

Annual Conference Planning Update

Memo for CMF Stakeholders

May 2020

Summary

We are implementing a change to our Annual Conference for 2020. After careful consideration around health and safety, community impact and contractual commitments, the 48th Annual Conference in October will shift to become an all-virtual event, and we will go to Kalamazoo in 2021. This decision impacts nearly every aspect of conference planning and as such, we have begun mapping out critical shifts that need to begin now and our next steps. We are confident going all-virtual can still allow for powerful peer-to-peer collaboration and create lasting impact, and in fact opens the conference to new possibilities that could only be achieved in a virtual environment, including perhaps greater access for those who may not have been able to join us in person. We recognize it will be a different experience, in line with these extraordinary times to which we must adapt.

Event Planning Considerations

Our team has been closely monitoring in-person events and conferences across the country that have been canceled, rescheduled and shifted to virtual in response to COVID-19, particularly after states began issuing “Stay Home, Stay Safe” orders. We’ve been closely following Michigan’s emerging mitigation strategies on such gatherings, and we’ve engaged our legal counsel and conference planning partners to help us understand our options. There are several other considerations we have taken into account in adapting all of our learning services programming:

- **Health and Safety** – It is imperative we are aligned with current mitigation guidelines release by the State, along with guidance from the CDC and other official agencies. Our decision making keeps the health and safety of staff and participants as the top priority in event planning considerations.
- **Immediacy** – We consider whether the content is time sensitive or in some way urgent, or whether it can wait, in which case postponement may be the most appropriate option.
- **Format** – We look at whether the content can be adapted for a virtual (web-based or call-in) format, or perhaps conveyed as a written message sent via email. There may be times when in-person dialogue or interaction is critical, and so again, delaying the event may be appropriate until in-person gatherings can resume.
- **Impact** – Key in our thinking is the impact a cancellation or postponement would have on those supporting the event in some way. This includes not only participants and hosts or speakers, but also the

surrounding community, venue staff, vendors and many others connected to the program or meeting.

While the Annual Conference does not take place until October 2020, this is a critical time to make several important decisions. Generally, at this time of year we're deep in planning efforts. In spring we typically book keynote speakers, secure our off-site event locations, reach out to sponsors and exhibitors, and work with the hotel on food, beverage and space needs, all while working in close collaboration with members on our Host Committee and Program Committee. Given all we know now, we recognize there is a need for thoughtful and proactive planning.

Two Pathways for Planning

We attempted to maintain two pathways for our conference planning for the last several weeks:

- (1) Planning as if our conference can be held in person. This assumes the "Stay Home" order for Michigan is lifted before October and mitigation strategies are either no longer needed or not applicable, even for a gathering of several hundred individuals.
- (2) Planning as if our conference will be virtual because it cannot be held in person.

Unfortunately Scenario (1) seemed increasingly less likely with no news of a COVID-19 cure or vaccine and experts warning of a possible "second peak" or resurgence in fall.¹ Even if guidance drastically shifted in time to permit a fall event, we also considered that some CMF members may be hesitant to attend, and individual foundations might choose to continue their own travel restrictions for staff out of an understandable abundance of caution.

Planning for Scenario (2) began with looking primarily at contracts, the conference experience and programming. Central to these early conversations was a "people first" mentality in thinking about all those who are touched by this event, from hotel employees to the nonprofit partners who might participate in on-site "philanthropy in action" experiences.

Decision Point on an Alternate Pathway

With the health and safety considerations outlined above, an in-person convening in October is not going to be possible and would not be the appropriate choice for our membership. Maintaining two pathways had already become more of a challenge, as well. For example, there is a keynote speaker we've begun to pursue but his representatives have said the speaker is not even entertaining conversations about booking in-person events for at least the next several weeks. We anticipate that same issue could be a challenge in trying to book entertainers, vendors and venues beyond our hotel.

We also have the opportunity to create a much greater positive impact on the Kalamazoo and Battle Creek region if we can bring business to the area and be on site for "philanthropy in action" experiences. Working with

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-wuhan-secondwave/beware-second-waves-of-covid-19-if-lockdowns-eased-early-study-idUSKBN21D1M9>

our event partner Destination Consultants, we learned that we could amend our hotel contract without penalty by rescheduling for October 2021.

Impact for 2020 and Future Conference Events

This decision has impacts across multiple conference years. For 2020 we know now that we'll be shifting to a virtual conference, which would not be region-specific. For 2021, we know now we'll be in Kalamazoo. We are already locked into a hotel contract in Grand Rapids in 2022 for our 50th Annual Conference. We had discussed being in Detroit for 2021 and had a hold on dates at a Detroit hotel, but did not yet have a contract in place. This change of plans to be in Kalamazoo next year means we would not have been on the east side of the state in several years in our conference rotation (among locations that can accommodate our large gathering), so we therefore anticipate that 2023 will be a Detroit-area conference. For 2020, "Building Inclusive Environments: Journeys that Bring Us Together" our environment will indeed be a unique one.

Next Steps

After discussing these changes with the Board of Trustees, Host Committee and Program Committee, we notified all members and will next reach out to all those who submitted session proposals and connect with members and vendors we contacted regarding sponsorship and exhibitor opportunities.

With input from staff, Destination Consultants is looking at options for outside vendors to provide technical support for a virtual conference, recognizing that while our in-house technology capabilities provide a robust set of tools for the webinar-type programming we've led to date, it may not be sufficient at a conference scale. We're also excited about exploring some of the above and beyond opportunities such vendors can offer that can contribute to a rich and uniquely engaging conference experience.

Our next steps include working with the Program Committee to move forward in finalizing the learning lineup of breakout sessions and securing keynote speakers, reworking our sponsor and exhibitor opportunities for a virtual environment, exploring new ways to infuse the arts and much more.

CMF members, partners and other stakeholders are invited to reach out with questions, ideas and comments. Please email Chief Strategy Officer Bridget McGuiggan at bm McGuiggan@michiganfoundations.org. Thank you!