looking at what they will do next year.

Typical fall visitor is not a family, usually retirees in the fall, so they may see less of those this year. What they might look into the economic impact. What does it look like going forward if the visitation number stay down?

JIM SCHENK, SUPERIOR, AZ: Very proactive in trying to figure out the future (not sure what's happening with snowbirds). They are anticipating more state-wide tourism, and have been working on a marketing campaign that includes health considerations, more digitally and less print than in the past.

What is one key piece of wisdom you would like to share with other gateway communities throughout the west based on your community's experience over the last 6-months?

- Communication, honesty and optimism.
- Transparency in communication is key; links between health and well-being and economic development vital.
- The only thing constant is change.
- Optimism matters.
- Focus on your strengths. Acknowledge your values as a community.
- Never give up!! Your community needs you.
- I would echo that - keep trying. If what you've done doesn't work, take another shot! Involve as many people as possible.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS - CONT.

What is one thing you can offer to other GNAR communities throughout the west?

- **Aubrey Larsen - Utah Community Development Office:** Planning related tools, guides, and resources (<https://cdotoolbox.wordpress.com/>).
- **Kelly Bricker - University of Utah:** Information sharing, research resources, education and webinars.
- **Scott Reid - Breckenridge, CO:** Ideas for transparent public outreach and public input. A model of a creative response.
- **Jake Powell - The GNAR Initiative:** GNAR Fellowship - allow people to travel to meet each other and learn from each other.
- **James Schenck - Superior, AZ:** Town leaders working to communicate via whatever works during a pandemic. Listen to folks especially if you don't agree. Be transparent and provide options as possible.
- **Suzanne Elger - Springdale, UT:** Understanding how local residents and leaders can address problems together.



APPENDIX A – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AND FACILITATION TEAM CONTACT INFORMATION

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APPENDIX B – LIST OF REFERENCED LINKS AND RESOURCES

JAPA article on Planning and Development Challenges in Western Gateway Communities:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2020.1791728>

NPR Article about Zoom Towns:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2020/09/08/909680016/zoom-towns-and-the-new-housing-market-for-the-2-americas>

Join the GNAR Network:

https://www.usu.edu/gnar/gnar_network

NEW Webinar Series about Amenity Migration:

<https://www.usu.edu/gnar/amenitymigrationseries>



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