March 20, 2020

The Hon. Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Nancy Pelosi
Speaker, United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Hon. Charles Schumer
Minority Leader, United States Senate

The Hon. Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader, United States House of Representatives

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, and Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of the nation’s community planners and planning officials, the American Planning Association (APA) appreciates your leadership in helping people and their local communities meet the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Your recent action on supplemental appropriations and resources for workers and vulnerable populations created a valuable platform for helping local governments tackle a range of issues for the people and neighborhoods we serve.

As you work now on additional legislative responses, APA urges you to incorporate provisions that will help ensure and expand the ability of planners and our local government professional colleagues to effectively meet the needs of residents in this emergency. Local governments, with the help of planners, are critically positioned to deliver support to our most vulnerable communities. Localities are on the frontlines of combating this pandemic and addressing immediate needs of people but face significant fiscal strains that could impair effective response and recovery. Federal support to local governments and agencies will provide the services and stimulus that today’s crisis demands.

APA believes that additional legislative action is vital and should include specific provisions aimed at ensuring planners and localities can address critical needs for housing stability, economic security, and access and mobility. Income instability caused by the pandemic will have a heavier effect on low-income and vulnerable populations, exacerbating the problems of employment, housing, and access to health services. Supporting these needs through a range of federal tools will make a significant difference in the ability to help people and communities recover.
The proposals below outline a variety of ways that Congress can partner with local communities to meet today’s urgent needs and set the stage for tomorrow’s recovery. As you consider additional legislation, APA respectfully requests that you include the following proposals critical to America’s communities:

**Housing Stability**

**Increase funding and flexibility for Community Development Block Grants**
The CDBG program is the most proven tool for aiding low-and moderate-income neighborhoods and responding to disaster recovery needs. Boosting funding for CDBG will allow localities to better meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities. Temporarily suspending the program’s public services and administrative caps will provide further flexibility in tailoring an effective response to local conditions. Additional CDBG funding now and a boost in FY21 appropriations would underpin vital services, planning, and recovery investment.

**Help communities meet immediate needs of housing insecure populations**
Communities across the nation are facing heightened housing problems. The situation for housing insecure and homeless populations is particularly critical now. Housing is a component of health care in this crisis. Congress should increase support for key housing grant and subsidy programs to aid in immediately supporting expanded homeless assistance, low-income rent support, and affordable housing. Programs like HOME, Homeless Assistance Grants, USDA rural development, and emergency housing assistance should be part of any legislative package.

**Economic Security**

**Allow Advance Refunding for Tax Exempt Bonds**
The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 eliminated the ability of governments to advance refund tax exempt bonds. Suspending or repealing this prohibition would reduce debt service, improve the stability of the municipal bond market, and provide immediate savings that local governments could use toward other infrastructure and community investments.

**Restore Build America Bonds**
In the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Congress responded to the Great Recession by temporarily authorizing tax-advantaged financing alternatives for government infrastructure projects. These bonds brought new capital into projects and were instrumental in promoting growth and recovery. These financing tools should be restored.
Address the Looming Insolvency of the Highway Trust Fund
Congress is already facing the need to act on the solvency of the Highway Trust Fund (HTF). The HTF is the primary source of federal funding for the nation’s surface transportation needs. The insufficiency of the federal fuel levy combined with the impacts of lower local sales tax revenue and higher operation costs of local systems due to the coronavirus crisis creates tremendous uncertainty and fiscal pressure. A comprehensive response provides an opportunity to stabilize the HTF and address the funding hurdle to completing bipartisan transportation legislation.

Fund critical block grants that support local services
Block grants to local government are a powerful and proven tool for protecting both the economy and residents. These funds move quickly to areas in greatest need. In addition to supporting CDBG and Surface Transportation Block Grant Program (STBPG), the Social Services Block Grant can aim resources at the most vulnerable populations in dire need of service and assistance and the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant can provide a boost to economic and environmental needs. Programs at the Economic Development Administration, such as the Economic Adjustment Assistance program, are also effective tools to providing targeting assistance to communities particularly hard hit due to impacts on particular segments of the economy.

Access and Mobility
Provide emergency support for public transportation
Public transportation provides essential access and mobility services. In many communities, transit is a vital link to health services. These systems are incurring increased costs associated with providing service amid the COVID-19 outbreak while also facing a significant loss in revenue. Federal support, including the Public Transportation Emergency Relief program, should aid transit agencies with funding that closes the gap for essential operations, maintenance, and service.

Increase funding and local share for the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program
STBGP provides flexible funding for states and localities for projects that preserve and improve access and mobility. This program puts funding directly in the hands of the agencies best positioned to implement local and regional plans and projects. Although residents are being encouraged to work remotely and practice social distancing in the short-term, transportation options are essential immediate needs that also provide long-term social and economic benefits. Stimulus funded infrastructure investments present an opportunity to incorporate resiliency standards and approaches to benefit long-term health and safety of communities.

Fund more projects in U.S. DOT competitive grant programs
Both the BUILD, formerly TIGER, program and the Capital Investment Grant program for transit have seen far greater demand than available resources in recent years. These programs have a backlog of proven projects and plans ready for investment and implementation. Providing resources for additional grants, project planning grants, and new rounds of grants can be a ready source of economic stimulus.
We urge Congress to move quickly on additional legislation aimed at helping the nation respond to the multifaceted issues presented by the coronavirus pandemic. State and local governments will face staggering challenges in the weeks and months ahead. Yet, these institutions are at the heart of the response and solutions our nation and people need now. Planners are assisting every day in communities across the nation with practical, local efforts to address the impact of the crisis and stand ready to work with federal partners. This pandemic is also a long-term challenge, and the planning profession is uniquely suited to think about and manage long-term solutions. Together, we can make a difference in the health of our people, our economy, and all our communities.

Thank you for your leadership and service.

Sincerely,

Kurt Christiansen, FAICP
APA President