

# QUICKNOTES

## The Five Strategic Points of Intervention

Have you ever had difficulty explaining to your family, friends, or colleagues what planning is or what planners do? Or why the benefits of good planning have enticed you to become involved in planning as a staff person, a new planning commissioner or board member, an engaged citizen, or an advocate for a particular planning issue? Describing community planning and its benefits can be a daunting task. Your audience may have an incomplete understanding of the subject, or worse, the image they have of planning may be limited to the permit desk at city hall.

Explaining to a new mayor, a business leader, a citizens group president, a state or federal official, or an interest group partner what planning is and what planners do can be even more challenging. How can you distill all the benefits of sound community planning into a coherent, perfect nugget of knowledge that clearly describes your planning department's special skills and aptitudes for getting the community to identify community challenges and take action that will lead to a more sustainable future?

You would like to explain how your planning director and staff are strategically well-placed to help create communities of lasting value. You want to show how good planning helps create communities that offer better choices for where and how people work and live. You want to convince people that good planning offers the best hope for meaningfully engaging civic leaders, business interests, and citizens in creating communities that enrich people's lives.

So why does planning matter? Your answer should go well beyond the usual response—that planning approaches problems comprehensively (everything is related to everything else), that it has a long-range perspective (20 to 50 years), and that it deals with unique place-based issues (this place is like nowhere else on earth). Planners, as the torchbearers of planning, matter because they are uniquely positioned. They are key players in the five strategic points of intervention. And their actions and recommendations can have extremely powerful effects on the future of cities, towns, counties, and regions.

### THE FIVE POINTS

Planners engage in a great many activities, but those that hold the most promise for making a difference can be boiled down to five sets of critical enterprises. These constructs can be useful for explaining to the uninitiated what planners do and what planning is. You might try incorporating them into your response the next time you hear, "So tell me what planning is all about. And why does it matter, anyway?" The five points should be familiar territory to any seasoned community planner.

**Long-range community visioning and goal setting.** When planners engage residents, business people, and interest groups in long-range visioning exercises, they help the community determine the values that should undergird the plans, implementation tools, and public investments it undertakes. Setting broad goals and objectives for a jurisdiction is often the first, best opportunity a community has to flag a problem for serious attention later in the planning process. These exercises often involve analyzing alternative policy scenarios, which helps decision makers visualize the effects of future actions or the effects of not taking action.



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**Plan making.** Planners help towns, cities, counties, and regions prepare all types of plans: jurisdiction-wide comprehensive plans (sometimes known as general or master plans); subarea plans (such as neighborhood, downtown, and corridor plans); and functional plans (such as transit, highway, sewer, water, housing, public health, economic development, and open space plans). Plans assess existing conditions and trends, describe recommended actions, assign responsibility and costs for implementation, and include benchmarks for measuring outcome progress. Plans set the framework for recommended implementation tools—standards, policies, and incentives, and future public and private investments.

**Standards, policies, and incentives.** Planners conceive and draft standards, policies, and incentives that have an enormous influence on what, where, and how things get built, and what, where, and how land and buildings get preserved. Zoning, subdivision regulations, design guidelines, landscaping and street tree standards, signage regulations, transit-oriented development ordinances, street and sidewalk standards, tax policies, and inclusionary housing regulations are but a few examples of the “carrots and sticks” that can be used effectively to build places of lasting value. Standards, policies, and incentives can have either a positive or a negative effect on community character, environmental integrity, energy use, climate change, housing choice and affordability, the economy, public health, transportation, and yes, sustainability.

**Development work.** Planners often have an opportunity to influence the outcomes of development or redevelopment projects. For one thing, they can serve as leading team members on public-private partnerships that result in mixed use developments, brownfields development, downtown revitalization, affordable housing, and transit-oriented development. Planners also take a leading role in reviewing and making recommendations on a wide variety of private development plans. They ensure that a development submittal is complete—that it has all the information needed to allow a planning board or other permit-granting body to make an informed decision—and that it meets or exceeds adopted development standards. A thorough site plan review increases the likelihood that the proposal will result in an outcome worthy of the community.

**Public investments.** Towns, cities, and counties undertake major investments in infrastructure and community facilities that support private development and quality of life in their communities. In many ways the capital improvements program is the most important tool for planners but one that is often overlooked. Planners’ influence over the location and design of sewer and water facilities, transit, streets, sidewalks, bikeways, schools, libraries, police and fire facilities, parks and open space, and other publicly funded investments is substantial. For instance, a seemingly innocuous recommendation about where sewer lines should go greatly influences the pattern and density of future development, which in turn affects car dependency, feasibility of transit, active living and community health, and housing affordability.

The Five Strategic Points of Intervention are not intended to be viewed as sequential “steps” in the planning process, for in most communities all five points of intervention are being addressed at the same time. Nor are the five points intended to be undertaken without a number of critical additives, such as a robust community engagement process and a continuous effort to benchmark progress.

While the efficacy of the five strategic points of intervention may be obvious to many working in the field of planning, it is not always obvious to those outside the field. To help spread the word, try to work up the 30-second, “elevator speech” version of the five points, and then the “two-minute-drill” version. Try them out on those who approach you wanting to know what planning is all about. You may find that the message goes a long way toward explaining what planners do and why planning matters.

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