

SEATTLE/KING COUNTY REVS SUMMARY - NOVEMBER 2020

National REVS framework

In early May, Music Cities Together – a partnership between [Music Policy Forum](#) and [Sound Music Cities](#) – launched Reopen Every Venue Safely (REVS), a national campaign to develop and disseminate action plans rooted in a hyper-pragmatic understanding of the challenges facing live music venues in the wake of COVID-19 shutdowns and the collapse of the US economy.

Seattle/King County is one of 11 U.S. pilot cities Music Cities Together supported with technical assistance and mentorship in developing local reopening plans. Working as a national cohort, these pilot communities are sharing best practices and learnings with public officials and venues in other communities as part of an aggressive, integrated plan to anticipate the resources and strategies necessary to successfully – and safely – reopen our live music economy.

Purpose of this paper

At the outset of the Seattle/King County REVS pilot project it was determined that the goal would not be to create a “best practices guideline” for re-opening. Several of these types of guidelines had already been or were in the process of being developed (see links below). Rather, the idea was to explore the institutional and grassroots infrastructure that existed in the region to identify what put the live music sector in a position to react to and mitigate impact from the closures and what elements were missing that needed development. The hope is that other cities can use this as a measure for assessing their own music industry infrastructure to inventory what they have in place and what needs to be added. This paper should be used in conjunction with the ‘best practices’ guidelines developed in other pilot cities.

Seattle King County uniquely positioned

Live music is in Seattle’s DNA. Its ecosystem of established and emerging artists, influential labels, and activist music industry leaders is central to the region’s civic identity. And Seattle/King County’s solid infrastructure around the music ecosystem, years in the making, provides organizational and political support for the REVS Seattle work.

REVS Seattle identified significant components of local government infrastructure that were in place before the COVID-19 shutdown:

- King County Executive Dow Constantine is an active political advocate for live music and the creative economy;
- King County’s investment in the sector includes a full-time position of Creative Economy Director;
- The City of Seattle recognizes live music as an economic driver and supports this sector with the Nightlife Business Advocate position;
- The Seattle Music Commission, appointed by the Seattle Mayor and City Council, deepens community relationships with industry; and

- A single public health department is led by and serves both King County and the City of Seattle.

Against this backdrop of government support, a strong local stakeholder group was able to organize and advocate for the industry.

Seattle/King County REVS Team

Building on three pillars – political support for the arts, access to public health, and an activist venue owner community – weekly Seattle/King County REVS team meetings created a platform for diverse stakeholders in live music to gather. Venue owners, musicians and unions, booking managers and talent agents shared information, identified concerns, and explored ideas as they worked through the shutdown and fluctuating guidance.

Top concerns. Early in the process, participants identified three aspects of the shutdown that are top of mind, and the REVS team dedicated additional meeting time for more focused discussions on each. Topics include:

- communicating, reassuring, and engaging performers and patrons;
- sustaining Seattle’s musicians and career venue employees through the shutdown; and
- adapting business models to reduced capacity, enhanced safety, and sunk costs.

Shared expertise. Most sessions featured expert guests, from King County Executive Dow Constantine to national REVS leaders Michael Bracy and Dani Grant to Meara McLaughlin, who contributed to a successful effort to secure COVID relief funding for the arts sector, including live music venues, from the Oregon legislature. REVS city leaders from Austin, Cleveland/Akron and Louisville joined the Seattle/King County REVS group to exchange ideas and learn from each other. The Seattle/King County REVS team also consulted with attorney Rodger Kohn, who offered counsel on how to plan for and document the precautions taken to ensure the safety of employees, performers, and audiences.

Access to resources. Seattle/King County REVS team members received regular updates on federal legislative activity, news from other REVS pilot cities, access to public health officials, and invitations to workshops on relevant topics, including systemic racism in nightlife venues and effective messaging for each stage of the recovery and re-opening process.

Clarifying guidance. Team leaders are in regular contact with the Governor’s office and the alcohol licensing board and serve as liaisons for venue owners with questions or seeking clarifications on compliance with the State’s COVID-19 response.

Seattle/King County REVS in a changing landscape

Seattle/King County REVS. While access to information and resources is a value-add for local venue owners, the most meaningful impact of REVS Seattle may be in bringing focus to the shared goals (and frustrations) of the community and in creating connections among team

members. Venue owners and other stakeholders in Seattle's live music ecosystem may see each other less as competitors and more as allies in the pursuit of reopening every venue safely.

REVS Seattle/King County serves as an organizing platform for local venues and other stakeholders that complements state and national efforts to develop safety-oriented guidelines and rally advocacy for federal assistance.

King County. Under the leadership of King County Executive Dow Constantine, the King County Council enacted a pandemic relief fiscal package that included \$750,000 specifically for live music venues. This public relief funding, the first public funding for COVID-impacted live music venues in the country, prompted a private sector effort to leverage these public dollars with philanthropic gifts. This [Keep Music Live](#) campaign is currently underway to raise critically needed funds for live music venues.

Washington State. While there is precedent of an organized nightlife/live music grassroots organization in Seattle, one did not exist at the time that COVID-19 shut down the economy. Recognizing the immense threat to their industry, venue owners, with some help from local government, quickly rallied together to advocate for themselves collectively, understanding they were more likely to survive together than as individuals. The creation of the [Washington Nightlife and Music Association](#) (WANMA) quickly spread beyond just Seattle/King County and now boasts some 45 venues from around the state.

WANMA's advocacy was crucial in helping the County pass the relief package mentioned above, and they are pursuing relief funding at the city, state and federal level as well. Having an organized, functioning and viable stakeholder group is essential in mobilizing grassroots support for local government policymakers, and supporting philanthropic fundraising efforts. Additionally, WANMA developed a Guide to Re-Opening Best Practices which was shared with the Governor's Office and Public Health, and is working with state legislators to lobby for CARES Act funds similar to what OR officials did.

Local, state, and federal. REVS Seattle/King County is focused locally, which complements the re-opening protocols released by the Washington Nightlife and Music Association and the federal [legislative advocacy](#) campaign led by the [National Independent Venue Association](#).

REVS, WANMA, and NIVA emerged in response to the threat COVID-19 and the economic shutdown pose to independent live music venues.

Where we are, where we're headed

As this summary is being written, live music venues throughout Seattle and King County have crossed the six month mark of being closed by government directive. Washington has a full entertainment ban in effect, and live music venues are not allowed to operate. Multiple live music venues have set up streaming from their venues, and to date, it has not proven to generate sufficient revenue to sustain them.

Regional economies in Washington have been hurt by the COVID-related loss of revenues from sales tax and tourism. State and local government anticipate reducing services going forward, leading to the potential elimination of a key City position that has supported Seattle's nighttime culture and economy.

Multiple clubs applied for and received federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans. The forgiveness criteria for the PPP loans have been modified as the pandemic extends longer than was originally anticipated. The forgiveness timeline and criteria will need to continue to be responsive to a reopening timeline that is mandated by government directive, if it is to be the lifeline Congress had envisioned. Additionally, venue owners have highlighted concerns that their skilled and dedicated workforce may need to find alternate employment due to the extended nature of the pandemic and may not be available for reemployment when music venues are allowed to reopen.

As these music venues continue to carry significant expenses while unable to generate revenue, the threat of permanent closure looms large. Hard expenses (rent/mortgage, insurance, utilities, etc) for independent music venues in Washington are estimated at \$2M per month. An August survey by WANMA indicates that two out of three venues cannot sustain another six months of closure without some level of additional funding.

If King County's independent live music venues close permanently, they will not reopen as independent music venues, given the market pressures of gentrification and real estate prices.

In short, Seattle's live music venues are resilient, committed, and engaged but struggling financially. King County assistance and federal loans are helping, and Keep Music Live promises additional relief, but as the epidemic continues it's clear that not every venue will be able to withstand the economic fallout created by this public health crisis. REVS Seattle/King County and our region's live music ecosystem continue to support our venues in finding a way to reopen safely and to advocate for substantial financial support to weather this challenge.

Addendums:

- Seattle/King County REVS Participants list
- WANMA Reopening Guidelines