



# Exploring a Career in Planning

County of Ventura • Resource Management Agency • Planning Division

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## What Is Planning?

Planning, also called urban planning or city planning, is a dynamic profession that works to improve the welfare of people and their communities by creating more convenient, equitable, healthful, efficient, and attractive places for present and future generations.

Good planning helps create communities that offer better choices for where and how people live. Planning is done in many arenas and involves professionals who are planners. Planners work with elected and appointed officials, such as mayors and planning commissioners, to meet the challenges of growth and change. Planners help civic leaders, businesses, and citizens envision new possibilities and solutions, with the goal of creating communities of lasting value.



## What Do Planners Do?

Professional planners help create a broad vision for the community. They also research, design, and develop programs; lead public processes; effect social change; perform technical analyses; manage; and educate. Some planners focus on just some of these roles, such as transportation planning, but most will work at many kinds of planning throughout their careers.

The basic element is the creation of a plan. Planners develop a plan through analysis of data and identification of goals for the community or the project. Planners help the community and its various groups identify their goals and form a particular vision.

In the creation of a plan, planners identify the strategies by which the community can reach its goals and vision. Planners are also responsible for the implementation and enforcement of many of the strategies,



often coordinating the work of many groups of people. It is important to recognize that a plan can take a variety of forms including: policy recommendations, community action plans, comprehensive plans, neighborhood plans, regulatory and incentive strategies, or historic preservation plans.

Other examples of plans include: redevelopment plans, smart growth strategies, economic development strategic plans, site plans, and disaster preparedness plans.

## Where Do Planners Work?

Planners work in every state and around the world. They work in rural areas, suburban areas, and large cities. They function in the public sector within federal, state, and local governments. They also work in nonprofits and within the private sector in real estate development companies or multi-disciplinary consulting firms.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, local governments employ about 68% of urban and regional planners, with most new jobs in affluent, rapidly growing communities. Companies involved with architecture, engineering, management, scientific, and consulting services employ an increasing proportion of planners in the private sector. Others are employed in State government agencies dealing with housing, transportation, or environmental protection, and a small number work for the Federal Government.

## A Typical Day in the Life of a Planner

Planning is a highly collaborative field, and planners spend much of their time working with others. A planner's day may start with a staff meeting to discuss the management of a planning project. Other meetings might include a team meeting with engineers, architects, and landscape architects to review the specifics of a plan. Yet other meetings might take place with developers as part of a pre-application process. The planner's role is to provide the big picture and to relate the project to various goals and guidelines, such as ordinances or design review, in order to achieve a final project that meets the needs of the community. This might include appropriate design, environmental considerations, support for the local economy, or equitable access for all members of the community.

Planners are also responsible for knowing state and federal legislation and court rulings that relate to the project, plans, or guidelines. Planners are responsible for providing this technical knowledge to the projects. In complex projects, a developer will likely consult his or her own legal experts.

Some part of the planner's day involves working on his or her own. Planners may conduct research and gather data from a variety of sources, including economic development or market research studies, from census reports, or from environmental studies. The planner tests assumptions about the meaning and importance of the data by using a variety of technologies. Two common tools used in planning are Geographic Information Systems (GIS) that link data and electronic mapping, and demographic databases. Planners prepare reports on their findings and analysis. Often, they will provide alternatives for policy makers to consider. Writing and critical thinking skills are necessary for this part of the job.

Planners also do presentations. Presentations are made by mid-level staff, department heads, or the planning director. Planners frequently provide presentations to the city council, business groups, neighborhood groups, and professionals. These presentations place the specific project or issue in the context of the community's plans and guidelines for development and change. Today, planners are proficient in using PowerPoint and other visual technologies to present information and ideas in planning.



Project management is another important skill for planners, especially for those working in the private sector. Planners manage a variety of projects from neighborhood planning programs to the design and development of a new bike path to much larger scale projects. They also oversee grant programs, such as historic preservation or community development block grants.

A planner's day often extends into the evening as he or she provides staff support to the monthly or weekly Planning Commission meeting. Public sector planners provide reports to the commission and provide support to the public meeting. Private sector planners present projects to the commission. Other evening meetings may include neighborhood meetings or staffing the historic preservation review board, design review board, or other committees and boards.

### What Specializations Are Common in the Planning Profession?

Most planners perform their work in one or more particular fields of specialization within the larger planning profession. These specializations represent specific bodies of planning knowledge that jointly further the welfare of people and communities. While some planners spend their entire career within one of these specializations, most will move between them or find employment opportunities that combine specializations. Here are several of the most common specializations within the planning profession:

- Community Development
- Transportation Planning
- Economic Development
- Planning Management
- Parks & Recreation
- Historic Preservation
- Land Use Planning
- Environmental/Natural Resources Planning
- Urban Design
- Housing
- Community Activism/Advocacy Planning
- Code Enforcement

### Sustainable Development & Smart Growth

Sustainable development and sustainability have become important concepts in today's urban planning field, with the recognition that current consumption and living habits may be leading to problems such as the over-use of natural resources, ecosystem destruction, urban heat islands, pollution, growing social inequality and large-scale climate change. Many urban planners have, as a result, begun to advocate for the development of sustainable cities.

Planners are important in managing the growth of cities, applying tools like zoning to manage the uses of land, and growth management to manage the pace of development. When examined historically, many of the cities now thought to be most beautiful are the result of dense, long lasting systems of prohibitions and guidance about building sizes, uses and features. These allowed substantial freedoms, yet enforced styles, safety, and materials in practical ways. More recently, many conventional planning techniques are being re-packaged and described using the contemporary term "smart growth".

### How Are Planners Educated?



Three main degrees are awarded in the field. The first is an undergraduate degree in planning. Many with undergraduate degrees will go on to receive a Masters degree in planning. However, planners with undergraduate degrees do work in planning practice, often in entry level positions. A masters-level graduate degree is considered the standard for those who are planning practitioners. Some planning graduate students have an undergraduate degree in planning, but others may have studied geography, urban studies, architecture, or sociology.

Nationwide, in 2007 66 colleges and universities offered an accredited Masters degree program in Planning and 15 offered an accredited bachelors degree program.

When hiring for professional planning positions, many organizations require or give strong preference to candidates holding graduate degrees. In 2004, 43 percent of all American Planning Association (APA) members had earned a Masters degree in planning. Many employers also give preference to those who are certified by the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP).

The third level of planning degree is the Ph.D. Most often, those who obtain a Ph.D. in planning pursue a career in academia or with research or policy institutions.

## What Skills Do Successful Planners Possess?

In addition to a formal education, planners possess a unique combination of skills that enhance their professional success. Because planning is a dynamic and diverse profession, individual skills vary depending on a planner's role and area of specialization. Successful planners possess a combination of these skills:

- ☺ Knowledge of urban spatial structure or physical design and the way in which cities work.
- ☺ Ability to analyze demographic information to discern trends in population, employment, and income.
- ☺ Knowledge of plan-making and project evaluation.
- ☺ Mastery of techniques for involving a wide range of people in making decisions.
- ☺ Understanding of local, state, and federal government programs and processes.
- ☺ Understanding of the social and environmental impact of planning decisions on communities.
- ☺ Ability to work with the public and articulate planning issues to a wide variety of audiences.
- ☺ Ability to function as a mediator or facilitator when community interests conflict.
- ☺ Understanding of the legal foundation for land use regulation.
- ☺ Understanding of the links between the economy, transportation, health and human services, and land-use regulation.
- ☺ Ability to solve problems using a balance of technical competence, creativity, and hardheaded pragmatism.
- ☺ Ability to envision alternatives to the physical and social environments in which we live.
- ☺ Mastery of geographic information systems and office software.

*Information taken from the American Planning Association website at [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org).*