



How MBAKS Members Evolved  
to Take on a Pandemic

# A Practical Guide to **RESILIENCY**

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When 2020 began, few could have foreseen how COVID-19 would radically upend our lives. This past year has brought multiple outbreaks, travel bans, economic shutdowns, and even sickened heads of state.

Washington was the earliest hit and one of the first to act. On March 23, Governor Inslee issued his “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order. Residential construction was initially deemed “nonessential” and the future was deeply uncertain. Early action saved lives—Washington state has the 10th fewest COVID-19 deaths per capita in the United States—but the economic impact has been devastating.

Homebuilders have always had to adjust to meet new codes, new materials, and new consumer expectations. Far from wilting, MBAKS members evolved again to take the COVID economy head on. Here are a few of their stories, in their own words. *Edited for length and clarity.*

## Taking Responsibility Seriously

Tod Sakai, President, Sockeye Homes



Adapting to COVID-19 has been a balancing act, but we’ve been extremely lucky to see increased demand. More people are looking to remodel to accommodate home offices, remote schooling, meal preparation, and just hanging out. By transforming their homes, we can positively impact their lives.

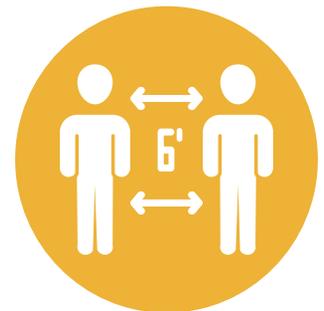
As I head into work each day, I look out my back window to our neighbor’s house. Several months ago, her husband of 50-plus years died from COVID-19. Neither she, nor their children and

grandchildren, were allowed to be with him. Every morning, I think about the responsibility we have as builders and remodelers to protect our clients, employees, trades partners, and their families.

We’re in a unique position. We’re entering people’s homes.

They’re trusting us to follow safety procedures. Our crews are leading by example, wearing masks all day and prioritizing client safety above all else. Following safety guidelines each and every day is the personal responsibility we all must take to safely keep the economy moving.

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## Focusing on Clients

Nancy Bainbridge Rogers, Attorney, Cairncross & Hempelmann



The shutdown presented immediate legal issues impacting our developer and homebuilder clients—how to comply with employment laws to safely button up project sites, who could travel where, what work was deemed “essential,” negotiating permit and deal

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extensions, and evaluating the applicability of force majeure and insurance clauses.

While helping organizations like MBAKS lobby for reopening

construction, we focused internally on providing clients the same or better services as before. The only major change was shifting from in-person to remote meetings and working from home if possible, but our IT staff already had excellent software in place.

Initially, the prohibition on in-person meetings halted public hearings necessary to entitle new projects. Our lawyers worked on their own, and with MBAKS and others, to create remote hearing

protocols and to convince local jurisdictions to adopt them.

Now, remote hearings and meetings almost feel normal and remote or cautious in-person notary services and electronic recording are business as usual. Some transactions have been delayed—resulting in contract extensions or cancellations—but most deals are proceeding, and many new deals continue to be made. Decisions are still being issued, new projects approved, and new housing coming to market.

## The Perks of Virtual Face Time

Joseph and Melissa Irons, President & General Manager and Marketing & Operations Manager, Irons Brothers Construction



We have been very fortunate to avoid layoffs. Our family-first philosophy, alongside the CARES Act, allowed employees to modify their schedules for childcare while receiving their usual compensation. We were fortunate to work with our local community bank and receive federal Paycheck Protection Program funding early on.



We also transitioned all consultation and sales meetings to a virtual platform. Virtual meetings have advantages.

They're convenient and cost-effective, saving on travel-related expenses. Clients with tight schedules can just hop on.

Meeting a masked contractor can intimidate potential clients, so we conduct all of our initial appointments over video conferencing. Using this system, we can introduce ourselves safely without masks and bond

more easily. Since Phase 2 began, we're conducting our onsite meetings with potential clients at their home, with masks. After the initial Zoom meeting, both our team and the clients are much more at ease meeting masked up. We have been able to confidently sign new projects during sales meetings with masks, gloves, and social distancing measures in place.

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## Clear Communication

Jim Coshow, VP Sales & Marketing, Dunn Lumber



A big part of safely running a retail space in Phase 2 is managing customer traffic and occupancy levels. We've done this using distancing markers throughout the store and checkout; creating one-way aisles to reduce crowding; and placing conspicuous signage alerting customers to occupancy limits, social distancing, and mask requirements. We've made contact points safer, using sneeze guards and frequently sanitizing high-touch areas.

Internally, we've been conducting daily screening; educating staff about preventing transmission of the virus; providing masks, gloves, and other PPE as needed; maintaining a

cleaning schedule; designating a site-specific COVID-19 supervisor; and providing high-risk employees alternative working options or additional leave as needed.

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## Focusing on the Positive

Staff, Village Life Inc.



When news of the pandemic hit, many believed that changes to "business as usual" practices would be short-lived. Boy, were we mistaken!

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dried, it needed revisions. But we remained proactive, and during the shutdown we focused on housekeeping. We started using conferencing software

for efficiency, and updated scopes of work, red lines for plans, and other procedures. These enhancements kept us focused on positive, constructive activities and gave us respite from uncertainty. We also compiled COVID-19 response binders with safety protocols.

Construction moved forward on houses deemed "essential"—at risk of spoilage, safety issues, or theft. Our sales teams and model homes were shut down

initially, so we worked diligently with partners such as agents, lenders, and escrow to ensure we had the documentation and tools to close on homes then under contract. Without open houses, our returning sales teams had to become proficient with virtual selling, using Facetime, recording videos for homebuyers, and selling by appointment only.

Although we now find ourselves operating under the "new norm," it is a completely different world. It's not ideal, but it is what it is. And we will certainly take it considering the alternative. 🏡

