

Canadian Water Network's   
**Canadian Municipal Water Consortium**

## COVID-19 Strategic Sharing Group: Water Utility Management Response

Meeting Date            March 20, 2020 from 1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. EDT  
Facilitator                Kim Jusek, Canadian Water Network

There were 20 municipalities participating from coast to coast (see the [attendee list](#)).

The objective of the meeting was to better understand approaches and responses taken by municipalities/utilities across Canada for maintaining or scaling back municipal water services during the uncertain and rapidly evolving circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic (see the [meeting agenda](#)).

The following themes were discussed:

- Prioritizing critical functions and scaling back operations
- Staffing priorities and challenges
- Securing supply chains
- Handling of capital projects
- Provincial regulatory guidance
- Local customer rate and disconnection relief

### Summary of Common Municipal/Utility Actions

Many municipalities/utilities are **initiating emergency response and operations protocols**, which have resulted in the identification of essential functions, adjustments to staffing and work arrangements, and in some cases, significant scaling back of programs.

- **Prioritization** has been undertaken to temporarily reduce non-essential work, including capital works construction projects, preventative maintenance such as sewer flushing and customer outreach and engagement programs such as ICI or lead sampling. Responses and priorities are being re-evaluated as the situation evolves.
- **Planning** is underway for situations where critical supply chains may be interrupted and staff may be limited due to sickness or quarantine, including options to take work remotely/online.
- **Health and safety precautions** include increased disinfecting of communal work areas, reduced exposure to the public, reduced exposure to co-workers – particularly in service vehicles, screening questions before entering homes/work sites and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).

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- **Approach to physical distancing** for essential staff included skeletal staff structure, with up to 50% or more reduction in field/operations staff, modified working hours or working structure such as staggered work hours or start times, team separation, dedicated facility assignments, skill-set separation, reduced work hours, on-call/on-shift, social-distancing and screening protocols for field and site staff.
- Most municipalities/utilities have implemented a **work-from-home policy** for all non-essential or office staff, with details on modified duties, salary/pay over the long-term still being worked out in some cases.

The handling of **capital works projects** varied among municipalities/utilities, including determining which ongoing projects are currently moving forward or will be put on hold, and some initial consideration for impacts to the 2020 capital plan schedule. There are a range of approaches to construction projects:

- A number of municipalities/utilities are currently operating with business-as-usual protocol where possible, with enhanced safety precautions on site. There have been some challenges encountered with contractors.
- Alternatively, as indicated above, many municipalities/utilities have prioritized which construction projects are vital to continue, using metrics such as “vital” or “not impacting” operations. Some utilities/municipalities have significantly scaled back construction work.

A number of municipalities have been instituting ways to **ease costs and increase hygiene for citizens** during this time, which has financial and operational implications for water utilities/departments.

- Measures have included suspending penalty charges for late bill payment, not charging interest for delayed payment, not turning off water services for non-payment and reconnection of services for those previously disconnected.
- Some municipalities are beginning to scenario plan for revenue implications, however, it is in the early stages and a lower priority presently.

## Key Challenges

Some of the key challenges identified during the meeting included:

- **Workforce challenges:** A number of challenges were raised regarding changes to staff working arrangements, including communication and clarity around safe working arrangements. Municipalities/utilities are facing IT challenges in supporting staff working remotely and finding meaningful work, as well as staff anxiety over personal safety, mental health, job security and the ability to socially/physically distance.
- **Lack of provincial guidance:** This was flagged primarily in Ontario and was discussed in terms of identifying water services as essential (and the implications for staffing), support in identifying critical services, regulatory relief on sampling, facility operation and operator qualifications, etc.
- **Supply of protective equipment:** There are rising concerns among many municipalities over the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) and disinfectant and hand sanitizer. Note: Supply chains for treatment chemicals and other equipment and communication with the public were not identified as particular challenges/concern at this time.

## Looking Forward: Opportunities to Consider

In response to the evolving situation and with a longer-term view, some utilities/municipalities identified actions they are undertaking or considering to support their continued operations moving forward, including:

- **Broader scenario planning** to prepare for a range of business continuity situations, such as different time horizons for modified working arrangements and operations, stress-testing critical staffing levels, revenue implications, impact on 2020 capital plans, etc.
- Trigger points for **elevated responses to maintain critical services and facilities**, such as remote operations capabilities for SCADA control or shelter-in-place quarantine scenarios. Some municipalities have already deployed or have the capability to remotely control their operations, and others are considering when supporting staff to quarantine at facilities may be necessary.
- In light of scenario planning and preparing for situations where critical staff may be unavailable due to sickness or quarantine, a number of municipalities have initiated **staff skills surveys** to assess their capacity to substitute workers if need be. Sharing this information with neighbouring communities was identified as important, particularly where there are small systems with limited staff resources.

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## Detailed Summary of Utility Responses

### Nova Scotia

28 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on March 22 at 6:00 p.m. EDT

#### **Halifax Water**

- Halifax Water is currently in “business continuity” mode. All employees that can work from home ARE working from home.
- Many field workers, which are mostly CUPE members, are currently putting a plan in place to work 50% of the time and be on-call 50% of the time.
- There is rising concern about the availability of PPE, hand sanitizers, disinfectant wipes and safety protocols for field staff. The utility is currently pursuing options to deal with these concerns.
- Only one person to date has expressed concern for work safety. However, there is growing fear and trepidation about job security. Halifax Water is currently working on strategies to quell the worries of the workforce.
- Halifax Water has had the experience in the past of running the utility with 1/3rd the staff.

### Quebec

221 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on March 22 at 6:00 p.m. EDT

#### **City of Montreal**

- The City of Montreal has requested that all employees that can work from home do so, with the exception of those responsible for critical functions. Where workers are still in a public environment, they have increased disinfection of high-impact areas.
- The province of Quebec declared water services a priority and essential service. The City is reducing staff by 50%. They have cut down on lab techs, but continue to perform on parameters they are regulated to monitor.
- The City has created a list of priorities and critical functions so that they know which can be postponed rapidly if needed. Currently, they are working to follow this list.
- The City is experiencing barriers that enable employees to work effectively from home. They are pursuing IT and equipment needs and will be more functional in a few days.
- The City was having difficulty finding disinfectant, but has since replenished stock. They have a sufficient supply of masks and have ordered more.

### Ontario

425 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on March 22 at 6:00 p.m. EDT

Note: At the time of the call, water services had been identified as an essential service in Quebec, but not in Ontario or Nova Scotia. This designation may have to do with implications for labour

disruption, but also impacts clarity around staffing and emergency planning and resources. It was suggested by Kitchener that water and wastewater are critical services to maintain during an emergency response.

#### **City of Ottawa**

- The City of Ottawa is asking all office staff who are able to work from home to do so.
- Field workers are currently working 50% of the time and on call 50% of time.
- The City is in the process of identifying what activities and functions are critical and where they will continue to provide support. They are also identifying activities and functions that are not critical and can be put on hold.
- The City is determining how stakeholders will be impacted – e.g. capacity to support capital projects will be reduced which will impact timelines.
- Field staff have expressed concern with social distancing while being in 2-person work trucks. In some areas there are enough trucks so multiple can go out with only one worker. Having a reduced workforce also means more trucks can go out.
- The City has stopped home visits and non-critical projects have been suspended.
- Ottawa is concerned with the lack of communication from their regulator, the Ministry of Parks and Conservation (MECP) – the approach is for each municipality to contact the municipal office if they have concerns. It would be helpful to have a more standardized province-wide guidance as it is difficult to gauge who is doing what and who needs what.
- Looking ahead, the city is concerned with supply of hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes. They are stocked for the next few weeks; however, they are struggling to get a good supply.

#### **Utilities Kingston**

- As of March 19, Utilities Kingston has scaled back operations to skeleton staffing in each operational area, which has presented some challenges to completing required work.
- All employees working from home are to be available during normal work hours or use holiday time.
- Construction projects have been scaled back or shut down.
- Screening questions, PPE provisions and additional precautions are in place, should employees need to enter homes for emergency work.
- Regarding the supply chain, there are no concerns over typical business equipment for which suppliers have indicated they are able to deliver. There are concerns about access to supply chain “hot” items such as sanitizer, which they are currently trying to source.
- Suppliers of typical business equipment are open and ready to deliver whatever the utility needs.
- Utilities Kingston has enacted a moratorium on service shut-off on a case-by-case basis.

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- They are concerned with the lack of direction from MOECC in Ontario. Media outlets and the provincial and federal government are asking everyone to stay home, but utilities are not explicitly considered an essential service despite providing critical water services, so utility staff are not sure what to do.
- Communications staff are working diligently to keep the public informed, but more could be done to communicate internally to staff.
- They are having more difficulty adapting to COVID-19 changes than other emergency situations such as ice storms.
- Utilities Kingston posed a key question about 'mutual assistance' and how many adjacent utilities might have the ability to assist neighbours should there be need.

#### **Region of Peel**

- The Region/OCWA, have designated staff to work at dedicated facilities and rented 10 double washroom facilities to support handwashing and minimize traffic at facilities.
- The Region has paused non-essential work on the wastewater side, including flushing and preventative maintenance work.
- Currently, the Region is holding daily meetings with union staff to keep them informed of the situation.
- Employees are concerned with having two people in a service truck at the same time and of getting into a truck that has not been disinfected and sanitized.
- The Region is concerned with sustained access to hand sanitizer and disinfectant and consistency in the percentage of effectiveness.
- The Region has advised all subcontractors to pre-screen, and where possible, are not entering customer homes.
- Peel is conducting a daily evaluation of the number of staff that are available.

#### **York Region**

- York Region has begun to separate departments and teams to minimize the number of people being exposed.
- York Region has also separated operations by treatment skills to minimize the number of people interacting. The operations team has been operating as per usual – no staff are currently taking time off.
- York Region is currently undergoing a planning phase to determine the next steps required should they begin to lose staff to illness, self-isolation or quarantine.
- York Region is in need of help and guidance from the Province of Ontario. They would like the province to relax the rules on non-licensed but skilled staff (such as engineers) who could potentially operate some systems as a back-up.
- York Region is experiencing shortages of hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes.

### **Ontario Clean Water Agency (OCWA)**

- OCWA has initiated an emergency action group. They currently have 700 employees and are tracking those in self-isolation (there were 24 employees at the time of the call).
- All non-essential operational staff have been sent home to work.
- OCWA is ensuring constant communication with three big chemical suppliers to ensure the supply chain is not broken.
- Some facilities have isolated roles. Operations departments, for example, are separated from the maintenance department, with larger facilities being isolated completely (e.g. one facility contains operations staff only).
- OCWA is not currently deemed an essential service, but is undergoing discussions with the province to change the terminology to “critical” service.
- OCWA is looking for regulatory relief at the provincial level and are putting together a document for the Province of Ontario.
- OCWA is interested in hearing the group’s perspective concerning self-quarantining within critical facilities and bunking/feeding employees at the plant so that they do not need to leave.
- OCWA is currently putting back-up plans in place, including assessing skills and needs, in the event of lowered staff capacity due to COVID-19 issues.

### **Durham Region**

- Durham Region said they are having similar experiences to those described by others.
- Durham Region is beginning to separate staff from between facilities to support social distancing. They are interested in knowing how other utilities are splitting staff—for example, on call 50%, working 50% or a different structure.
- All non-essential staff have been instructed to work from home.
- The Region is planning for the potential of a live-in shift if conditions require it.
- The Region is keeping track of employee availability and those who are isolated.

### **City of Hamilton**

- The City of Hamilton opened an Emergency Operation Centre, which has been active for a week.
- All planning staff have been instructed to work from home. The only staff continuing to work at facilities are operational staff and they have scaled back to the bare minimum on lab staff for regulatory requirements. Staff are still entering homes in cases of emergency.
- The City of Hamilton is staggering shifts and having staff work with the same individuals.
- The City has adopted the approach of only having single-occupancy service vehicles.
- The City has enabled remote SCADA nodes so they can operate the system remotely.

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- All construction is going forward as per normal; however, some contractors are pulling back to protect their workers.
- The City of Hamilton is in need of more guidance and direction from the Province.

#### **City of Guelph**

- The City of Guelph does not currently have much ongoing or pending capital construction activity. They do have a few tenders out. They are currently not anticipating an impact to the 2020 capital work plan, but this could change.
- Non-essential workers have been instructed to work from home.
- The City of Guelph is directing employees and managers to work one-on-one to determine how to manage the workload. Where the workload is light, employees are encouraged to focus on personal growth through e-learning.
- The City of Guelph is experiencing IT-related challenges in getting staff set up to work remotely. Software programs required for certain roles, such as modeling or AutoCAD, are not currently accessible remotely and VPN connections are still not fully functional.
- City staff are concerned about income security. All full-time employees will be paid in full until April 6, upon which it will be re-evaluated.
- The City of Guelph is not currently accepting any additional development applications. They will review existing applications remotely.
- The City of Guelph was undertaking updates to numerous Master Plans. The stakeholder engagement piece of this is currently on hold, and all other engagement activities have been postponed to support social distancing.

#### **City of Kitchener**

- The City of Kitchener is undergoing emergency operations planning and the Emergency Operations Centre has been active for one week.
- The City of Kitchener is currently undergoing frequent meetings of the command centre to ensure that communications cascade through the organization.
- Most of the office planning and support staff are now working from home.
- Kitchener is employing a “critical services only” model. They have scaled back the non-critical workforce, which is about 50%.
- The City of Kitchener has pushed routine maintenance back and is taking the lead from the Province for capital construction work, which is to keep construction operational as much as possible. City Council is moving to remote meetings which could support this, but it's possible some capital work may need to be deferred.
- The City of Kitchener has recently rolled out a skills survey to identify skills among their staff, to cross-post if needed.



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- The City of Kitchener has conducted scenario planning to explore what could happen and how they can effectively prepare and respond (e.g. if there is a second wave, if it lasts for several months, etc.).
- The City of Kitchener is not currently requiring masks for staff doing home entries; however, they are recommending gloves, regular PPE and social distancing of a minimum of 2 metres. When home entry is necessary, home owners are being asked to move into a different room while staff are completing the work.

### Saskatchewan

33 confirmed cases and 19 probable cases of COVID-19 on March 22 at 6:00 p.m. EDT

#### City of Regina

- Regina's City Council is meeting to decide whether to suspend interest rates and penalty charges for late fees until September 2020. They will not be turning off any water services.
- The City of Regina is looking at their capital program to see if they will delay anything.
- The utility is not going into any residential homes unless they have to respond to emergency sewage backups or water service issues.

### Alberta

259 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on March 22 at 6:00 p.m. EDT

#### City of Calgary

- The City of Calgary has 101 confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the time of this call.
- The City of Calgary has activated emergency operations.
- Operations are currently normal in plants.
- The City of Calgary is currently splitting shifts, staggering crew, putting social distancing into place and separating teams for field operation staff.
- The City of Calgary is still going into homes for emergency purposes, but non-essential programs such as lead sampling have been suspended. Where field staff have to go into homes, they have increased PPE and have more rigorous screening questions.
- Non-essential staff have been instructed to work from home if they can; however, they have been experiencing IT issues.
- The City of Calgary are currently doing scenario planning on a month-by-month basis on staffing, revenue projections.
- The City of Calgary's mayor expressed support for utility bill payments to be spread out over time.
- A key question moving forward is about resourcing issues and skilled staff.

## **EPCOR**

- EPCOR has sent the vast majority of in-office staff to work from home; however, there are significant challenges as they work with IT. EPCOR predicts remote work procedures will be long-term, so they are working on how to achieve this more effectively.
- EPCOR operations are currently staggering shifts to minimize contact
- Control and SCADA operation have moved to home/remote functionality.
- EPCOR is currently working with the unions and are aiming to get down to two people per vehicle. It is currently not possible to achieve one service worker per vehicle.
- EPCOR is trying to keep capital programs going as much as possible, provided there no public interface or impact on operations. Contractors in some cases have implemented *force majeure* clauses, interrupting progress on some construction projects.
- For programs that require field workers to enter homes, they are implementing processes for PPE and other screening.
- EPCOR will not disconnect services for late payments. They are implementing a grace period and working on what repayment will look like at a later time. The Alberta government has indicated a 90-day grace period.
- A rising concern for EPCOR is for the small communities it services, where there are only 2-3 people running the treatment system. In these places, there is less resilience to loss of staff and maintaining functionality compared to larger cities, which have more workers.

## **Alberta Capital Region Wastewater Commission (ACRWC)**

- ACRWC is adopting many of the same initiatives with respect to separation of non-essential and essential staff. They are limiting access to work sites, other than essential service providers, and are conducting screening on site. ACRWC have discontinued ICI sampling, as they are considered non-essential staff.
- Disinfection efforts are being increased. Some instrumentation requires particular disinfection procedures (e.g. portable gas protectors can be disinfected with bleach solution only).
- When they have to go into homes, a screening protocol is now in place.
- For construction contracts, they are still undertaking projects that manage specific operational issues, such as pipe replacement.
- ACRWC is also cognizant of employee mental health associated with COVID-19. They are actively encouraging staff to take a break from the news and from work.
- ACRWC are currently seeking legal counsel on what information they can and should share with the broader public and among their workforce with respect to employees being infected.

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- They are viewing this experience as a learning experience, as there were gaps in their pandemic response plan, and are actively seeking feedback from staff to improve as they go forward.

### British Columbia

424 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on March 22 at 6:00 p.m. EDT

### **Metro Vancouver**

- There have been over 270 recorded cases in Metro Vancouver at the time of this call, with the first case on January 28.
- Metro Vancouver has sent around 80% of office staff home and have been trying to carry on remotely in a business-as-usual fashion.
- Metro Vancouver has not cut back on any services yet and are seeing standard levels of absenteeism in their services department.
- They are currently working on business continuity plans.
- Metro Vancouver has 500 staff and have determined they can maintain critical functions with 80 staff and will modify as they go. They currently have a daily role call to start to cut services if needed (e.g. reducing maintenance work and planned capital projects).
- Metro Vancouver has started separating their lab into two distinct groups, in case one group is exposed, and are trying to achieve social distancing where possible.
- Metro Vancouver has checked in with supply chains to ensure that the chemicals they need are in stock and available.
- They have instituted a mandatory 14-day isolation protocol for anyone who has travelled outside the country. Wages are covered for field staff who are unable to work from home.
- Staff anxiety levels are increasing and they are beginning to ask to stay home even if they have not experienced exposure. Staff mental health is high on Metro Vancouver's list of priorities.
- Metro Vancouver is currently assessing their emergency response plans (ERPs) and they will be drastically updated for pandemic scenarios when they get back in full action again. Previously their ERPs were focused natural disaster scenarios.
- Metro Vancouver hasn't discussed financial/revenue implications yet because they don't interface directly with the public as a wholesaler, but anticipate this discussion in the coming weeks.

### **City of Vancouver**

- The City of Vancouver operates the water distribution system (not water treatment).
- Design work is done in-house, so they haven't had to deal with external contractors.
- The City of Vancouver is trying to move as many office, planning, design and support staff as possible to a remote work model; however, they are running into hurdles with IT support and hardware.
- The City of Vancouver is currently defining their critical services. They have a plan to maintain critical services and the ability to maintain those critical services alone if needed.
- The City of Vancouver has identified back-up staff if the primary person falls ill.
- As of right now, the City of Vancouver is trying to maintain a business-as-usual approach to follow through on capital plans and maintenance plans.

### **City of Burnaby**

- The City of Burnaby is currently employing a business-as-usual approach for all operations for employees who are healthy and able to work.
- Burnaby's City Hall will be closed on Monday.
- Future capital projects might be impacted, but for now they are moving forward.
- Management staff at EOC are looking at rotating shifts, reduced hours, staggered hours, taking vacation.
- Critical staff have been implemented and sick leave and benefits are in place.
- The City of Burnaby has confirmed that employees will be paid for regular working shifts assigned, regardless of what happens.
- The City is experiencing IT issues and are not equipped with the needed VPN and hardware. This also raises potential concerns with how to handle/protect data.

### **City of Surrey**

- The City of Surrey is currently operating under a business-as-usual scenario. They are starting to ask people (who have the capacity) to work from home.
- The City of Surrey has identified all critical staff and are looking for guidance from the EOC team. They are looking at crew situations and exploring single occupancy vehicle and staggering shifts.
- The City of Surrey has not formally addressed pay, especially with respect to operations staff who currently don't have work to do.
- The City of Surrey is interested in creating a shared skills list for municipalities in British Columbia that are nearby to share workers and competencies. Metro Vancouver was in support of this suggestion.

  
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**COVID-19 Meeting Attendees**

**March 20, 2020**

<b>Municipality/Utility</b>	<b>Name</b>
Alberta Capital Region Wastewater Commission	Wade Teveniuk
City of Burnaby	David Lee
City of Calgary	Carolyn Bowen
City of Guelph	Arun Hindupur
City of Hamilton	Nick Winters
City of Hamilton	Andrew Grice
City of Kitchener	Bu Lam
City of Kitchener	Greg St. Louis
City of Montreal	Carole Fleury
City of Ottawa	Tammy Rose
City of Regina	Kurtis Doney
City of Surrey	Tara Macrae
City of Vancouver	Andrea Becker
City of Vancouver	Samuel Li
CWN	Bernadette Conant
CWN	Jenessa Doherty
CWN	Sandra Cooke
CWN	Kim Jusek
Durham Region	Ian McIlwham
Durham Region	John Presta
Durham Region	Rich Tindall
EPCOR	Christopher Ward
EPCOR	Cindy Shepel
EPCOR	Ryna Brideau-Thombs
EPCOR	Stephen Stanley
Halifax Water	Cathie O'Toole
Metro Vancouver	Heidi Walsh
OCWA	Alicia Fraser
OCWA	Terry Bender
Peel Region	Jeff Hennings
Peel Region	Elaine Gilliland
Union Water Supply System	Rodney Bouchard
Utilities Kingston	Allen Lucas
York Region	Wendy Kemp

<b>Agenda – COVID-19 Strategic Sharing Group: Water Utility Management Response</b>	
Friday, March 20, 2020 from 1:00 – 2:30 p.m. EDT	
1:00 – 1:10 pm	<b>Welcome and Introductions</b>
1:10 – 2:20 pm	<p><b>Discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each municipality/utility has approximately 3 minutes to share with the group, with some time for Q&amp;A.</li> <li>• <u>Please consider the list of questions below.</u> Prioritize and share your top challenges or responses to these questions in order to flag common needs or offer insights and guidance to your colleagues.</li> </ul> <p><i>Operations</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Are there any changes to the normal activities of water, wastewater, and stormwater operations? For instance, have you scaled back any normal day to day functions to protect critical employees and facilities? How are priorities being set?</li> <li>2. How is your utility modifying in-house calls, PPE requirements, and social distancing?</li> <li>3. How is your utility managing absenteeism/continuity of operations?</li> <li>4. How is your utility managing supply chain impacts on PPE, chemicals, etc.?</li> </ol> <p><i>Revenue/Financial</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Is your utility offering payment relief options? If yes, have you quantified the revenue/cash flow impacts?</li> <li>6. What revenue impacts is your utility anticipating, and what scenarios are you using when making these forecasts?</li> </ol> <p><i>Other</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Other questions not included above? For example:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Related to state-of-knowledge on the science on the virus in water systems, including protection of plant workers, communicating with the public, etc.</li> <li>○ Impact on water demand and wastewater flows with social distancing</li> <li>○ Sharing lessons learned from other emergency response scenarios.</li> <li>○ Communications regarding continuity of service to assure the public.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
2:20 – 2:30 pm	<p><b>Wrap-up</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recurring follow-up call needed next week? Focus area?</li> <li>• Technology options for upcoming meetings (e.g. videoconferencing, interactive platforms)</li> </ul>