
Government Greening COVID-19



'Pulse check' research // April 2020

Background

This report summarises work done by Greener Spaces Better Places to listen to understand current attitudes, concerns and needs of green space professionals at local and state levels of government in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, including:

- the current state of urban greening programs
- key challenges to maintaining them
- immediate opportunities that exist to support green space professionals to continue to deliver the health and wellbeing, environmental and economic benefits that vital green spaces provide.

This purpose of sharing this work is to provide our Living Network with insights gleaned during this work, and the opportunity to exchange knowledge and possible solutions to the identified challenges.

Context

As well as the program's research findings, it is worth noting the recent NSW Government announcement supporting 'shovel ready' local government projects.

It outlines the opportunity to position green space projects as 'shovel ready essential services projects' that significantly contribute to maintaining local council jobs.

The Daily Telegraph

NSW CORONAVIRUS NEWS

NSW government spend \$350m on local council stimulus

Ben Pike, Urban Affairs Reporter, The Sunday Telegraph
April 26, 2020 8:20am

NSW Treasurer Dominic Perrottet is offering \$250 million in cheap loans to the state's 128 local councils to ensure they get shovel ready projects off the ground.

The cash injection is designed to limit job losses in the NSW local government sector, which is the biggest employer in many regional areas.

"This is about keeping people in jobs which will allow councils to continue to provide essential services in their communities throughout the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and bounce back faster once we come out the other side," Mr Perrottet said.

Sydney Business Chamber executive director Katherine O'Regan also welcomed the cash, saying "this is money well spent, bringing local jobs and much needed investment in local infrastructure such as swimming pools, sports fields and community facilities".

Context

The ACT has created clear precedent for local government stimulus to be applied to tree planting.

The Canberra Times
TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

APRIL 23 2020 - 9:00AM

4000 new trees to be planted as part of coronavirus stimulus plan

An estimated 4000 trees will be planted across Canberra in a bid to keep city service workers in jobs during the coronavirus crisis.

The \$3 million program will also include a makeover of the city's playgrounds and public spaces as part of the ACT government's COVID-19 stimulus package.

Ten new jobs will be created as part of a tree team based in south Canberra and will focus on a backlog of tree maintenance requests and Canberra's urban forests.

ACT City Services Minister Chris Steel said the program was designed to keep people in work during the pandemic.

"Responding to the spread of COVID-19 is one of the greatest challenges our city has ever faced," Mr Steel said.

"To do this, we need to work together with Canberrans to create job opportunities for those that need it and support local businesses through this difficult time."

The number of trees planted as part of the government's Autumn tree planting program has more than doubled this year as part of the stimulus, rising from 1500 planted last year to 4000.

Methodology

Given how rapidly responses to the COVID19 pandemic are changing, our approach in this research was to take a 'snapshot' of the thinking within a very specific timeframe (March 31 - April 13, 2020).

To gain these insights, we undertook two kinds of outreach:

1 Local Government Survey

This survey was sent to 300+ people working in urban greening within urban local government across Australia. The response rate was around 20%, providing a sample-size but not complete view of all councils. Councils vary considerably in their response based on size and financial position. Given that our survey is only a sample, it is possible that key councils can skew the results.

2 Interviews

In each State we spoke with a cross-section of people working at local and state government as well as government associations and elected representatives to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities of the current situation.

Key findings

60%

of respondents said that Urban Greening (including tree planting, maintenance, potted colour displays), and other capital works projects like new parks **have been considered 'essential'** and expenditure will remain the same or be brought forward.



Based on these findings, demand for trees and plants by government is currently at risk in **40%** of LGAs, however some of this may be offset by increased demand from councils able to afford to bring forward expenditure.

12%

of respondents said that urban greening projects like new tree planting, community greening projects and major works **have been considered 'non-essential'** and have been paused until further notice. Around 50% of these stated that some basic maintenance like mowing, arboriculture, weeding and cleansing is continuing but tree planting and other green spaces projects have been halted.

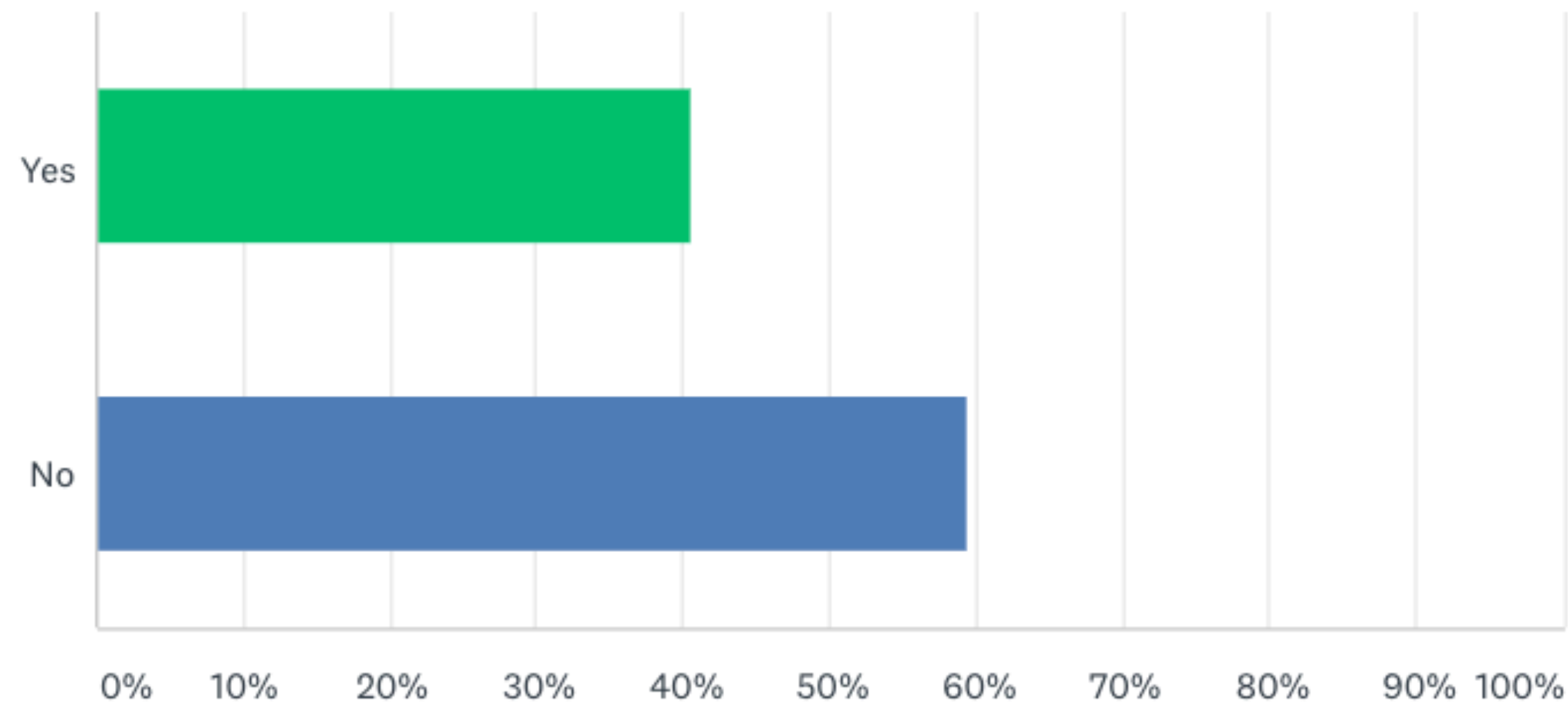
28%

responded 'other', reflecting a high level of uncertainty in the immediate future status of urban greening programs in their LGA.

Key findings

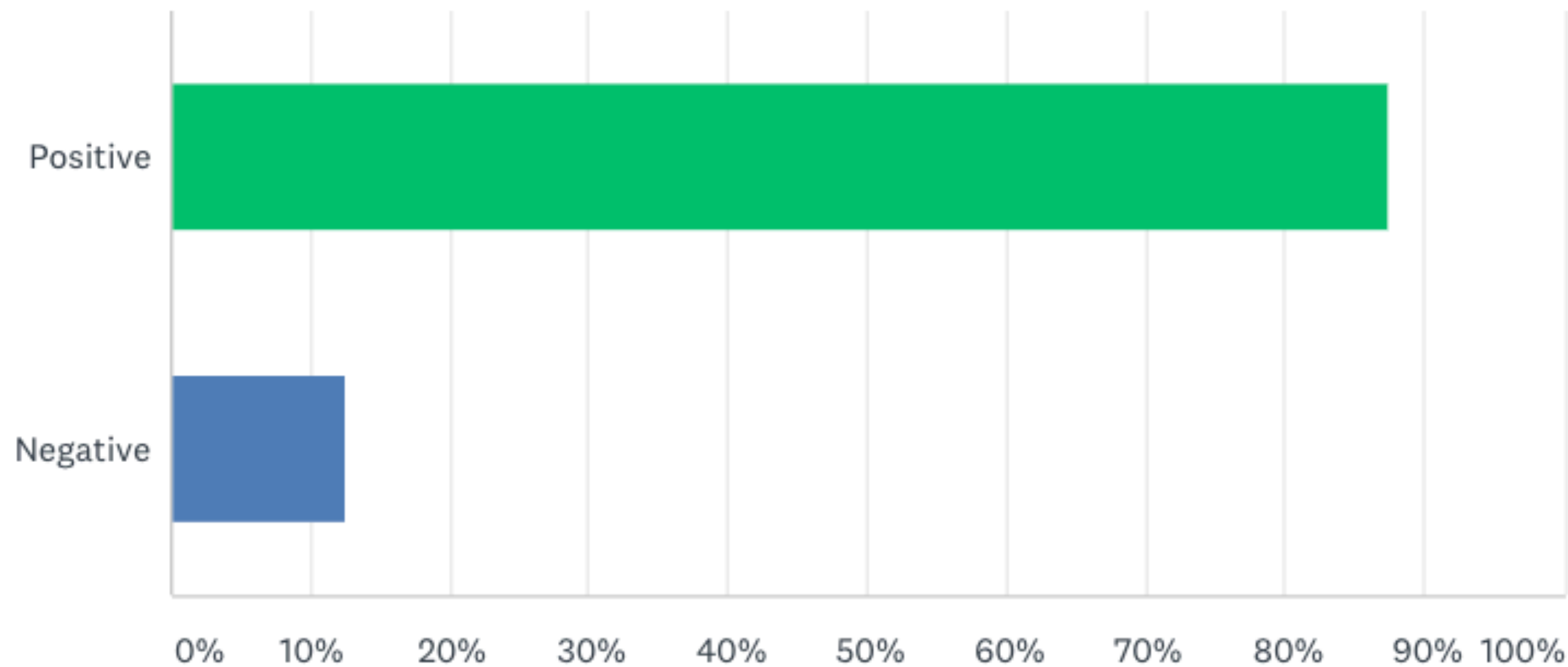
40%

of respondents are receiving State, Federal or philanthropic funding to undertake urban greening in their local government area. This would suggest that decreased rate revenue is lesser immediate risk factor in these LGAs.



Key findings

87% of respondents have noticed a positive shift in community attitudes toward urban green space



“ Parks, promenades and open spaces have become vital community place. They are peoples’ backyards for those living in denser suburbs with apartment blocks. Urban green space and the quality of residential spaces has never been more important.”

“Increased numbers of people using parks and recreational spaces. Lights on sports grounds have been turned on during evenings to extend times for people to use the parks.”

“There are so many people outside recreating and exercising that it is difficult to maintain the 1.5-2m separation.”

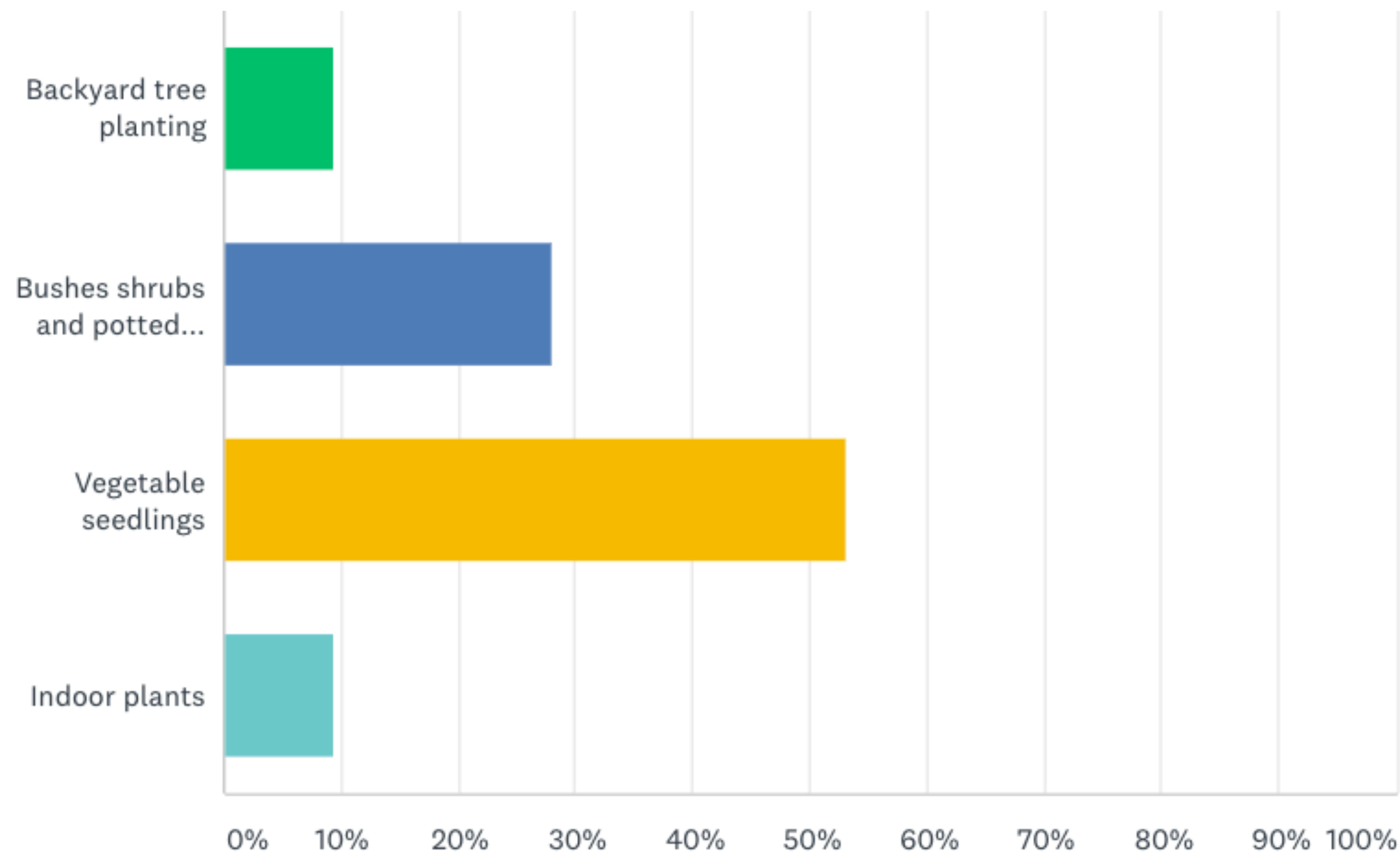
“More people are becoming aware that getting outside fresh air is essential for mental health and wellbeing. There should be more street tree programs. Also, every street can become active and lift spirits even in the lowest income areas where parks are not maintained well.”

“People tend to be visiting parklands less frequently at this time due to compulsory closures of play equipment, outdoor gyms, BBQs, skate parks, basketball hoops etc.”

Key findings

100%

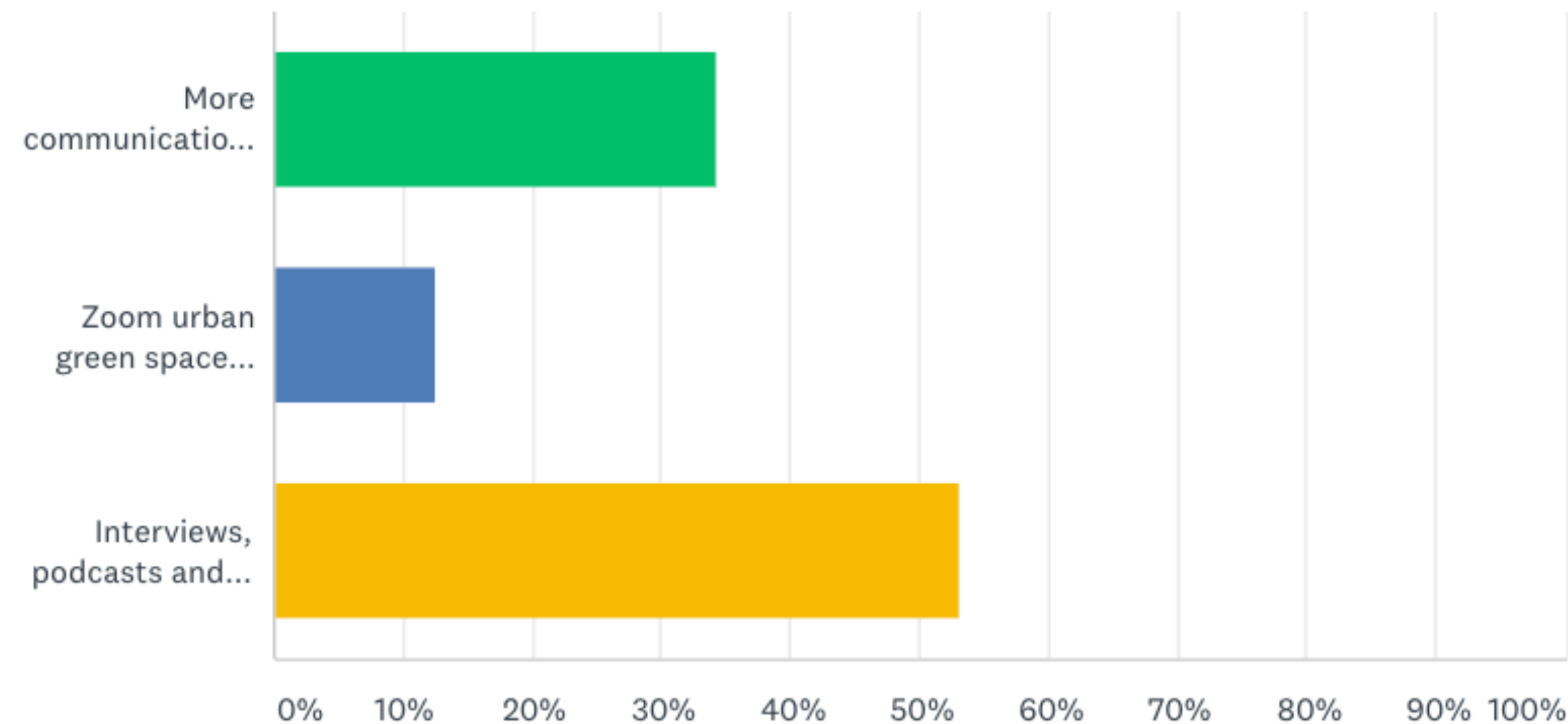
of respondents believe that there is a greater interest among their community in urban greening at home, with vegetable planting the lead



“ There is more interest in backyards. There has been an innovative approach with a local NGO to sell seedlings for fruit trees, and I run a greening verge that is picking up more enquiries about growing seeds on their front porch to share more. ”

Key findings

100% of respondents would like to see more support for councils in communications the value of green space during COVID-19



“

More support for local governments to get increased funding to continue tree programs including community education, tree preservation and incentives for growing the urban forest.”

“Continue advocacy of green space as public health enablers - not spreaders of viruses.”

“Harness the opportunity that greater appreciation for green spaces is providing at the moment.”

“Start really encouraging greening of backyards and verges.”

“More research to understand how much more green spaces are being used during the lockdowns.”

”

Summary of opportunities

Based on the research, we see three immediate opportunities for Greener Spaces Better Places and the nursery and garden industry to support councils.

1 Research Evidence

While usage and appreciation of urban green space appears to be at an all time high, there are no statistics to back this up. There is a one in a lifetime opportunity to gather this information while behaviours and attitudes are changing, and promote activities that encourage longer-term behaviour change.

It appears that Councils and State Government do not have the capacity to undertake research or gather this data at this stage, but there is an opportunity to do so.

2 Enable private greening

The increased interest in greenlife and gardening among consumers due to the COVID-19 situation offers the opportunity to continue setting the agenda of what people can do in their home and on private land to contribute to their own health and wellbeing - as well as support their local economy. However, some people feel unsafe accessing plants and trees and some council tree giveaways have also been cancelled. As such, fulfilling demand has become more difficult at a time when understanding of benefits are highest.

There exists opportunity for councils wishing to promote private urban greening to work with local nurseries to fulfil this demand.

3 Seek funding

The biggest challenge facing many councils is that they are not generating enough revenue through rates, fees and charges, parking and other assets to ensure that they can continue spending on projects as they have done.

Given that no criteria appears to be set for how and what local government stimulus packages will be for, there is an opportunity to make a compelling economic, environmental, health and environmental case for ensuring that projects with green space outcomes are prioritised.

Research results - deep dive



> Local Government Survey - key insights

Continuity:

60% of respondents reported that at this stage, urban greening projects will continue as business-as-usual. However there is also a high-level of uncertainty. Maintenance of existing green space seems 'safe', but community planting programs, education and strategic greening are most at risk of having funding reduced. 40% of councils that responded are receiving State or Federal grants to undertake their projects - it is unclear what will happen at this stage, but it seems likely that given these grants are conditioned to have trees planted within a certain timeframe, that councils will ask for an extension.

Community attitudes:

87% of respondents reported a positive community attitude toward green space and a significant increase in usage. While this is the dominant trend in high density areas, there are reports that there is a decline in usage where equipment was the main draw card. Greening on private land appears to have a huge amount of community support and preparedness at this stage, with vegetable and seedlings followed by potted plants and shrubs as potentially the most popular ways of achieving this.

Research:

While anecdotally across the board, people are observing a high shift in community attitudes toward their green spaces, there does not appear to be any research or framework for measurement with which to back this up. Capturing this type of data would help councils continue to make the case for more green space investment, as well as provide an interesting data set to plan for future community and greening infrastructure.

Support:

Our council network members have many suggestions on how GSBP can best support them at this time, from providing guidance on digital and community communication, to virtual green space tours, and sharing interesting articles and podcasts. The support that they are requesting broadly falls into the following three categories:

Communications support: Continue sharing stories that help frame a positive green space narrative and highlight the co-benefits

Pathways: Creating pathways through which councils can engage with relevant industry bodies to clarify what it is they need from State and Federal government

Research: A nimble approach to data collection on usage patterns and attitudes toward green space at this time.

> Findings - Part Two

Interviews

From April 6-13, we also conducted phone interviews with key local and State government contacts in each State.

Additionally, we spoke as many people as well could from local government associations, elected representatives and other key stakeholders on the condition of anonymity.

We asked them to tell us what:

- **What the current situation was within their organisation, regarding COVID-19?**
- **What are the challenges?**
- **What are the opportunities?**

New South Wales

Inner City Council

Situation

Departmental managers were asked to prepare a business continuity plan in response to COVID19

Various cases for continuity were assessed against one another by the General Manager to determine which ones were essential, and which were not i.e. waste collection, street-sweeping, building maintenance, tree planting etc.

In the case of this council the tree planting program was seen as non-essential and has been paused

Challenge

Tree-planting projects under consideration involved a considerable amount of face-to-face meeting time and/or situations where it would be difficult to observe physical distancing

Operational tree-planting, community-based urban greening projects all been halted

This council have requested an extended period of time to undertake and acquit the match-funding that they have received from the State Government as part of the 5 million trees program

Operational tree services have been halted as the parks crews that ordinarily undertake this work have been redeployed to services considered as 'essential'

There have been no lay-offs or urban greening council staff made redundant at this stage.

Opportunity

This council operates two community nurseries with full-time staff. With the bush regeneration programs paused, there is a surplus of plants at the nurseries and therefore an opportunity to divert these plants to residents who may like to plant them in their yards or verges

New South Wales

Suburban Metro Council

Situation

There are a range of measures that this council are taking to ensure continuity across their trees project, as part of the NSW Government initiative to plant five million trees for Greater Sydney by 2030. They could proceed with planting from April onwards in light of COVID-19 restriction

While face-to-face community consultation is not possible, this council are using interactive maps to engage the community with the program and community members can request a free tree to plant on their private property

Challenge

While there are some challenges in terms of not being able to speak to people in person, these are being overcome in a myriad of ways using technology both old and new

Planting projects often require that people show up to the one space to collect their plants (think Tree Giveaways). However due to physical distancing, they have had to find new ways of doing this largely through pre-ordering and managing the distribution of plant stock

Opportunity

In response to the challenges posed by physical distancing, this council have undertaken the following measures:

They have split their teams into smaller groups that focus on either preparation or planting and are keeping these groups isolated from one another, so that if one person or team were to become ill, work could continue

They have staggered the rollout starting in April, with the ambition of getting in 30 plants per day

Community engagement is the primary focus of the tree project, so the priority right now is to continue to build connections with people and the trees during COVID-19 so as measures ease, there is already a great deal of support for the program

New South Wales

State Government

Situation

Given that the planting of 1 million trees by 2023 is one of two Premier's Priorities, there is a strong awareness among the department that everything possible must be done to ensure the continuity of tree planting programs. To that end, they are also very aware of the need for 'shovel-ready' projects that can receive Federal stimulus funding

Challenge

There is a concern that without the support of local government and with the halting of projects, that they will be unable to achieve their tree planting goals.

The NSW State Government is concerned that COVID-19 will disrupt the horticultural industry and tree supply for when planting will resume in 6 months

Opportunity

It is important there are tree planting programs and opportunities to reconnect as soon as the lockdowns are lifted.

New South Wales

Mayor

Situation

The Council is in a very good position - morale is high, there has been no loss of staff and all of the open space, parks and reserves are open

The council have managed to strike a clear balance between operational and strategic concerns within their teams and at this stage it is mostly business as usual, with some key adaptations for example redeploying their swimming pool staff to the beaches and home-delivering 11,000 library items in the first week

Challenge

The COVID challenges have followed-on from the flooding issues that happened throughout January and February. So the big challenge has been keeping up with the maintenance regime - this has been accelerated in light of sports fields not currently being used

Community sports is on hold, this means that they need to come up with a solution to accommodate the overlap of Summer and Winter sports for the 2020/21 season

At this stage there will be a delay to some capital works projects as there is a \$16-30 million budget hole and subsequent delays on these projects

Capital works that are budgeted for within the next four years remain unchanged. Revenue is a major challenge and means that major works will be pushed out. The business continuity of sports clubs is a major issue as they are losing revenue through canteens, and registration fees

Opportunity

There are many many more people out and about using paths, parks and reserves throughout this council. They have also noticed that they are being used differently - there is much less organised sports, and much more families out kicking balls in open space and cycling.

There is money for the tree canopy within the forward budget for tree-planting. The Mayor is very interested in how they could be encouraging the community to plant and care for street trees at this time, and this is likely to happen shortly

There's also a great story about a 15-year-old local girl who set up a community garden at the council nursery and is continuing to do so within the limitations of physical distancing.

Victoria

Municipal Association of Victoria

Situation

It's too early for MAV to provide a clear indication of what local governments will do with their spending on urban greening. Overall, the position of councils seems to be quite conservative and reliant on what the State and Federal government will do

Challenge

Unlike in NSW, councils in Victoria have not had advice from their relevant Minister as to whether they are able to:

Conduct meetings online*

Move their council elections until after September
Extend the submission of their budgets until after June 30

The key risk to industry is that decisions regarding green space spending will be delayed until after September 2020

The worst case scenario would be that for the next 6 months, there will be a freeze on capital works spending - which would include green space

Opportunity

Some Victorian councils are paring back to skeleton budgets and waiting to see what State and Federal governments do in terms of announcing potential stimulus packages

During the GFC, stimulus packages were granted to local governments to keep capital works programs happening. Urban greening played a big role in this, and would be a key advocacy position that industry could take to support MAV

*Note that this has since been revised by the Minister

Situation

Urban greening at the council is business as usual, partly due to the recognition that there are many contractors and businesses involved throughout the supply chain and that it is in no-one's interest to halt, pause or redeploy urban greening teams while it is still safe to keep these programs running

The council knows that any disruption to its greening programs and initiatives would cause a significant ripple effect throughout their organisation, supply chain and industry which would make it much more difficult to recover

Their major contractor for urban greening works has been 'doubling-down' their efforts to undertake as much work as possible, taking full advantage of greater access to sites

Capital works programs will continue and ramp up, as long as a Stage Four or Five lockdown do not prevent them from doing so

There is currently no plans to open up the community funding to round three, but there are currently 15 projects already underway and will be delivered

The council fully recognise their urban greening programs as essential services and have no intention at all of delaying, halting, cancelling or defunding them - the reverse is more true. While it is safe to do so, they will continue to deliver their works

Challenge

There is some tension between the continuation of strategic versus operational programs, but the general attitude is that a balance needs to be struck between the both in order for there to be 'shovel-ready' projects ready to receive State/Federal stimulus, as well as ensure a longer term pipeline of work

The council is extremely aware that the biggest risk to business continuity is for one of the staff or contractors to contract COVID19, which would potentially jeopardise the entire supply chain

Opportunity

While there should be advocacy for the continuation of maintenance and tree planting programs that are 'shovel-ready', there is also a need to champion ongoing strategic work to ensure future demand of green life products

Due to physical distancing measures, some community planting days have been cancelled, but there is a significant realisation that now - while people are at home looking out of their windows - **is the opportunity to build a real passion for horticulture** and green space

In order to take full advantage of people being home, industry and partners need to move quickly to provide people with the opportunity to do so: **"now is the time to be thinking sideways and double down on efforts that have public impact, and thoughtfully communicate the benefits of urban green spaces"**

Community attitudes toward the value of public green space have radically shifted, parks are busier than they've ever been, necessitating in some circumstances digital message boards and increased rangers on patrol to enforce social distancing

People really see the benefit of public urban green space when their own personal space is limited and that is all they have

Victoria

State Government

Situation

At this stage, there hasn't been any slow down on government planning programs, but this may be due to the fact that the full impact of COVID19 is yet to be realised

The State Government is currently working on reforms that make it more difficult to remove tree canopy, and easier to increase canopy and green space

While there have been some changes to resourcing within planning teams, it's not yet clear how this will affect the timeline of the planning reforms. At this stage, the proposed changes to the controls are progressing - ideally with an announcement to be made by the Minister in January

State and Local governments are continuing with what is required to respond to the new planning controls at a state level. This is happening at an officer level, with the expectation that it will go to Councils for endorsement - however Councils being unable to meet in Victoria presents a new set of challenges

Most councils appear to be progressing planning scheme changes in line with the proposed stat changes, and to this end are working with the department with informal endorsements to proceed.

Challenge

Uncertainty: no-one has a clear sense of when the 'peak' will be, therefore decisions about resourcing hasn't been made

Senior Directors are preoccupied with immediate health concerns and economic fallout, so have not yet begun to think about urban green space

There are some sensitivities surrounding the green space 'narrative'. As the situations evolves, urban greening projects may potentially be seen as 'luxury' items - **nice to have but not essential**

There is a political risk that some elected representatives do not recognise the potential value of green space projects, and as a result redirect resources and funding to those that appear to meet more 'immediate' needs or are seen as 'doing something' directly related to COVID-19. E.g sending teams in to disinfect public spaces

There is an emerging narrative that the urban design of suburbs are perfect for pandemic conditions - this is counter to the dominant idea that cities require densification to become truly sustainable.

Opportunity

Establish a positive and leading narrative:

If the narrative can be framed in a way that highlighted the co-benefits (health, economic, social and environmental) of green space projects, there is an unparalleled opportunity to fast track projects and gain high levels of political and community support

Reframing the issue is incredibly important at this time - as senior bureaucrats pivot to thinking about their recovery responses, it is important the green space 'shovel-ready' projects can remain front of mind

To make the strong economic case for urban greening projects as essential infrastructure projects that have the ability to provide lots of flow-on benefits to local communities

Victoria

Global Cities Resilient Network

Situation

RC100 have taken the view that this is an enormous opportunity to fast track the implementation of the Living Melbourne Plan. The observation is that while it has taken people a couple of weeks to adjust to the new conditions, quite a strong response in favour of the value of green space is emerging

Whilst there are six Living Melbourne projects currently underway, there are another six or seven in scoping phase up until June 30. It is hoped that these projects would be 'shovel-ready' and in implementation mode by the new financial year.

Challenge

Many stakeholder organisation staff naturally took a few weeks to adjust to the COVID-19 'working from home' environment.

This initially caused some delays in progressing projects as connections with project lead and supporter organisations was re-established. This situation gradually resolved itself as April progressed and adjustments to work demands were made.

The key challenge will be to maintaining momentum and ensure that the scoping of projects is undertaken carefully by project stakeholders without the opportunity of face-to-face meetings and BAU.

Opportunity

In other councils, urban greening is seen as 'business as usual' and projects will continue

Staff are being repurposed and redeployed and parks and open spaces teams are in a position to absorb this

RC100 agree that a major campaign to promote, encourage and enable urban greening on private property is something that would be well-timed to do over the coming months, and an enormous opportunity

Victoria

Suburban Council

Situation

The current attitude toward greening, bush restoration and tree projects is that all major projects will continue as 'business as usual', both in terms of the regular operations and maintenance of existing green spaces, as well as the continuation and development of council's strategic plans. Library and services staff are being redeployed, but not urban greening staff

Operational teams are out in the field, while strategic teams are working from home and taking advantage of the opportunity to think about what kinds of 'shovel ready' projects they would need to prepare in order to attract stimulus packages

Key projects that are in the works at the moment include:

- Their integrated water management plan that is currently being finalised
- Bushfire and native bushland reserve management
- Urban revegetation projects
- A citizen science Backyard Biodiversity program and;
- An urban heat island reduction program at shopping centres in lower socio-economic areas

Challenge

Within this LGA there are also a lot of wholesale nurseries - especially of advanced trees that have closed their doors to the public, but appear to otherwise be operating business as usual

Opportunity

The approach to the shopping centre projects is to take a community-led approach based on insights into the changing urban landscape in a way that aligns to what people appreciate and would like in terms of a better environment

The brakes have in no way been put on in terms of undertaking community consultation that would further enable this kind of work

Among the community, there has not yet been a noticeable shift in attitudes toward public open space or urban greening in their own yards

Generally speaking the community is very engaged with protecting the environment and there are generally lots of complaints when any trees are cut down (either by council for safety reasons, or illegally by residents).

Victoria

Wholesale Production Nursery, Victoria

Situation

This product nursery mostly serves large private clients in the construction industry

They have restricted public access to the farm and developed a range of measures to ensure that there is minimal contact between staff, equipment and the public. Described as 'common sense', measures include wearing gloves, one driver per truck, not sharing tools and equipment, regular disinfection of door handles and common areas

To manage risk, they are evolving practices as they go and regularly meeting with staff. No-one has had to be laid off and there have been no reduction of shifts

Financially, the nursery is doing extremely well with it's best month ever recorded in March 2020. That said, some other nurseries are not doing so well

Challenge

The majority of the sales going through this nursery don't come from Council or Government contracts directly, instead their key clients are landscapers and developers of major projects in the City.

So while the continuation of capital works by council may provide some benefit, it's not direct. Instead the most valuable thing to this nursery is the continuation of big projects and keeping worksites in the City open

One of the risks/challenges is the adherence to physical distancing on building sites by tradespeople. This has been well publicised in the media. If trades (including landscapers) cannot access sites) then the demand for trees will dry up.

Opportunity

The continuation of any form of infrastructure project is of huge value and importance to this business. Promoting the extended hours of sites is a good thing as it helps spread the amount of people onsite over time. Increasingly, they are doing twilight deliveries, so that landscapers can access sites on a night shift

Establish a nursery forum or resource so that they can share information and keep on top of developments

They have noticed a significant increase in inquiries from the general public wanting to know if they can buy plants and shrubs direct (they can't), they don't see any value in doing small deliveries to the public as they have much bigger clients to service

Observed that there is a huge opportunity for retail nurseries to engage with this emergency trend to not only supply plants and trees but all of the other materials needed for planting.

South Australia

Local Government Association, South Australia

Situation

LGASA have remained in emergency management mode since the bushfires to COVID19, their key role is to liaise between local and State Governments to make sure that the local government can continue to undertake essential work, and make policy changes to enable them to do so

There has been little discussion about green space and open space with regard to COVID with health and waste issues taking priority

There is a new proposed design code being put forward by the State Government which makes it much more difficult to get greening on private space - councils are concerned about this, but there has not been a response to these

The HIA and Urban Development Institute lobbies have been influential with this policy and appear to be leading to an outcome whereby there are very few requirements for permeable or green space on private land within the new design codes

There has been a huge increase in usage of public spaces and green space. The former State government encouraged councils to borrow money for major works while interest rates were low

Challenge

There has been no announcement of direct funding to councils at this stage, the stimulus so far is being diverted to local businesses. LGASA have not yet advocated for this, and are aware that many governments are still processing drought funding from the State and Federal government

Right now, LGASA are mostly just trying to manage the current regulatory framework, and have not yet thought much about how they will emerge from COVID19

Most councils are being forced to rethink their budgets ahead of May when they will need to be approved.

Opportunity

While they are not there yet, councils are beginning to think about programs that they might be able to bring forward that would attract funding

LGASA has had a good working relationship with AILA in the past, but there haven't been conversations recently regarding the importance of green space.

LGASA is open and interested in having these conversations and collaborating to further understand the co-benefits of stimulus that features green space as opposed to that that just brings forward capital works

There's also an opportunity to align stimulus and grants with the State Government's tree canopy targets, although it may be argued that grants have already been given to encourage this.

South Australia

Outer Suburban Council

Situation

There are no confirmed reports of a stimulus package, but people are generally connecting and expect a 'school halls' style stimulus

The response has been too slow, and a lot of worry and concern among council staff as to whether they will keep their job, like in other councils revenues have dried up

The operational work continues teams are digging up and replacing verges with green infrastructure, but jobs are being coordinated at home

Just before the lockdown, their tree strategy was approved by Council to go on exhibition for community consultation which normally means drop-in days, maps and mock-ups that will need to go online. It's uncertain whether online forums and modes of consultation create better/ fairer engagement or less

The key aspect of the new strategy is the treatment of urban green space as essential assets. The good news is that the new Mayor is very passionate about trees and so much new data has become available in the past couple of years that has helped inform their strategy which looks at lots of ways to increase canopy cover through incentivising, encouraging and paying for greening on private land.

Challenge

Undertaking community consultation for the new Tree Strategy will be a challenge. To do this the council had planned on putting large tree tags in the public domain as well as a large scale education campaign. There is a concern that given that many people will be under financial stress that this might be perceived by some as a waste of money

They had also planned to provide new home owners with \$25 vouchers to choose from a selection of trees to 'buy' at their local nursery to plant at home. There is concern that the timing of this might be off, again as people might see trees as a luxury item especially those that might need that money for things like bills and food - so the issue is getting the narrative right

Like many others, revenue to spend on keeping staff and projects going is the key challenge. There is also a concern that without a good education program, all of the people who have purchased seedlings and who are getting into the garden may fail, and not try again.

Opportunity

The good news is that the current council are very passionate about trees, and this has been reflected in the recent strategy. Continuing this moment by reinforcing the benefits - health and wellbeing, social, environmental as well as financial is key to ensuring that budgets won't be reallocated from trees to other projects like for example, small business grants

There has also been an increase in people using green space more and rediscovering parklands, cycleways and public parks and streets

There is a big opportunity to promote the 'ripple benefits' to the community of investing in plants in trees in particular to local retail workers, nurseries, delivery drivers etc. Developing stories that highlights how council providing residents with plant vouchers benefits the whole community is a key opportunity

The SA Minister for Local Government has singled out building and planning teams and appealed to not 'down tools on approvals'.

South Australia

Councillor

Situation

The council weren't prepared for the disruption and in response have gone into a temporary leave arrangement in order to buy time to figure out how best to proceed

Major works are on hold, but council meetings and decision-making is continuing via Zoom meetings.

Challenge

There is an inherent conservatism among the council, and reluctance to do anything that Sydney or Melbourne haven't done first

Despite there not being the same level of lockdown regulations, Adelaide has an ageing population and there have been very high levels of compliance with the recommendations and self-isolation. So even though people can technically go to their local nursery, the default is to stay away

There is a real sense that smaller businesses will not survive the hibernation period - high streets in Adelaide pose huge risks.

Opportunity

The Clr is very interested in the role that the council could play in enabling people to plant their own seedlings and food on council-owned land, this is in appreciation that many people don't have access to large backyards and outdoor spaces

Growing food appears to be a good hook and means through which to engage the community in Adelaide

Is supportive and open to the idea of plants and seedlings being delivered to peoples' homes

The Clr sees an opportunity to collaborate with other Capital Cities to collectively advocate for funding and priorities

South Australia is not experiencing the same level of lockdown as Victoria and NSW are. In SA, physical distancing is a recommendation which means that you are allowed to visit people and ten people are allowed into a store at any time. This has significant implications for retailers in SA (and WA)

There is a real spirit of bipartisanship and cooperation between various levels of governments and political parties, so it might be a good time to push reforms or projects that in the past may have been rejected based on ideological divides.

South Australia

AILA

Situation

Apparently there is \$350 million available for 'shovel-ready' projects, but unsure what this actually means

The situation has caught most councils completely unaware, and has resulted in many design and urban greening staff being stood down. At the State government level he is observing an enormous disconnection between politicians and bureaucrats

The health aspect of COVID19 seems as though it is being dealt with well and anyone who wants to be tested in SA right now can be. He has never seen more people out and using public places, green spaces and cycleways as he has over the past couple of weeks

Challenge

Huge job losses among green space practitioners especially landscape designers, architects and landscapers. The way that the City of Adelaide has handled things is an example of what not to do. Younger people in the sector appear to be really struggling, especially being away from their colleagues and friends

Some projects seem to be going backwards, instead of getting better value from existing assets through improvements they are instead contracting out to new projects.

Opportunity

They see an enormous opportunity to invest in green space - specifically street renewals and widening to accommodate increased foot traffic, planting and new lighting along cycleways that have been seen, and he believes will continue to see a huge increase in usage

Sees a great opportunity to call for money that is used to resal roads to instead by investing into greening and lighting - he thinks that the community will love to see this happening and it is an excellent advertisement for the Council and State.

Western Australia

Outer Suburban Council

Situation

This council is characterised by huge levels of population growth and urban infill housing, especially on the per-urban fringe.

There has been a significant and concerted effort among staff at council to educate Councillors and Directors on the value of green space. There is a relatively newly appointed CEO who seems to really 'get it when it comes to valuing open and green spaces. In a recent meeting Councillors asked engineers why only \$50k of a \$500k development of a new carpark had been put toward greening, and said that it wasn't enough - this further exemplifies how the narrative with regard to green space has changed.

There is no sense that urban greening or park maintenance budgets will be put on hold or stripped back, in fact it seems as though the opposite may be true. A budget is going before council imminently, and there is a high level confidence that it will be passed

While the whole of the council is cutting back to bare bones, parks and tree budgets will not be touched. Interesting for the first time in the 40-year career, he thinks that there will be less budget for roads and hard infrastructure.

Challenge

While anecdotally staff have seen a huge increase in the number of people using green space, they currently have no way to measure what the actual figures are.

Opportunity

There would appear to be a "clock-turn" in peoples' attitudes toward urban green space, and greater recognition of how vital they are to health and wellbeing, especially given the reduction in peoples' block sizes. People 100% understand that green infrastructure is 'essential infrastructure'.

People are realising the importance of parks and people are bursting to get out and use the park spaces, importantly Councillors realise this too. The parks team has already been asked by Directors to put together 12 'shovel-ready' projects, for the Executive and Council to decide on 5-7 that they want to back

There is an absolute boom in being growing at home. Our contact reported never having seen so many cars at the local retail nursery

Western Australia

WALGA (Western Australian Local Government Association)

Situation

In WA the state legislation has been updated to enable local councils to meet. According to WALGA, the general attitude is that all levels want for local government to be carrying on business as usual to the extent that it is possible.

Local governments have an obligation to ensure that public space is well-maintained and safe, as well as provide business continuity.

There are two main issues currently at play among Western Australian local governments:

How local governments will manage their COVID19 **response:**

- Maintaining operations
- Enabling rapid decision-making
- Business continuity and job losses are kept to a minimum
- Balancing immediate operational considerations (maintenance, admin, approvals) with strategic decision-making and medium to long-term goals

The ongoing role and viability of local government as they **emerge** from COVID19:

- WALGA are advocating for a stimulus package that focuses on projects and works that prioritise employment at the local level
- At the same time there needs to be an ongoing focus on developing strategic plans
- The extent to which local government are prepared to receive stimulus funding for projects

Challenge

The major challenge is loss of revenue through loss of council fees, rents, businesses and charges, but the State Government and WA has also imposed a rate freeze that effectively means that councils can no longer increase their business and residential rates as they see fit

WALGA have developed a COVID response team, but they have not yet gone out to their members to survey to what extent they are doing with regard to their budget

Ensuring that councils and the planning authorities continue to approve proceed with strategic planning so that there isn't a bottleneck of development applications that prevent capital works and new projects from occurring 3, 6 or 12 months from now

WALGA have surveyed their members to understand what kinds of major projects they have that are 'ready' - these are projects that have already undergone legal planning and consultation procedures

There appeared to be a bit of a reluctance to call for greater planning powers by the State as it would potentially impose upon local government authorities, but WALGA predicts that temporary approvals may be put in place to push development through.

Opportunity

There is a gap in knowledge in understanding how council members are currently managing their budget

There is a high level of confidence in WA local government's ability to manage their way through this financially, WALGA said that all local governments have cash reserves but it is unclear as to whether they will want to spend the money now

There is an assumption that State and Federal government stimulus money will flow and prioritise projects that clearly have a job creation aspect. The key opportunity for industry is to demonstrate what the employment benefits of green space projects are not just within the immediate council area, but also further up and down the supply chain

So far, the State and Federal government have provided very little detail as to what will be included within stimulus packages so there is an opportunity to make a strong case for the inclusion and prioritisation of green space projects.

Queensland

Inner City Council

Situation

The organisation is operating business as usual with the urban forestry and cooling team policy people working from home and those implementing programs doing so in the field.

The new Mayor won a second term as Mayor and campaigned on a 'clean and green' platform, which includes an ambitious 50% by 2040 urban tree canopy target

As part of the election campaign major urban greening projects were announced including five active travel routes) and a major park vision. This is in addition to the ongoing tree planting program - urban greening is a high profile priority within LGA and election commitments were made to continue them.

Challenge

This council will lose revenue as part of COVID19 and is aware there may be some budget cuts, it's unlikely that the urban greening programs will be cut, but they may be delayed within the capital works plan.

They do not have any data to understand how COVID19 has influenced how people are moving throughout the City and suburbs within it.

Opportunity

There is a lot of focus and emphasis on greening the streets and achieving the 50% shadeaway cover by 2040 target. Their team will continue to focus on the urban heat, green street and active transport narrative

Would be very keen to see more research and case studies into the economic recovery benefits or urban green space.

Queensland

Suburban Council

Situation

The council workforce went remote within a week, there have been no job losses and all divisions are proceeding business as usual with some redeployments of staff.

The local government elections took place on March 28, not all divisions have been declared so there has not been a meeting of the new Council, however meetings can happen remotely. As Council approaches the EOFY, the new Council will need to decide the new budget.

DAs and planning assessments are still going through as usual - nothing has had to go out for community consultation for the past month, so this has not caused any delays.

Challenge

The incoming council, and particularly new Councillors will need to make decisions about the budget without necessarily knowing what it is all about. The greening team and strategic development team have prepared budgets well in advance which includes additional allocations to green space, but these may be bumped for other priorities

The rates base has dried up, and without knowing how long the recommended restrictions will be in place, it is difficult to plan for the 'bounce-back'. It is expected that some urban greening projects will be delayed

Coinciding with COVID19 council had closed some nature trails for routine maintenance and there has been some backlash against that. The Mayor shut the carparks to the beaches in an effort to dissuade non-locals from coming.

Opportunity

There hasn't been a decision as to how Council will handle the budget, there are new Councillors so there is an opportunity to educate them on the value and benefits of public open green space

With more people than ever accessing and spilling into the public domain, now would be a good time to highlight the benefits of these types of places.

The currently planning controls ensure that footpaths are wide enough to accommodate walkers, runners and cyclists. There is no data being gathered for increased usage in the parks, they would be interested in heat-mapping this as planning controls are "not based on perceptions of what will happen in the future, but instead what is happening right now."

Would you like to know more?

The Greener Spaces Better Places team would be very happy to elaborate on any of these findings, as well as answer any questions that you may have.

If this is something that you would be interested in, please contact hello@greenerspacesbetterplaces.com.au and we will organise a time to speak within the next two weeks.

Hort
Innovation

