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Taking the Communications High Ground

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Communication is an important part of the work that planners do. Speaking to community members, stakeholders, and the media about plans and planning can help build support, but may also present challenges.

Recently, planning has been under attack from a variety of groups who are creating contentious environments for planners and the work they do. The tactics and arguments opponents of planning are using — such as spreading falsehoods and misunderstanding about the overarching goals of the planning process — have caught the eye of the media, resulting in recent stories in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

In some communities or states where elected officials have been sympathetic to the views of opponents, plans have been blocked. In communities where there is broad support for planning, opponents have been rebuffed. This period of political transition and turmoil requires planners to be both strategic and proactive in the way they present and discuss plans and planning to elected officials, community and business leaders, and citizens.

This *PAS Memo* is intended to help you learn best practices in communicating planning. It divides this subject into five parts:

- Building communications into your planning process
- Reframing how you present and talk about planning
- Discussing planning in terms of economic benefits and outcomes
- Managing contentious public meetings
- Developing effective media relations

Part One: Communication Goals and Objectives

Developing a separate communications plan or program will ensure your communications advance — not detract from — efforts to produce or update a comprehensive plan or other planning initiative. Depending on the determination and effectiveness of those in your community who are opposed to any plans or planning under way, or who are working to stop previously approved plans from being implemented, undertaking a strategic communications effort could be the difference between those planning efforts succeeding or not.

Developing a communications plan or program need not be complicated or elaborate. Your communications strategies and efforts should be tailored to the level of opposition you expect and the resources you have available. To be effective, however, such a plan must include separate communication goals and objectives that align with the goals of your comprehensive or other plan. Clarify these by asking what you want your communication efforts to accomplish: Is it to generate widespread citizen involvement and support for the plan? Prevent the planning process from being derailed by opponents and critics? Help ensure sufficient council support so the plan is adopted? Perhaps all of these apply.

Other components of the communications planning model used by public relations practitioners include strategies, messages, and tactics; audiences segmented by concerns, demographics, and other attributes or characteristics; traditional (print and broadcast) media relations and outreach; website and social or other electronic media; activity timelines and calendars; and methods to be used to measure effectiveness and results.

If your budget allows, retaining professional communication counsel, even if used on a limited basis, can be invaluable given their experience with developing strategies, crafting messages, conducting media training, providing feedback, and managing crisis communications.

SWOT Analysis Is Critical

During the first stage of a planning process it is critical to do a separate analysis of the economic, political, social, and environmental issues shaping your community. What's on people's minds right now? Is the timing right to begin a years-long process to develop a new comprehensive plan

or update an old one, or are there significant issues or challenges that might interfere with or divert attention from the plan?

Communications and public relations professionals typically perform an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) when beginning any major communications campaign or program.

Your SWOT analysis should identify the priorities of elected city, county, or borough officials; concerns of business and other community leaders and influencers of public opinion; and, if there is public distrust or animosity towards local government, the planning department or both.

Pay particular attention to what opponents or critics of planning are saying via blogs and other social media. If possible, take time to talk with them; finding out what their objections are before your planning effort gets under way will give you a head start on developing more effective communication strategies and messages.

The SWOT analysis also should be used to examine internal issues and considerations such as the communication skills of your staff and their ability to handle difficult public meetings while staying "on message."

Making Plans and Planning Important to Audiences

After completing a SWOT analysis think about some of the bigger or macro issues facing the community and how the comprehensive or general plan will address these. Positioning the plan as an integral step to saving the community money and attracting new businesses, jobs, and investment capital is one way to show the relevance of a plan and how planning helps create lasting value and prosperity for the community. You want your messages and discussion about the plan and planning process to be presented or "framed" in a way that emphasizes to various constituent groups and the community as a whole the multiple and long-lasting economic, environmental, and social benefits resulting from the plan.

To ensure consistency between what is written in the comprehensive or other plan and what planning staff members say at meetings, in everyday conversations, and through written, printed, and electronic communications, you'll need a set of messages that everyone is trained to use. Messages express complete thoughts; they are not slogans, sound bites, or thematic statements. Good messages are easily understood, resonant with your audiences, and devoid of planning jargon.

A thorough communications plan will include contingency measures and responses you've rehearsed in case critics or opponents at any point in the planning process try to disrupt any planning meetings or use blogs, websites, and YouTube to spread misleading information about planning and to disparage planners.

Use meetings and events where citizens give input about a plan to carefully listen, answer questions, and educate participants about the short- and long-term benefits and value of plans and planning. Public meeting are also an opportunity to test preliminary conclusions reached earlier in the communication planning process and make any necessary changes.

It's important to maintain the flow of information about the plan, the value and benefits of the plan to the community, and next steps in the planning process through your department's website, traditional and social media, and public venues. You'll also want to enlist interested allies and supporters to share their views and perspectives about the plan and to help create a positive "buzz" about the plan and counter messages of opponents.

Communications between you and your audiences is a dynamic process that is constantly changing. It's imperative that as the comprehensive or other planning process moves forward you monitor the messages of opponents and the extent their perspective is gaining the attention and support of elected officials and public opinion leaders. The best defense is a good offense.

Part Two: Reframing How You Discuss Planning

Countering the damaging work of opponents and still keeping all members of the community informed requires planners to work doubly hard to ensure that there is public understanding of the benefits of planning and to gain public support as new plans are rolled out for public review. Key messages are essential tools in reframing the benefits of planning and creating this public understanding.

Given the current environment, it's important that planning be reframed not only to respond to current attacks, but also to educate the public about the benefits of planning. There is widespread public concern about the economy in general and jobs specifically, and planners can create traction by showing the links between planning and economic recovery, prosperity, and a measurable return on the investment in the planning process.

It's essential that key messages be audience centered. Every member of your audience will in some fashion be asking "What's in this for me?" Your key messages must answer that question if

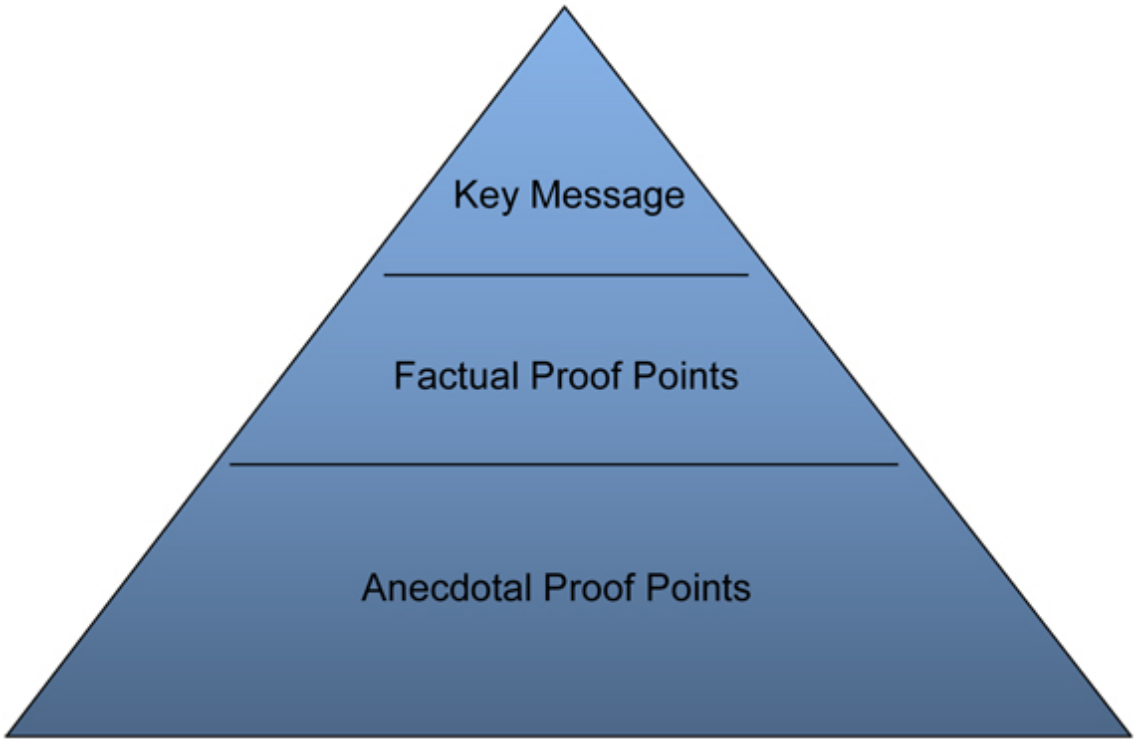
they are to be effective.

Key messages are enduring, long-lasting statements about your plan or planning process. Given the current attacks on planning, key messages should underscore that planners are the guardians of the future who have a special concern for the long-term consequences of present day actions. In addition, planners add value to a community by focusing on the economics of land-use decisions.

These key messages should create an environment and a belief system among your audiences that will create support for your plan and the work you do. Put another way, if every member of one of your target audiences understands and believes your key messages, it should create an environment that will make it easier for you to be successful in your work.

Key messages should have three layers to be effective tools for communication: an overriding statement about planning, a factual or emotional point, and a "drill-down" proof that supports your factual or emotional point and ensures your audience believes and remembers what you say.

For example, a factual point for a key message could be that a new plan is designed to create 6,000 new jobs in a community, and the drill-down proof could be that 1,700 of these will be international trade jobs created by establishing a new inland distribution center. Put another way, your two layers of proof will give you the opportunity to tell a story of how planning will bring economic benefits to your community.



The message triangle offers a construct for organizing the hierarchy of key messages and supporting proof points. Louisa Hart for Axiom Communications Group.

Putting Key Messages to Work

Once you have identified your key messages and supporting proof points that will make them compelling and memorable, you are ready to put them to work. Incorporate your key messages every time you communicate to an audience, whether it's in person or in writing. And make sure that all of your colleagues are delivering consistent messages. Repetition is important to retention. Audiences must hear your messages frequently and in a variety of settings in order for the messages to be internalized.

To deliver your key messages confidently and effectively, it's important that you:

- Don't wait until asked about your key messages by others: proactively deliver them and set the framework for the discussion.
- Use your key messages to defuse tense situations. Instead of getting into an acrimonious debate, acknowledge the opposing point of view, but bridge to your key messages to underscore your points and rebut falsehoods about planning. Phrases such as "On the other

hand..., " "It's important to note that,... " or "The facts are..." will help you get to your key messages without spending time on false information. Remember that your goal is not to "defeat" that one person, but instead to convince the majority of the audience about the merits of the plan and their involvement.

- Use signal phrases to draw attention to your key messages. They include, "The key thing to remember is...," "The bottom line is...," "The overarching point here is..."
- Make sure that the "proof points" you cite resonate with the specific audience you are trying to reach. You can vary your proof points for each audience, but make sure that the dominant messages stay consistent.
- Be certain that your key messages use clear and concise language to translate complex issues.
- Remember that body language and voice tone are critical elements of your delivery: remain relaxed and maintain a pleasant, firm, authoritative tone (don't match your opponent's level of intensity and conflict).
- Entertain your audience: bored people don't listen! One way to make plans and planning more real to people in the community is to think of plans as stories and the planning process as storytelling.
- At the end of a meeting or presentation, summarize your key messages. People tend to remember the last thing they hear about an issue, so make sure you seize the opportunity and have the final word.

Key Messages Illustrated

The following is an example using the fictitious city of "Metropolis" that has spent the last two years generating a comprehensive plan to manage its substantial growth and enhance the quality of life. The plan seeks to capitalize on the strong sense of neighborhood that exists in the city's various sections while enhancing the urban downtown center.

Key components of the plan emphasize promoting economic growth, matching transportation with jobs, promoting owner-occupied housing and, at the same time, providing housing choices for people of all income levels.

The challenge now is to roll the plan out to the public as a whole, and build support for its recommendations. The key message and proof points below focus on economic growth.

Key message: This plan promotes economic growth in Metropolis and the creation of new jobs.

Factual Proof Points:

- Over the next two decades, the plan calls for the addition of 400,000 new jobs.
- The plan will identify gaps in retail and service businesses and support efforts to bring these services to Metropolis neighborhoods, thereby increasing job options throughout the community.
- Growth in retail sales activity is currently about 1.5 percent and our goal is 4 percent annually.
- Land-use regulations will be reviewed to ensure they support economic growth.
- The plan supports a mixture of offices, retail services and residential development within one-quarter to one-half mile of the most appropriate Metro stations in order to maximize the value of development surrounding these transit stops.

Anecdotal Proof Points:

- Last year Dell opened a call center here. Currently there are five other corporations looking to locate their data centers here, but we have to ensure the town has the necessary infrastructure.
- Grocery store tax benefits will work in the inner city for underserved populations – Safeway has already committed.
- The plan offers incentives for day care centers to locate near transportation hubs, to make life easier for working parents.
- The plan revamps public transportation so it is a viable option to get to work and leave the car parked Monday through Friday.

Part Three: The Economic Case for Planning

Given tight municipal budgets, high unemployment, and heightened public uncertainty about the future, strong messages about planning's role in contributing to and creating vibrant local economies and lasting value are essential to building public and political support for planning.

Current polls show that job creation and economic recovery are the top priority for most

Americans, outranking land use, transportation, housing, the environment, and other issues usually discussed by planners. Planners can strengthen support for future plans by making the connections between the development and implementation of a good plan and a community's economic growth and competiveness clear to elected officials, community leaders, and other important audiences.

One of the challenges when discussing the connections between planning and the local economy is assigning specific economic results to plans for the future. Planners can solve this by showing successful outcomes or projects that would not have occurred without a plan. Among the economic connections related to planning that can be used to craft effective messages are cost savings, increased property values, jobs, leveraged private investment, and reduced costs to government and residents.

Consider the following categories of examples when crafting your own economic-related messages about your plans and planning efforts:

Infrastructure Cost Savings: A strong economic case for planning can be made using estimated savings from compact patterns of development, reduced capital expenses, and lower operation and maintenance costs. Other external savings, such as reduced travel times, can also be factored in these scenarios. Many planning processes make effective use of tools to visualize or model the impacts of various decisions, but there is also an opportunity to use this same analysis to show economic benefits.

For instance, by keeping growth and development within 125 square miles of the greater Salt Lake City metropolitan area as prescribed in its Envision Utah plan, the region would save approximately $4.5 billion through 2050 in transportation, water, sewer, and utility investments.

Redevelopment: Often, a straightforward comparison of property values in an area before and after the implementation of a plan or project can show dramatic changes, with the initial investment serving as a catalyst for other spending. Planners may be able to show changes in assessed tax value of real property located in an area that underwent changes influenced by a plan (from revitalization, redevelopment, historic preservation, improvements to a business district, etc.), as well as the result of this catalytic investment enhancing the tax base and increasing public revenue.

Some $93 million in "renaissance zone" projects, planned infill development, and adaptive reuse in the city center of Fargo, North Dakota, for example, contributed to property values rising 110 percent between 2000 and 2009. The renaissance zone exempts new development in the area from property and income taxes for five years.

Planning and construction of the $35 million Milwaukee RiverWalk, a pedestrian-only walkway in Milwaukee, increased property values adjoining the space by more than $500 million and contributed to a $712 million increase in commercial and residential investments.

Job Creation: No issue has dominated policy and political discussions in recent years more than jobs. Local and regional plans support the creation and preservation of jobs. Planners can evaluate the jobs-related impact of specific capital investment called for in plans. Don't forget to consider the impact of key programs on indirect job creation. For example, some planning departments have begun making the case for affordable housing programs in terms of the economic multiplier of job creation and investment in related industries like construction. This is an area where planners may find good opportunities to partner with local economic development organizations (e.g., local chambers of commerce) and universities to both conduct the analysis and bolster the credibility of the message.

In Tempe, Arizona, a plan implemented during the last 25 years to both revitalize and preserve the historic character of Mill Avenue in downtown Tempe resulted in three million feet of new retail, restaurant, office, and residential space. Annual sales from the development increased from $12 million to $160 million and led to more than 9,000 jobs and two million annual visitors. Currently, the Mill Avenue district is positioned between two other rapidly growing areas in Tempe and is surrounded by more than $2 billion in planned new development.

Disaster Planning: Disaster adaptation and mitigation planning can be closely linked to economic benefits. Strategic improvements associated with plans show meaningful economic impacts, with or without a disaster event. Renovations to the Virginia Beach Boardwalk in Virginia Beach, Virginia, during the 1990s included the planning and building of a 30-foot steel seawall buried underneath the pedestrian walkway, which prevented an estimated $80 million in damage from Hurricane Isabel in 2003.

In Frederick, Maryland, an $11 million investment resulting from a plan to remove the city's downtown from a 100-year floodplain spurred $150 million in new construction, infill development, and historic renovation.

Return on Investment: In a time of reduced government spending and budget austerity measures, planning is uniquely positioned to show the value of long-term strategic investment by showing the overall return on investment for plan implementation. This can include a triple-bottom-line approach that incorporates social and ecological impacts as well as economic factors. Partnering with chambers of commerce, universities, economic development organizations, and civic institutions can be particularly helpful.

The City of Austin, Texas, for example, was the leading member of a regional consortium that received a $3.7 million federal HUD-DOT-EPA partnership grant to develop a regional plan for sustainable development. Austin's "Return on Investment" calculation and goal for its planned sustainable-development projects is the creation of 6,000 new jobs.

A detailed analysis by planners of the future economic returns on investment from a bus rapid transit (BRT) project along Euclid Avenue in Cleveland found that the development would generate $4.3 billion in new investment.

Public and Private Investment: Discussing the role of public dollars to attract private investments in connection with a plan or planning project is a way to highlight the important role planning and public funds play in leveraging public investments and attracting private capital to a community. For instance, over the history of the Community Development Block Grant program (CDBG), the leverage ratio has averaged $3 of private funds for every $1 of public funds, according the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. A similar analysis of the federal HOME program shows an even stronger private leverage ratio of four to one.

Part Four: Managing Contentious Situations

Planners have always had to contend with a variety of personalities and points of view during public meetings. But during the last few years, the opposition to planning from various groups has intensified and become well organized, creating a very difficult and sometimes contentious atmosphere. Here are some tools and approaches you can use to prepare for contentious situations.

Knowledge is power, so before you participate in a public meeting to unveil a new plan, make sure you know that plan inside and out. Be able to easily cite the tangible benefits of the plan to the community and the plan's short- and long-term economic value. Focus on specific outcomes from implementing the plan, and use language that nonplanners will understand. Avoid planner-speak and jargon at all times.

As mentioned in Part One, reconnaissance performed during a SWOT analysis can help you be prepared for groups that may be disruptive. Such groups are likely to have websites or a social media presence. Visit these venues so you better understand their agenda and point of view.

Another way to prepare for a disruptive meeting is to think about the kinds of questions you can expect from these groups (for example, about Agenda 21 or property rights). Make a list of these questions and possible answers and practice responding while bridging back to the key messages about the proposed plan, citing the benefits as often as possible.

A third way to prepare yourself is to role-play a disruptive situation with your staff in advance of the meeting. Remember that your ability to handle the situation lies in your ability to bridge back to your key messages.

It's also important that you build and tap a strong base of supporters of planning and personally invite advocates and champions to the public meeting and ask them to weigh in. You can also bring them up to date on the plan in advance and detail what you hope to achieve during the public meeting. If elected and appointed officials from the community will attend, brief them in advance if possible.

Organize the meeting format and setting so it will be easy for you to manage. The room, the walls, and what is on the chairs are all part of your overall approach to the event. For instance, you can have an informal setup, taking away the podium and audience microphones and thus making it harder for anyone to disrupt the meeting.

At the beginning of the meeting, inform attendees about the ground rules and ask that they agree to participate according to these rules. This could include:

- Specifying the length of the meeting, and noting a need to provide time for input from all who are present
- Asking people to express disagreements or concerns respectfully
- Setting a two-minute time limit for questions and comments

There are a number of creative ways to solicit feedback from audience members, in addition to taking questions from the floor. For instance:

- Place large white pads around the room and invite attendees to write down their concerns before the meeting.
- Place large white pads around the room listing key priorities and themes from the plan. Invite attendees to write their comments on these pads after the presentation.
- Hand out cards for people to write down their questions. Collect and answer as many as you can at the meeting, but promise to post all of the questions with answers on your website.

Managing the meeting: The question-and-answer period following a presentation may be particularly challenging, especially if the first person to the microphone is disruptive and levels false allegations about the work of the planning office. Don't be surprised by this disruption: expect some people or groups to misunderstand you and your goals, to misrepresent what you are trying to achieve, vilify or defame you, and work in other ways to disrupt the meeting. What do you do?

If you are running the meeting, enforce the rules you have established, pointing out that the group agreed to observe these rules at the beginning of the meeting. Tell the individual that their time is up, but let them know how they can contact you or your office following the meeting, if there is more they want to share.

Most importantly though, role-play a contentious situation with your staff BEFORE you get to the meeting so you are prepared. Additionally:

- Remember your manners and thank them for the question.
- Do not get into a debate and do not restate anything negative they have said.
- Pivot back to your key points about the plan, underscoring your aspirational points using one of the following bridging terms:
  - Thank you for your comment, however...
  - What is really important to understand is...
  - Let me get back to you in ...
  - I can't respond to a hypothetical, but what I can tell you is that...
  - I appreciate that perspective, our goal here is to...
  - In fact...
  - What we have been hearing around the community is...

After the meeting post your remarks and those of the other meetings participants on your website and incorporate them into blogs, Facebook, and Tweets. Be as transparent as possible. If you promised to post and answer all questions from the meeting, be sure to follow through. If there were reporters at the meeting, call and ask if they have additional questions and restate your key messages about the plan and planning process.

Part Five: Building Relationships with the Media

Traditional media provide one of the most effective, far-reaching, and credible ways to reach your community with news about the planning department and its work. Building professional relationships with representatives of your local newspaper, as well as radio and television, will pay dividends when you have news to share. These relationships will also be of vital importance should your department or planning allies come under attack by persons spreading falsehoods about plans and planners and attempting to upend the planning process.

Reporters are always looking for news and value knowledgeable sources like you and your colleagues at the planning department. Therefore, make an effort to get to know a reporter and help him or her gain a better understanding of the work that you do and the impact it will have on your community.

Calling a reporter is not really as scary as it may initially seem: you will, in fact, be helping them to do their job and will be delighted to hear from you. Look at your local paper and determine who is writing about planning issues: this may actually be a reporter you have met at a planning meeting or who has called you in the past seeking comment.

To help you develop rapport and a relationship with that reporter, follow these steps:

- At a planning meeting, ask the reporter for his or her card and let them know you want to call and schedule a background briefing.
- Call the reporter and invite him or her to sit down and learn more about the new comprehensive plan, zoning change, or other timely planning topic that you are working on.
- Set up a meeting at your office or at a location affected by the plan or zoning change. Going to a location often adds valuable context and will give the reporter specifics to write about in the future.
- Before any meeting with a reporter (or giving an interview), organize your thoughts: What do you want him or her to know and understand as a result of your meeting? Be sure you've

prepared and practiced delivering your messages in advance.

- Ask if handouts would be useful (two or three pages of background information, a map, a rendering, before-and-after photos, etc.). Do **not** overwhelm the reporter with lots of information. He or she has other stories to write and deadlines to meet, and needs succinct, newsworthy information.
- If you are at a planning meeting where community members are being disruptive, you can leverage your existing relationship with the reporter by pulling him or her aside after the meeting or calling them the next day and clarifying the key points you delivered at the meeting.

Preparing for Media Interviews

Before developing relationships with the media, first determine who is going to serve as the spokesperson for the planning program, project, or process. Whether it is you, the planning director, a senior member of the planning department staff, the chairperson of the planning commission, or the city manager or mayor, the individual should be well versed in the topic and prepared to speak with the media. Even if you are not a spokesperson for planning, you can still cultivate relationships with reporters and develop messages and talking points your spokesperson(s) can use during interviews. Refer back to the earlier section on messaging for pointers on how to pull your talking points together.

Remember, when a reporter calls, you do not have to speak to him or her right away. First find out what they want to discuss. What is their deadline? Who else are they interviewing? This will help you prepare, especially if they are interviewing individuals with opposing points of view. To give yourself time to organize your thoughts and review your talking points, tell them you are in the middle of a project and will get back to them, and set a specific time for the interview. Sometime it can also be helpful to put a time limit on the interview by letting the reporter know that you have 15 minutes to chat.

Reporters are always looking for good stories and breaking news to help them beat their competition. Therefore, if you have information you think may be of interest, contact a reporter. The worst-case scenario is that they say no (the same answer if you do not call), but many times they will say yes. Some ways to work with the media proactively include:

- What is your headline? You read news in print or online every day and photos and story headlines attract your attention first. To help you decide what makes your planning story news and worth media coverage, think about what you want the headline of your story to say and what key facts you want in the first paragraph. That is the "news" you want to call and "pitch" to a reporter or editor. For example, your department may have finished a new plan for a downtown area and during the research and data collection phase found a revitalized central business district is expect to add 160 jobs, infuse $10 million to the local economy, and increase tax revenues by $1 million. This research will be of interest to the news media.
- Another way to frame your thinking is by using a classic journalism tool – answering the five Ws and one H: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How. Using the example above: Who — the planning department; What — new plan to revitalize central business district; Where — downtown; When — effort will start in six months; Why — add 160 jobs, infuse $10 million to the local economy and increase tax revenues by $1 million; How — the details of your plan.
- News is often connected to controversy, something planners are familiar with given local land-use and development disputes, zoning battles, "not-in-my-backyard" concerns, and so forth. If there is a local controversy brewing and you have a piece of information you want to get out via the news media, contact your local reporters.
- The media also likes human interest stories — whether about the rich, famous, underserved, or disadvantaged — and planning has plenty of these. Using the example above, there may be business owners in the downtown area who have been there for 30-plus years and are excited about the prospects resulting from a revitalized urban core.

Beyond Interviews

While interviews and background briefings are essential tools for working with the media, here are other ways to get a reporter's attention and provide them with information about important issues:

- Submit letters to the editor to print and online publications.
- Submit a guest editorial or commentary about a timely issue or topic.
- Lead walking tours of an area being planned.
- Provide fact sheets or summaries of a plan's positive benefits and outcomes.

Letter to the Editor Excerpt

Here's an excerpt from a letter to the editor from APA in response to a newspaper story about climate change skeptics and their efforts to stop communities from planning for sea level rise. One of APA's core messages (slightly modified) is italicized:

Disruptive tactics [of self-styled Tea Party activists in Virginia] deny citizens their rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, revealing the activists' interest in themselves rather than our Constitution.

These attacks can impose real costs and can have tragic consequences for the communities they say they are trying to protect. Good planning is vital to dealing with challenges such as the combination of land subsidence and rising sea levels in Hampton Roads. In every state across the country, *engaging citizens through local planning is essential to rebuilding local economies, creating jobs and improving people's lives*.

Planners welcome critics to civic engagement, but fear mongers' undemocratic tactics cannot be allowed to cause a community to abandon planning for its future. (Farmer, Paul, "Sound civic planning is essential," *Washington Post*, December 26, 2011, Page A22.)

Part Six: Integrating Social Media

Online social media platforms, ranging from blogs to networking services such as Facebook and Twitter, are fundamentally changing the way planners work and engage with each other, the media, other professionals, and the public. These platforms present great opportunities and additional means for planners to increase public understanding of the planning profession itself and the planner's perspective on key issues. Online conversations that occur through social media have the potential to empower planners and the public by encouraging an open dialogue that is both transparent and informative.

With the proliferation of niche sites and communities on the Internet, and considering the millions of people online worldwide, it is becoming increasingly important for planners to participate in the social media sphere. Conversations about planning will continue to happen with or without you, so it is vitally important to be part of the discussion.

Social media present challenges but they also give planners a chance to better understand the public and its integral role in community planning initiatives. The key differentiator between social and traditional media is interaction: social media allow readers, viewers, or listeners to participate in the creation and development of content.

Social media encompass a variety of multimedia communications including:

Blogs: If you've ever owned a diary, then you should be familiar with another form of social media — blogging. The term blog comes from the words *web log*, comprising regular online entriesthat include commentary, information, graphics, videos, ideas, or anything the writer wishes to share.

Wikis: Wikis allow users to interact collaboratively with an entire community of users, permitting any user to add and edit content on a specified topic. Wikis, such as Wikipedia and WikiTravel, encourage the building of knowledge and give readers a comprehensive report on a topic.

News: Sites such as Digg, Slashdot, and Reddit rank user-submitted stories based on popularity. Certain sites may feature only specific genres of articles. Slashdot, for instance, focuses mainly on science and technology news. Digg, on the other hand, includes any type of article, creating a clever system where the reader "diggs" articles he likes and "buries" articles that he finds boring.

Photo and Video-sharing: Websites like Flickr, YouTube, and Vimeo allow users to share their photos or videos with others. These sites encourage you to upload and display photos and videos either publicly or privately. They also provide ways to organize the photos and videos. Planners are currently using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and video and photo-sharing sites to reach and interact with the public.

How Social Media Helps Traditional Media

Traditional media can be supported and bolstered by social media. When you send out a press release, make sure you post a copy of it on your website. You can link to that press release on your site via your department's social media outlets such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. In addition, your organization can comment on the blogs of a media outlet or use social bookmarking sites to highlight a relevant or interesting story.

For example, The Metropolitan Washington (D.C.) Council of Governments coordinates traditional media with social media by posting short links to complete press releases on its Facebook newsfeed, many of which link directly back to its website. In this way, they use Facebook to

support and bolster traditional media efforts, increasing both press release views and webpage traffic.

The San Francisco Planning Department gives its traditional media a boost through several social media outlets, including blogs, Twitter feeds, and Facebook posts. Meanwhile, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning regularly uses Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and blogs. The agency's main site has a page dedicated to social media, including links to each outlet and encouragement to join their outreach efforts ("Be our friend on Twitter!").

The Cuyahoga County Planning Commission in Ohio utilizes nearly every type of social media, from blogs to monthly e-mails and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. The commission also uses video and photo-sharing sites (Flickr and YouTube) to help connect and interact with their community.

Conclusion

Whether your work in a community that is generally supportive of planning or one that's critical, it is important to take some time and think about how the strategies outlined above can be better implemented in your community. Doing so may make the difference between a negative experience and a positive experience in communicating planning, as well as the ability to garner support for implementing plans.

See the resources listed below for sample communication plans, as well as more information on managing contentious situations, media relations, and politics and planning.

About the Authors

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Resources

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