EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This PAS Report examines management issues for local government planning, especially management trends. Most planning managers are already leading, responding to, or at least considering most of these trends. The focus of this report is on key issues and management trends to help managers, planners, and students think strategically.

Planning, project reviews and approvals, and plan implementation often receive public notice, acclaim, and criticism. Management issues, on the other hand, tend to make news only when a new planning director is hired or an old one is fired; when allegations of corruption emerge; or perhaps when a mayor, city manager, or county supervisor proposes a major reorganization or budget. Generally, the public view of management issues is obscured by substantive planning issues, as it should be. Although the general public may not follow management issues, they may be as important as substantive planning issues for many municipal and county planning managers, line planners, and public users of planning services.

BASICS OF MANAGEMENT

The best organizations and agencies have strong and visionary leadership; excellent communication, coordination, and collaboration; and very strong employees. Arguably, the most important task for a planning manager is to build and maintain the best team possible. Key to any operation is hiring the right people; valuing, training, empowering, feeding, and protecting those people; and getting rid of unmanageable people. Political constraints, civil service restrictions, union contracts, the challenges of working in a fishbowl, and other legal structures sometimes limit a manager’s ability to develop the right team, but building that team should always be the holy grail.

Hiring the best staff means hiring the best people available—even if that means knowing that staff will move on. It is critical for top managers to know how to get the best from every employee, whether that involves training, coaching, or simply providing assignments that will help staff members grow while also playing to their strengths. The same goal should apply to line professionals, which includes planning managers and leaders who set the policy direction and take political risks, and staff who support the agency mission, such as staff who work at the permit counter. In planning, the distinction between line and staff may be hard to see, but often the difference is about empowerment—such as a manager empowering and supporting employees to take risks and help advance a mission.

A clear mission and an optimized department organizational structure should also enhance a department’s ability to excel at providing customer service. Providing excellent customer service is one of the most important functions of a taxpayer-funded public agency. Customer service, however, is perhaps the area where planning offices are most ripe for improvement.

PLANNING OFFICE ORGANIZATION

For some planning managers, office organization is the result of careful thought. For others it is the result of historical or legacy factors that never changed. Almost any organizational structure can work when there are willing and cooperative players who want to make it work and who have both strong political support and a culture of collaboration. Smaller communities are more likely to have a consolidated model in which planning, building, housing (including grants administration), and economic development are together in a single department. Large cities and counties typically house those functions in separate departments or in divisions within a larger department.

A very strong argument certainly exists to have current and long-range planning integrated in some formal way. Zucker (2007) recommends keeping current planning and long-range planning in the same department to ensure collaboration and integration of different functions. The goals and policies expressed in comprehensive and general plans and subarea plans are implemented by current planning functions, including site plan and development review, zoning, and form-based codes. Planning department leadership must focus on creating and embracing the vision of the department’s work, coordinate all functions so that departments collaborate, and work toward a shared mission.

In planning management, as in planning, context is everything. The different contexts of inner city, urban, suburban, exurban, and rural communities; fast-growing and shrinking communities; and wealthy and working-class communities all lead to different management needs—to say
nothing of different values and perspectives. However, more similarities than differences likely exist within different communities, and an understanding of context simply reinforces the options. The same issues can be raised about the integration of economic development, sustainability, development services, housing, and planning.

Sustainability is one of the newer organizing principles in local planning. It involves finding integrative approaches to addressing the “three Es”: environment, economy, and social equity. As sustainability becomes a dominant paradigm for planning, planning managers and communities are grappling with their organizational structures. There are no universal guidelines about where sustainability functions should be housed in local governments, what a sustainability function is, which professionals should take the lead in sustainability, or even what the relationship between sustainability and planning should be. Local government sustainability functions are typically located in one of four (all good) organizational structures:

1. Sustainability in an integrated planning department, often with major or minor restructuring or rebranding
2. Sustainability integrated into a chief legislative or executive office
3. Sustainability as a standalone department
4. Some combination of integration and separate departments

The reality is that all four models can work exceptionally well when planning managers ensure that there is good communication and collaboration; all four can also fail spectacularly without such communication and collaboration. What is most important for communities is that they carefully examine which organizational structures, within each community’s context, will allow the best integration, strongest collaboration, sharpest focus, and most effective use of limited resources.

CUSTOMER SERVICE AT THE PERMIT COUNTER

With unlimited resources, staffing ideally would consist of senior-level staff that understand the context, represent the process inside and out, can give consistent help to the community, and can make consistent decisions. As a practical matter, front-counter work is usually assigned to junior staff who are less expensive, have more time to spend with the public, and do not have the seniority to request other assignments. It is critical that planning managers set up procedures, training, and oversight so that those junior-level staffers are providing quality customer-friendly support while ensuring consistent treatment of new projects.

Consistency and reproducibility are especially important for development reviews. Checklists provide consistency and help planners avoid forgetting simple steps. They also provide two other critical benefits for overwhelmed planning offices. First, the more checklists can be used, the more steps in planning reviews can be delegated to junior professional staff and support staff. Second, and even more promising, many things that can be codified in checklists can now or eventually be moved online and made part of an interactive process with an applicant.

The first step in evaluating any application is to ensure that it is complete. One of the benefits that planning managers have discovered when they use online application processes—with checklists incorporated into the permit applications—is that the applications cannot be submitted until at least the basic steps are complete: attachments included, fees paid, and questions filled out. Obviously, this same approach is done in most planning offices manually if the process is not automated. Until an application is judged complete, planners will find that understanding the context of an application and undertaking a substantive review will be more difficult.

Written and oral staff reports are a critical aspect of current planning, development permitting programs, and development-related plan and zoning amendments. Most importantly, planning managers require staff reports to provide the public and decision makers with consistent and informative reviews, regardless of the staff planners who actually write the reports. Reducing litigation risks and providing consistency in staffing and responses are also extremely important.

Disputes are probably more common in the permit process than any other aspect of planning. In the permit process, alternative dispute resolutions are an option for planning managers to consider. They can cool down affected parties to allow successful dialogues and agreement on mutually beneficial resolutions of issues. They are an alternative to the traditional permit process—that is sometimes winner take all—and to litigation. Alternative dispute resolutions may take many forms; they usually involve some variation on mediation, arbitration, and negotiation.

A critical part of any permitting system is ensuring that projects will be built as proposed and approved. Performance guarantees are the legal and financial mechanisms to ensure that improvements offered as part of the permit process are provided and that construction projects are properly completed, generally without the need to resort to criminal or civ-
lic sanctions. Performance guarantees are the heart and soul of most government efforts that avoid after-the-fact criminal and civil sanctions, and they are generally much faster, less expensive, less complicated, and less adversarial than sanctions. The three types of performance guarantees are non-financial performance, third-party responsibility, and financial performance.

**POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENTS**

Planning, especially in local government in the United States, is a political exercise—not partisan, but political nonetheless. Planners are charged with managing change, which requires great sensitivity to the communities they serve, the political context, and the need to accomplish things at the end of the day. One of the best trends occurring today is a growing commitment within governments to create clear departmental visions and missions. Planning offices are mission driven. Ideally those missions are focused on implementing community master, comprehensive, or general plans. The job of planning managers is to ensure that their work remains mission driven.

Risk management, in the local government context, is used to identify potential events that may affect the government and to protect and minimize risks to the government’s property, services, and employees. Planning and governments are often faulted for not being willing to address risks. This is especially a problem with long-term risks—from such things as climate change—because of the lack of short-term political payback and political and community support in light of enormous uncertainties. For local governments, the primary threats are litigation risk and political risk.

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Planning managers need to ensure that their staff, policies, and procedures support community engagement. This engagement in turn influences the management of planning offices. Community engagement is at the core of the planning profession, particularly for public-sector planners. It is the planner’s job to guarantee that low-income, minority, and historically underrepresented communities are engaged in the planning process. Depending on the perspective, the actual process of citizen engagement is either an opportunity for collective empowerment and collaboration or the bane of the existence of local planners—or, for most planners, probably some of each.

Because citizen engagement is so important to the management of local planning, it should be thought of as one of the core constructs of any local government planning office. However, there is no “right” way to organize a planning office around such a construct. Some planning managers want to make sure that every staff member is good at community engagement and that this aspect of planning is part of everyone’s work. Other planning managers assign especially skilled staff members to serve as community engagement experts and to help the rest of the staff with their projects. Ultimately, the organizational structure may be less important than the overall orientation of local government planning managers and their staff.

**METRICS AND DATA**

Planning offices use metrics and data in several ways: to evaluate planning office management, to support the planning process, to assess how well planners are doing, and to conduct trend analyses. Metrics and assessments are most useful when they are performance or outcome oriented. The number of ordinances or plan changes proposed is not a measure of success (although too-frequent plan changes might be a metric for failure to plan well). Implementing the plans and visions of communities and achieving community goals should be the focus. Performance measurements, however, should not just be about the big picture. Planning managers still need to understand the productivity and customer service abilities of their staffs and create metrics to measure and assess those areas.

Data of all kind are designed to help inform rational decisions. Planners like to believe that information provides unlimited answers, whether the criteria are indicators, benchmarks, assessments, performance measures, or other metrics. In a rational planning model, once but no longer the holy grail of urban and regional planning, decisions and alternative assessments are driven by data. Under that model, “correct” management decisions are made based on assessments of data. This approach has obvious problems, most notably that the public is typically excluded from the decision-making process. Regardless, planners like the idea that facts make a difference in decision making.

Metrics and data are critical for the management of planning offices and for creating positive futures. However, planning managers needing to carefully manage scarce resources must ensure that data are not being collected simply for the sake of collecting. This requires identification of needs, costs, and opportunities and development of the most
cost-effective data collection systems available. An effective strategy includes assessments of existing data—often collected by others—and data analysis, and identification of the ways these can serve planning needs and instances when new data collection systems or analyses are needed.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Perhaps no area of planning, or any other profession for that matter, is changing as quickly as information technology. The information technology available to planners evolves so fast that any discussion about it will be out of date very quickly. One of the most important rules of technology is that simply automating a function is not enough. Planners need to rethink how and why automating functions can take full advantage of new opportunities. Managers talk about ideas leading to innovation and innovation leading to implementation. Technology helps planners implement their ideas and innovations, and it can support a feedback loop to ensure that they are modifying what they do and using technology to think differently.

Citizens expect and deserve that many, if not most, government services will be available 24/7. This concept came about before the Internet, with older technology such as informative voicemail or automated fax responses, but the pace of change continues to accelerate. Most planners have embraced these changes for a number of years. In many municipal planning offices, for example, the number of visitors to the offices is a small fraction of what it was a few years ago because citizens can use the web and electronic services instead of coming in. This decrease alone can result in savings that more than cover any investment in these emerging technologies. The pace of change, however, continues to be daunting for most public agencies—not so much because of resistance to the changes themselves but because of the need for constant reinventing and investment. The new challenges for municipal governments are lowering the cost of such offerings so that they are available to smaller communities, lowering internal resistance to making all public information readily available, and addressing the digital divide of data access.

LEADERSHIP

Ultimately, the best planning directors, mayors, managers, and leaders of a community are those with compelling visions and who are willing to take risks to fulfill those visions. The most successful are those who can share their visions and their communities’ visions in just a few sentences—the one-minute elevator pitch that inspires and brings along the community. Charisma in a planner is a great trait, but it definitely is not an essential one. Vision and an entrepreneurial risk-taking attitude, however, are irreplaceable.

Converting the vision into a mission-driven operation is the next step for planning managers. A mission-driven operation may start with a mission statement, but it needs to be far more than just a statement. A mission needs to be the compass that drives the organization. At the same time, the head of a department cannot be the only person articulating a vision and a mission and providing leadership. Many very good planners see themselves as technicians, and they may not always be great leaders. Great planning managers, however, need to also be leaders. Planning leaders need to possess key characteristics that reflect great leaders: visionary and entrepreneurial perspectives, an openness to new ideas, the willingness to work collaboratively and to bring people together, a focus on problem solving (instead of a focus on why problems cannot be solved), and the ability to generate enthusiasm and respect.