

Pandemic Musings

By Maria De la Cruz

Recently, some ideas have been brewing in my brain. I have no outlet for them, though. Part of me wants to write a letter to the mayor. It just seems like a community response requires a response that is not “business as usual.” However, I don’t know how the city works, so I don’t know if my ideas are implementable, especially as I am not an economist.

Here are some of my brain-children:

Our food bank has seen a surge in service, and they are not always able to stay in stock, or it is getting expensive to do so. Many households are currently depending on its service. Meanwhile, many community gardens are directing harvests to the

gardening, it is time to put non-revenue-generating properties to work for the benefit of our locals.

Repurpose other vacant buildings into housing [*4]. With so many people out of work and with the increased need for food production, perhaps new jobs as urban farmers can be generated. Farmers need to be near the source of growth (as farming is not just a 9–5 job), so it would make sense to offer free or discounted housing to urban farmers working for the benefit of our local citizens. If needed, such housing could also be opened to benefit other essential workers, who often are also “working poor,” people who work hard but struggle to earn a living wage, and who likewise are the workforce the rest of society depends on.

Offer food-production employment [*5] to any citizen who wants or needs it. There are many people in need, not just the



Peas and squash grown in my inner city front yard; San Antonio, Summer 2014.

food bank and directly to community members undergoing hardship. This reveals one edge in which the city can grow — food production.

Develop a large city garden [*1]. This is one way of keeping citizens nourished. Not only does it raise food for the population, it also offers labor to those in need.

Develop an edible forest [*2]. San Antonio is in need of much shade, especially in the summer months. It would be wonderful to not only receive shade from trees, but also a snack while cooling off. Furthermore, increased vegetation “drinks up” storm water that could otherwise lead to floods.

Repurpose some vacant buildings into indoor gardens [*3]. Downtown has many old buildings that have been in disuse for many years. These old buildings are conveniently located near hotels and restaurants. Chic restaurants are turning to locally-sourced goods, both because it is trendy and because it supports the local economy. With the growth of hydroponics and indoor

standard homeless person living on the streets. Food production jobs should be made available to anyone who would like to work.

Update to compost-toilets [*6] and install rain-catchment [*7] systems for water [*8]. One big critique of raising food is that it consumes a lot of water. This can be addressed by 1) decreasing the use of potable water for flushing down refuse, and 2) increasing the amount of water for irrigation. The toilet issue can be addressed in two ways: a) either flush with non-potable water, or b) don’t flush by switching to dry-compost toilets (already legal in Austin [*9]). The rain catchment system can be addressed in non-complicated ways by deviating rain from roof-tops into cisterns, which can then feed drip-irrigation systems for vegetation. In these ways, rainwater can be used during rainy periods, and potable water can be used during drought.

Dual currency/Alternative currency [*10], or Time-dollar banking [*11] system. A few communities in other countries have dual currency/alternative currency. In such systems, food,

and other basic necessities are paid with local/alternative currency, which keeps prices low for locals only. This champions the local population, as they struggle to compete with more affluent external partners. External partners would have to pay with standard national currency. If a dual currency system cannot be put in place, or if alternative currency becomes politicized, a Time Dollar system can be used instead. A Time Dollar system assigns 1 time dollar for each hour of volunteer service (\$1=1 volunteer hour). Alternatively, a service may be assigned a specific amount of time dollars if T\$1 per volunteer hour is deemed too little. It could, for example, be T\$15/hour or more.) Those time dollars could then be used to pay for locally produced food, housing, clothing, services, water, electric, etc. Foreign items, or items not considered basic needs, would need to be paid with national dollars, like computers, phone service, internet, imported entertainment. (Potentially, an exchange rate could be generated so that those who only earn one type of currency would have access to the other, but only locals should have access to both. Someone might have to make the decision about the parameters that constitute a local citizen, for example, based on length of residency.)

The Digital Divide is real. As people debate whether students should be returning to school with questions of safety, alternatives that address the digital divide should be considered. Before the internet, individuals could take classes via educational television shows. Math, science, art, and language classes have been developed for television via broadcast, VHS, and DVD. Also, other countries have schooled rural populations via radio broadcasts. In this day and age, it may seem anachronistic to return to pre-digital outlets, but the digital divide makes it necessary to meet families where they are. Most, if not all, families have access to TV [*12] and radio [*13]. Tutors can also be available by phone. If pre-digital devices seem ludicrous to a digitally dependent population, podcasts and video casts can be saved to devices, phones, USB's, CD's, DVD's, etc. With such "blanket education" platforms, the teacher's role can be changed from lead to support, so students can continue receiving individualized learning. Moreover, the "job" of parents can be changed to "in-home teacher," which the government should consider paying, so that parents don't have to be unemployed. Meanwhile, educators and school staff that don't themselves have family can take the lead as remote "educational support" so parents don't feel lost.

- ** Note — 7/28/2020: A news [*14] segment recently expressed surprise that many teachers were not experienced in online education. Perhaps people don't realize online education is considered its own expertise, as a stand-alone degree. I realize schools are turning to exclusive online education by handing out ipads to low-income families. It's good that

they are doing that. However, this does not guarantee project success, when goals are lofty and expertise is missing. In general, online education is challenging for children and adults because online relationships are abstract; such platforms require being a self-starter, and having self-direction, self-discipline, and abundant motivation to learn — since social engagement is missing. While some learners have these characteristics, the majority do not. Even for adults, blended learning is always considered best. It's great that we want to dissolve the digital divide practically overnight, but realistically, this is something that we should have been working on over the past 10 years [*15].

- ** The idea of educational **Pods** [*16] has been interesting. If a couple of families can gather to learn together, and



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the parents can tag-team teach, maybe while using a "blanket online/broadcast curriculum," then that could meet the blended learning needs of all learners.

- ** Note — 8/4/2020: Work towards Restorative Justice [*17]. More recently, the Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police protests [*18],

followed by the deployment of federal police have been taking center stage. Violence in general has been rising in society. It is time for something different; at the same time, the structures that uphold violence cannot be demolished overnight. Yes, racial issues need to be addressed because it seems society simply sweeps these issues under the rug; this would involve internal work to take a look at the parts of ourselves that we don't want to see (psychologists call it shadow work), and external work, to have dialogs that build structures that respect human life. Moreover, internal and external work need to take place both in small circles, such as individual/family, and wider circles, such as community/society.

I realize that some might consider these ideas really far fetched. In fact, they are solutions already in existence in other parts of the world. I think that times such as these require a little thinking outside the box, and make it necessary to tap novel solutions that are already helping others in other parts of the world. At the very least, these ideas might be something to fall back on, in case other methods don't work.

Medium link: bit.ly/pan-musings [*19]

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