

COVID-19 and the Smart City

By: Rapid Access International, Inc.

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Toronto's Quayside Smart City Project Ends in Controversy

In our February 2018 article for MRI's Platinum Society, we wrote about Alphabet subsidiary, Sidewalk Labs, and its project aimed at transforming the Quayside neighborhood in Toronto into a sort of smart city live experiment. At that time, Sidewalk had already pledged to spend \$50 million on the first phase of planning.¹

Sidewalk had won the right to plan the 12-acre neighborhood, in partnership with Waterfront Toronto, "from the internet up", "filled with new technologies such as heated sidewalks, robotic garbage systems, and, crucially, sensors that would collect data about how people move about cities and inspire even more innovations."²

In May of this year, Sidewalk announced the cancellation of the project. The company blamed the COVID-19 pandemic, citing its devastation of the global economy and its effects on the Toronto real estate market.³

But, the Quayside has been fraught with delays and controversy. Privacy concerns were at the center of the controversy. Tech-billionaire Jim Balsillie has said that Sidewalk's withdrawal was a "beautiful vindication" for opponents who called out governments for partnering with a company whose parent is known for hoarding intellectual property and collecting user data.⁴

While COVID-19 may have played a role in this about face for Sidewalk and Waterfront Toronto, the failure of the project really highlights the importance of public-private trust in the development of smart cities.

COVID-19 Accelerates Smart City Development

Indeed, COVID-19 in many cases has served to help accelerate smart city development. In the face of worldwide economic recession budgets have been slashed in the public and private sectors. City budgets for tech innovation projects are under greater scrutiny, for sure. But, many governments are leaning even harder in to their commitment to smart city technologies.

In an October article, "How COVID accelerated smart city development", GCN outlined some of these commitments:⁵

¹ Woyke, Elizabeth. A smarter smart city. MIT Technology Review. February 21, 2018. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/610249/a-smarter-smart-city/> Accessed on November 30, 2020.

² O'Kane, Josh. Google affiliate Sidewalk Labs abandons Toronto smart-city project. The Globe And Mail. May 7, 2020. Available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/technology/article-google-affiliate-sidewalk-labs-abandons-toronto-smart-city-project/>. Accessed on November 30, 2020.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sooryaa Muruga Thambiran, Siva. How COVID accelerated smart city development. GCN. October 15, 2020. Available at: <https://gcn.com/articles/2020/10/15/smart-cities-post-covid.aspx>. Accessed on November 30, 2020.

- In June, the government of **Singapore** announced that it would escalate its investment in digitizing businesses by 30%. In a statement, officials identified the development of new tech tools to respond to COVID-19 and the use of data analytics, artificial intelligence and sensors to modernize government initiatives as areas of key focus.
- In the **United Arab Emirates**, the government made sure that guidelines regarding social distancing and lockdown rules were obeyed by implementing an AI-based system that helped local police wearing “smart helmets equipped with a thermal camera to detect those infected with COVID-19 from a safe distance,” officials said in a statement. At the same time, the system also helped identify people who were on the roads without the necessary authorization by reading their vehicle plate numbers.
- As part of the **Indian government**-funded Smart Cities Mission, 45 cities have operational integrated command and control centers. These ICCCs serve as quasi-war rooms to make emergency decisions, manage contact tracing activities and monitor the state of lockdown efficiency.
- In **China**, building plans for Net City include more sustainability measures such as green roof gardens, less infrastructure support for cars and more use of AI in decision-making. At the same time, there has been more emphasis on resilience planning. [E]mergency response systems are being optimized to integrate features that pinpoint locations of callers using mobile phones and use dashboards and data visualization tools to manage the crisis.

Klaus R. Kunzmann, a professor emeritus and the former head of the Institute of Spatial Planning at the Technical University of Dortmund, Germany, has offered some insight on the apparent COVID-19 trend of the smart city materializing faster than expected.

In a recent article for *disP—The Planning Review*⁶, Kunzmann argues that the conditions created by the pandemic will make it much easier for local governments to pursue smart city solutions in areas such as traffic control, crime prediction, and data sensors.⁷:

Kunzmann says the pandemic has increased peoples’ exposure to top-down government guidance—from social distancing requirements to official virologists interpreting data. This exposure, he says, will subtly create more openness to suggestions and plans proposed by city leaders. Combined with the imperative to quickly rebuild devastated local economies, Kunzmann argues that the door will open widely to the kinds of efficiency-focused solutions offered by companies such as IBM and Siemens. “Individual convenience will outweigh privacy concerns,” he says.⁸

⁶ Kunzmann, Klaus R. Smart Cities After Covid-19: Ten Narratives. *disP - The Planning Review*. Volume 56, 2020 - Issue 2. July 17, 2020. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02513625.2020.1794120>. Accessed on November 30, 2020.

⁷ Berg, Nate. COVID-19 has opened the floodgates for smart cities—whether we like it or not. *Fast Company*. July 23, 2020. Available at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90530580/covid-19-has-opened-the-floodgates-for-smart-cities-whether-we-like-it-or-not>. Accessed on November 30, 2020.

⁸ *Ibid.*

In the end, the example of Sidewalk's failed project in Toronto is a hopeful case that illustrates how the acceleration of smart city development, hastened further by COVID-19, can still be placed in check where the controversies of privacy and the public-private trust cannot find the right balance.