

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 2, “Finding Silver Linings: Brainerd’s Reopening Story”

[Podcast theme music]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali-Smith.

When you stop and think about it, being responsible for the safety of people is pretty central to everything that cities do. Providing street surfaces that are safe to drive on [podcast theme music fades out], walk and cycle lanes to keep people safe from passing traffic, water and sewer infrastructure that give safe access to drinking water and the ability to take wastewater out of homes efficiently. These are just a few of the everyday things that cities do to keep people safe. So with all that practice at normalized safety, putting together a COVID-19 preparedness plan to reopen a city should be a piece of cake, right?

For some cities, it may well have been a relatively smooth process to reopen, and for others, it may have been filled with unique challenges and hurdles. Today we are talking to one such city who had their fair share of bumps in the road throughout the pandemic and as they look to reopen their city hall. Their reopen story includes a new city administrator, a new mayor, and a fire at City Hall on top of a global pandemic. Today we are talking to the city of Brainerd, and I'm delighted to be joined by City Administrator Jennifer Bergman and HR Director Kris Schubert. [Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

So if you guys could tell us a little bit about yourselves and your roles at the city of Brainerd.

Jennifer Bergman:

Sure. My name is Jennifer Bergman. I'm the city administrator for the city of Brainerd. Uh, I've been in my position for a little over five months. It's been an interesting, uh, year to take this new position. And I was the executive director for the Brainerd Housing and Redevelopment Authority where I was there for about eight and a half years, and I had previously worked for the cities of Anoka, Columbia Heights, and Mounds View, and then also Anoka County.

Kris Schubert:

My name is Kris Schubert. I am the HR director for the city of Brainerd. I was born and raised in the Brainerd Lakes area. I have worked for the city of Brainerd for 32 years. I currently provide HR services for the city, Brainerd Public Utilities, the Brainerd Housing and Redevelopment Authority, and the Brainerd Lakes Regional Airport Commission. That represents 140 full-time employees, 35 paid on-call firefighters, and normally about 75 temporary seasonal employees. This year is a little different though.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Wow. You guys both have so much experience. I feel really honored to be speaking to the two of you. Um, you're a wealth of city knowledge, that's for sure, and Kris, you alluded there to the fact that things are a little unusual this year, and ...

Kris Schubert:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Adriana Temali-Smith:

... we are here to talk about your preparedness plan for opening the city during this pandemic that we're in. Um, so let me just ask the question of what has been the city of Brainerd's experience throughout this COVID-19 pandemic?

Jennifer Bergman:

So we started planning for a stay at home work plan actually about two weeks prior to the governor's Executive Order 20-20, which was that stay at home work plan. We were watching what was starting to happen in European countries, um, Italy and so forth, as well as what we were seeing in other states throughout the United States. And so, again, about two weeks before that, we thought, you know, let's put a team together and let's start working on this. Um, our team was our department heads, but then we also included a decision maker in that, so one of our councilmembers was appointed as a liaison, uh, to this committee.

Jennifer Bergman:

The very first thing that, that we did, and Kris will get into a little more detail on this, is that we identified each staff person: who could work from home, who couldn't. Of course, we have streets, um, employees. We have parks maintenance. Those people work from their trucks. It would be very difficult for them to be able to work from home. So after identifying that, then we really had to look at how many laptops, tablets, monitors we had to deploy. Um, I think the police department was really interesting also because of their security requirements. So we had records clerks, um, how do they work from home? So the very first thing we did after kind of identifying that is we did put together a draft stay at home work plan for the city of Brainerd. The city council called an emergency meeting on March 29th to approve that work plan, and our very first meeting was kind of a hybrid of video and in-person, and it failed miserably.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Really? Why? What happened?

Jennifer Bergman:

Oh my gosh. So the people who joined us virtually couldn't hear the people that were in person so we kept having to try to ask our councilmembers to run up front to speak directly into our computer so that the people who joined us virtually could hear them. So we quickly realized that that was not going to work, and we really needed to do something solely online. Our IT department did quite a bit of research, um, on all of the different platforms, and they really found that WebEx seemed to be the most secure platform. One of the things that we found out is at Brainerd, we do have a lot of Brainerd residents who only have a landline. We wanted to make sure that we had a toll-free number so that people wouldn't get charged a long-distance fee to be able to attend the public meeting.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So you talked a little bit already about the experience of getting employees home, having a plan around the technology, getting the WebEx. What else was part of the experience that you had at the city of Brainerd during the pandemic?

Jennifer Bergman:

So it was really interesting. Our mayor, uh, in March resigned, effective ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Wow.

Jennifer Bergman:

... on April first.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah, that's a big deal.

Jennifer Bergman:

It was a big deal, and at our emergency meeting, um, he did, was willing to continue to serve as mayor until the council could appoint a new mayor, so while he resigned effective April 1st, um, at our April 4th city council meeting, we actually did mayoral interviews ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jennifer Bergman:

... to appoint a new mayor, uh, virtually, so by WebEx, which was interesting, and the council interviewed those five candidates virtually and then voted, um, to appoint a new mayor. The council decided, uh, or voted on, one of our sitting councilmembers, so then we had to appoint a new city councilmember virtually at a subsequent meeting. So it was an interesting experience, uh, to see that government work in a virtual setting.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Well, so the two of you have shared a number of challenges over the last three months. Some I think are, are kind of universal to the experience of the pandemic that other cities can relate to, and some are pretty unique, I think, to what the city of Brainerd went through, certainly with the mayor resignation. What has been your approach through the challenge in, in terms of leading people, you've got staff, council, community, um, in a time of crisis like this?

Jennifer Bergman:

Specifically in the last three months, um, we've had a few challenges. First of all, in 2019, we actually started a remodel of City Hall, and implemented a new software in, in February for all of our staff. Then, of course, we had the stay at home work order from the governor in March, and then in May, uh, we actually had a fire at City Hall, so it has been, uh, an interesting time to take a new job like this (laughs). What I can ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah. I mean, let's just pause and remind listeners ...

Jennifer Bergman:

(laughs)

Adriana Temali-Smith:

... you've been there five months.

Jennifer Bergman:

I have.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

And you had a fire which hasn't come up yet as well. Could you say a little bit more about the fire?

Jennifer Bergman:

Absolutely. So we, as I mentioned, we're doing a remodel to City Hall. Uh, we're putting in a new HVAC system, and in addition a new roof. So, um, on May 18th, um, we ended up, uh, having the roof start on

fire, and while the fire didn't do a lot of damage, the water and the smoke sure did. So ironically, we had just the week before finished the third floor of City Hall and had just moved all of our office furniture back up to the third floor, and our goal was to reopen City Hall at the end of May. And then of course, on May 18th, we had a fire, and so we now had to refix the third floor that had just been completed, so that was quite a challenge (laughs).

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah. That's a pretty serious setback, and I'm sure, I mean, Kris alluded to the fact that there were people who are eager to get back to work, there's challenges about working from home, and you kind of anticipate the date that you might be coming back to the office, and then boom, it gets set back by this fire. How did you guys handle that from a leadership perspective?

Jennifer Bergman:

So what I'm gonna say is we have an amazing team. Um, I am really proud to report that that fire got called into our fire department at 12:24. Our fire department was on scene at 12:27, and they had contained the fire in 10 minutes. Um ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's amazing. Yeah ...

Jennifer Bergman:

Yeah. The ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's a huge credit to them.

Jennifer Bergman:

Huge credit to them. Now, of course, it continued to smolder, but the fire had been put out. It probably took them another two hours to completely, uh, get rid of it, but, but for our fire department, we very easily could have lost the entire City Hall. So I think we were really fortunate in that, um, and again, I can't stress enough our team. Um, I think everybody, the majority of the staff as soon as they heard there was a fire came in, uh, to City Hall. The fire department allowed a few staff to go in there once they knew it was safe to try to save our equipment, save our computers, save our files, um, so we had three of us kind of stomping around through water on the third floor trying to gather as many things as we possibly could to save the city as much as we could. So, you know, again, I can't say enough about our staff and our team and how everybody is there just to pitch in whenever it's needed.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Let's take a quick break to hear from a member of the League's Business Leadership Council.

Message from a member of the League's Business Leadership Council:

[Music] For decades, Gallagher has helped cities with compensation, benefits, and compliance. We pride ourselves on tackling questions like, "Insurance is complicated. Where do I start?" "How can we have better union negotiations around rising benefit costs?" Tell us about your city so we can help you face your future with confidence. To learn more from Gallagher's Minnesota Public Sector team, call (952) 356-3852 or visit ajg.com. [Music ends]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay. Let's get back with the show. So let's transition to talking about your preparedness plan for reopening. Could you tell us what it includes and how did it come together?

Kris Schubert:

So sure. We started looking at that preparedness plan that was provided by DEED, and it looked a little overwhelming at first, and I had participated in a training session from the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities. They originally provided a sample that focused more on local governments, and the primary focus of that sample was for the safety of our staff. So we decided to utilize that sample for our original situation. It provided for the prompt identification and isolation of sick staff and staff exposed to sickness, and to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. At that time, most of our staff were still working from home with some staffs returning to work on a limited basis. Um, just to give you an idea of a time frame, that original plan was adopted on May 19th.

Kris Schubert:

Uh, we also provided letters to each department clarifying return to work guidelines and sanitization expectations: who was driving what vehicle, who was going to be cleaning all our counters and bathroom doorknobs and stuff like that every day, just to make sure our staff felt comfortable coming back to work.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kris Schubert:

And then on June 5th, Governor Walz issued Executive Order 20-74. With that order, staff is now in the process of revising our plan to utilize more of the state's template to address the safety of employees in customer-facing positions in the public. Uh, the template and instructions are very helpful and informative, and we plan to present our revised preparedness plan to the city council on July 6th.

Kris Schubert:

As far as resources that we have used regarding our preparedness plan, the League of Minnesota Cities has been wonderful. They have COVID-19 guidance and frequently asked question information for us on their website. We appreciate that it has links to the applicable state websites such as DEED, the Department of Health, and also the state's Stay Safe Minnesota website. Needless to say, this has, this process has been a team effort, and, um, very thankful for all of our management team that's come together to get us to where we are today, and with the support of our city council.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's a lot of work that you guys have been putting in. Jennifer, do you have anything to add?

Jennifer Bergman:

Well, I think the other thing that I would add too, you know, and as a part of our preparedness plan and getting ready to reopen City Hall to the public, you know, we are, we are concerned about our staff, um, but we're also concerned about the people who are visiting City Hall as well. So we have installed plexi-, or actually regular glass on all of our counters, uh, with enough space to be able to hear our, our customers. Although City Hall has been closed to the public, the other thing that we've tried to do is make sure that we're still able to provide services to the public. We recognize that's really important, and making sure that our staff are wearing masks when they're meeting with anybody from the public that would be scheduling meetings if anybody needs to have an in-person meeting. We're really trying to think about it both from the safety of, of our staff, as well as the safety of our residents as well.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So as the city is preparing to return to work, what are your priorities right now?

Kris Schubert:

So right now our priority is to maintain our workforce. Um, we've had a couple of retirements and, um, some people, uh, that have left, so we need, needed to make sure that we still maintain our workforce. From the employment side, it's been challenging. We've had to conduct virtual interviews. We've had to utilize things such as FaceTime, Skype, Messenger, Microsoft Teams, um, and when all else failed, we had to just do a conference call. It wasn't ideal, but it worked.

Kris Schubert:

Um, right now, and actually today, we're conducting police officer interviews for our eligibility list. We've had to change our practice a little bit. Normally we would do physical agility testing in one day in our training room. This year, what we've had to do though is we had to move all of our equipment outside, and we utilized our high school track instead, and we broke it out over two days to utilize social distancing.

Kris Schubert:

Normally we would ask representatives of our neighboring communities and a member of our public to serve on our panel. That didn't work this year. We didn't want to expose either, um, those people to the COVID or the, the applicants. So instead we have utilized an all-internal staff to do the interview process. We are making sure to be careful to utilize, um, gloves and sanitizing wipes for the interview table, doorknobs, chair arms, everything before and after each interview. Um, we even had to bring in separate tables for each panel member to make sure that they had that social distancing requirement, and it's been interesting. We've, uh, even asked the police chief to rotate the chairs in for the candidates so that they are not being exposed to any kind of fabric from someone else. Um, the last thing we've done is we're allowing anyone if they feel the need to, if they want to, they can utilize a face mask. We're not gonna ask them to take that off.

Kris Schubert:

We've also had to do some onboarding during this process, so, uh, as an example of what we did there, we had an officer start for us, and during that process, um, we got the paperwork ready for him, gave him the packet, and then I utilized FaceTime to see what forms he had so that we could go through it. It was a little challenging, but it worked, we made it work. And, um, right now as we return to City Hall, we are, uh, utilizing our training room so that we have several tables available so that we can utilize social distancing.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So we've all needed a little bit of positivity throughout what's been some challenging months. I'm wondering what are some of the positive practices that we can bring from quarantine into our everyday as we begin to return to work.

Jennifer Bergman:

I think there's been a lot of positives that have come out of the quarantine. I'm gonna start with the fire at City Hall. I think we were very fortunate that a good majority of our city staff were actually working from home. We had about 10 people at City Hall at the time of the fire, and luckily it happened over lunch, so I think that was really a positive thing. As ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah, nobody was injured, correct?

Jennifer Bergman:

Nobody was injured. And again, fortunately, so many of us, I think about two-thirds at that point, of our staff were working from home. We have all learned how to very quickly jump on a WebEx call and talk to each other face-to-face, and so I think it's gonna change the way that we have meetings in the future. I

think that the city council is very anxious to return to in-person meetings, but I think there are other ways that we can continue to be innovative when it comes to virtual meetings.

Jennifer Bergman:

I think we're also all learning about the importance of cleaning and disinfecting, not only for COVID-19, but for other flus. Um, the installation of the glass partitions — while we were concerned it was going to be a barrier, we don't want a barrier between city staff and the public. We want to make sure that our residents know that we are open. And so after we got that glass installed, what we realized is that it's still really easy to communicate. So I, I think there have been positives that have come out of the quarantine, uh, al- although I'm not going to lie, it has been challenging at times.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah, absolutely. I especially appreciate the positive around the fire. When you started saying that you thought there was a positive to do with the fire, I thought, "Wow, that's, that's really impressive that you're able to look at it like that." I think a lot of people would have said, "All that work and remodeling, you know, and all that work moving back everything into the third floor," um, and be, it would be difficult for some to see the silver lining and, of course, you're able to put that spin on it, and I really appreciate that about you.

Jennifer Bergman:

And let me give you another kudos, actually, for the League of Minnesota Cities. You are our insurance carrier, and our fire was on a Monday afternoon, and Tuesday morning, uh, the, our insurance representative was there — uh, meeting with us, going through everything, making sure we knew what we were supposed to do and how to be doing it. So thanks to the League of Minnesota Cities for that as well.

Kris Schubert:

What I had thought about was, um, when we talk about positive practices, two things that come to my mind is, um, what has really played a positive role or a major role in this in going forward will be adaptability and empathy. Our staff and council had to be fluid and just figure things out as they developed. Also empathy is huge. There is not time or room for blame or judging. We needed to treat each other fairly and consistently, and everybody helped out where they could, and it's huge. Um, that's part of the reason why I like working where I do.

Jennifer Bergman:

And you know, I'd like to add something to that too, because I think of all of the things that were thrown at us in these two to three months, you know, things that, not only the city of Brainerd, but no city has ever had to deal with before, so really it, it was just a team effort, um, and everybody stepping up and acting very quickly to make sure that we were doing everything we could in our power, uh, for the benefit of our residents and our businesses.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Kris and Jennifer, I want to thank you so much for being on the City Speak podcast today. It was a pleasure getting to chat to you both.

Jennifer Bergman:

And I just wanna say thank you to the League for doing these podcasts. I think it's really interesting to hear, um, how other cities in, in Minnesota are handling issues that can be really so unique to cities. So thanks to the League for doing those, much appreciated.

Kris Schubert:

I totally agree. Thank you very much.

[Podcast theme music]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Here at City Speak, we like to wrap up by reflecting on the important lessons that our guests bring us.

One of the things I really enjoyed [podcast theme music fades out] in talking to Kris and Jennifer was that question that I asked them about looking for the positives. They really caught me off guard by bringing out that silver lining about the fire, and the fact that nobody was injured, it was over a lunch hour, most people were working from home. I would say that the ability as a leader to look for those silver linings and find positivity in what can feel like a crisis, is really essential to leading groups of people.

The second thing that I heard in abundance from both of them was pride: pride in the services that the city delivers, whether it's the response time of the firefighters, or pride in the city itself in terms of the, the residents coming together, rallying around the downtown businesses, being able to ensure that the community has free access via the telephone to join council meetings. There was a clear pride in the work that they do and in the work that the city does.

The third thing, and perhaps central to our entire conversation today, was just the fact that safety has to come first, and that's safety for the people who work in the city and it's safety for the community itself. And in all honesty, I couldn't be more proud of the city of Brainerd, as they have managed to get through the multiple hurdles that they've faced in these past four months. A huge congratulations to Kris and to Jennifer for the work that they are doing, and to all of those who work for the city of Brainerd.

[Podcast theme music] That's it for our show today. I want to thank you for listening to City Speak. Episodes are released regularly and are posted on the League's website and via Twitter. You can find us on iTunes, Google Play Music, and other podcast applications. If you have an idea for an episode, feedback, or just want to get in touch, you can connect with us at podcast@lmc.org. Until next time, take care.

[Podcast theme music ends]