



Center for the Future of Museums

Scenario Two: Scaling Back

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Justinia History Museum played a vital role in helping the (fictional) city of Justinia respond to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, while creating financial strategies to compensate for the damage to their own finances.

The Justinia City Council is widely credited with having limited the local impact of the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. In March, as the number of reported cases in the US began to soar, the Councilors convened school principals, business leaders, church officials, directors of social service and cultural nonprofits as well as the heads of the city health, transportation, and safety departments to plan a coordinated response. The resulting city-wide effort included launching a public health information campaign, migrating K-12 classes to online platforms, establishing two drive-thru COVID-19 testing stations, and cancelling all recreational sporting events. Cultural nonprofits voluntarily cancelled many public events, including performances and programs. In turn, the city established a relief fund to help alleviate some of the financial damage to local businesses and nonprofits.

The Justinia History Museum played an essential role in the city's COVID-19 response. Partnering with the local nonprofit science center, they hosted a community coronavirus forum, sharing information, answering questions, and briefing the public on the response plan. Curators quickly pulled together an exhibit telling stories of how Justinia had responded to the 1918 influenza pandemic (during which one third of the county's population came down with the flu). The exhibit was designed for digital exploration online as well as being installed in the museum's grand hall, which had itself been converted to a hospital ward in 1918. Museum educators worked with the public school system to integrate the museum's on-line learning platform into the distance education plan for students, and shared the curricula and resources the museum had developed for home-schoolers.

The director brought together staff from all areas of operation to create policies and procedures designed to maximize the health and safety of visitors and staff. Rigorous cleaning and sanitation of the public and office areas was implemented. An outreach officer from the local health department led an all-staff training session on COVID-19 precautions. Staff were encouraged to telework when possible, providing laptops and other equipment as needed, and all work-related travel was suspended.

Even as they helped lead COVID-19 response internally and in the community, museum staff struggled with the pandemic's impact on their own operations. Attendance dropped by sixty percent—in part because their core visitors were older, and inherently at higher risk for COVID-19. The popular morning family hours for parents with pre-school age children had to be cancelled because many participants were concerned about indirectly increasing the risk to elderly relatives. The museum had developed a robust income stream from space rentals, but by June almost a quarter of these events had been cancelled by clients, and an additional ten percent postponed until the fall. The city's (voluntary) ban on gatherings of over 500 people led the museum to cancel their annual fundraiser. Another major financial blow was a 14 percent decline in the value of the museum's investments, due to the combined impacts of COVID-19 and Saudi oil policies on the market.

In response, the museum launched a campaign asking donors to step up their support to help JHM weather the storm. Highlighting their work in helping the city respond to COVID-19, they made a case for the museum as an essential public resource that was needed by the public now more than ever. With the support of the City Council, the director also negotiated with lenders to defer payments on their current bond debt. The museum cancelled three rented touring exhibits scheduled for 2020, replacing them with exhibits drawn from the museum's collections (including the well-received exhibit on the 1918 flu). Even so, the museum was forced to cut the hours of some part time employees, implement a hiring freeze, and suspend cost of living increases.