

Top Influencers Affecting Community Sustainability, Resilience and Disaster Recovery in 2020

Disclaimer: ISD does not endorse these individuals and organizations. This list was created through discussions with technical experts and ISD senior advisors and partners. This list represents those that have had the most impact, not those that are most sustainable.

2020 was an annus horribilis in so many ways. This time last year, Greta Thunberg was being celebrated as the youngest person to be named Time's Person of the Year, pandemics were almost non-existent on lists of top 10 nightmares, and Donald Trump was in the process of being impeached. It seems like ancient history...except for the last part.

From a community development perspective, pre-pandemic, downtowns and cities were flourishing. The urbanization trend and hollowing out of small-town America was continuing. Small businesses in all 50 states reported revenue growth in 2019. Minority unemployment fell to record lows. Zoom went public at \$36 a share and commentators were concerned that investors were overpaying given the small size of the videoconference market. Times have changed. Who or what drove this change in community development? Here is ISD's list.

10. J.D. Vance – His 2016 memoir [Hillbilly Elegy](#) was turned into a movie streaming on Netflix. An accounting of his life in Appalachia, he shown a spotlight on rural white poverty and a culture in crisis, calling attention to issues like domestic violence, opioid abuse, and the fraying social net in the region. Both critics and supporters used the vision of Appalachia that it depicts as a proxy to fight over the Trump Administration's social and economic policies.

9. Elon Musk/Tesla – If 2020 had been a normal year, Elon Musk, now the richest man in the world, might have been much higher on this list. The Boring Company and SpaceX are both built on visions for the future that reimagine tunneling, transportation, space, and human habitats. Tesla had a monster year, not just due to its popular cars, but to its increasing and "infinitely scalable" clean energy and storage products. His vision is helping the world to transition to a different conception of travel and energy.

8. FEMA – Traditionally in disaster response, crisis management receives the lion's share of attention and resources from the government and general public. Before former FEMA Administrator Brock Long left office, he spearheaded legislation that has led to the creation of FEMA's [Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities](#) (BRIC) program. Current Administrator Peter Gaynor has built on this vision to help people "before, during, and after disasters" and helping communities to focus increasingly on the idea that the best disaster response is the disaster avoided.

7. Chef José Andrés – whether teaming up with Meghan Markle and Prince Harry to build community centers, getting chefs to feed thousands of displaced people in hurricane zones or mobilizing the World Central Kitchen to use the power of food to heal and strengthen

communities in times of crisis, José Andrés is one of the leading influencers encouraging disaster responders to stay with communities in crisis long after the spotlights move on.

6. Corporations – In January 2020, Microsoft announced a “climate moonshot” to become “carbon negative” by 2030. Wells Fargo committed to donate all of the processing fees from its Paycheck Protection Program (\$400 million) to minority small business recovery. Companies pledged \$1.7 billion for racial and social justice causes. Even simple acts like site selection decisions could affect the creation or disappearance of hundreds, if not thousands of jobs. Love them or hate them, large corporations were some of the biggest community developmental actors in 2020.

5. Polarization – Call it “cancel culture”, shunning, conservative v. liberal, Red State v Blue State...This has been a trend that has been [growing in divisiveness and rancor](#) for years, leading to people becoming increasingly siloed and segregated by political opinion. This trend is affecting states, metro areas, neighborhoods, and online community development.

4. MacKenzie Scott/Billionaires – When MacKenzie Scott and Jeff Bezos divorced in 2019, Scott immediately became the 20th richest person in the world. What’s she done in 2020? Given away an estimated \$6 billion, [the most ever in a single year by a single person](#), largely to higher education institutions including over a dozen historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Over 211 of the world’s richest people have signed [the Giving Pledge](#) – a commitment to dedicate the majority of their wealth to philanthropy. This outsized influence on future development needs to be monitored very carefully.

3. Zoom – The lifeline of schools, global business, separated families, and long-distance love, Zoom and other video-conferencing tools have become a ubiquitous part of pandemic life. While commercial real estate vacancies have yet to explode, experts predict that [“the pain is just beginning.”](#) [New York leaders have been begging](#) for people to come back. Video-conferencing and [increasing boundarylessness](#) may lead to reduced traffic loads, reduced rates of urbanization, increased outmigration to suburbs, exurbs, small towns and rural communities, changes in social interaction, how houses are designed, and even the form and function of future office buildings.

1. (tie) – George Floyd/Dr. Anthony Fauci



When [George Floyd died in the hospital](#) on May 25th, after Police Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for over 8 minutes, the magnitude of the reaction was overwhelming. Protests did not just erupt in Minneapolis or the United States, but around the world. While Black Lives Matter and other sympathetic organizations initially focused on police brutality, George Floyd's death catalyzed a much deeper introspection in many communities around racism, equity and social justice. This tragedy marked an epochal turning point affecting community design, investment, planning, programs, and funding, and has led many individual organizations to remake themselves to become more inclusive and diverse.

In most years, the George Floyd tragedy would have been the stand-out catalytic event for the year, but the COVID-19 pandemic has also had a seismic effect on future development patterns. In turn, as the public face of the scientific community coping with COVID-19, Dr. Anthony Fauci has had an outsized influence on how individuals, communities and states have responded. Mask wearing, social distancing, public shutdowns, school closings and other public health measures were all learned behaviors this year. The developmental ripple effects from these strategies will be felt for years to come.

Honorable Mentions:

- [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#)
- [Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#)
- [Team Rubicon](#)
- [Singularity University](#)
- [Maurice Jones](#), CEO, LISC