2026

APA FORESIGHT

Trend Report for Planners

Use the future when preparing for uncertainty and helping communities navigate change. Stay a step ahead of the issues impacting the future of planning and our communities. Brought to you by the American Planning Association and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

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Trends and Signals for 2026

The trends and signals in this report are structured in three timeframes, which indicate the urgency of planners' action. Within each timeframe, trends are grouped into themed clusters (in alphabetical order).

Act Now

Intensifying Bonds Between Humans and Chatbots

Community Rights, Culture, and Safety at Risk

Institutionalizing and Weaponizing Disinformation

Political Violence in the 21st Century

Public Schools Under Pressure

Regulatory Rollbacks Pose Environmental Risks

Disrupted Paths, Shifting Nation

Prepare

Changing Climate Approaches in the Private Sector

Funding Cuts Fuel Uncertainty in the U.S.

New Lows for Higher Education

Policy Shifts Not Working for Labor Markets

Public Transit Faces Growing Uncertainties

Tariff Costs Take Hold for Businesses and Households

Tectonic Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy

Learn & Watch

Global Issues, Local Impacts

A Constellation of Developments in Outer Space

Privacy Will Never Be the Same

Mixed Prognosis for Worldwide Public Health

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Special Features

SCENARIOS

2031: Mobility by What Means?

2036: When Will We Reach Peak Productivity?

2041: You, Me, and Privacy

DEEP DIVES

AI Governance: Promise, Risk, and the Path Forward

Preparing for Tourism's Disruptive Future

The Future of Jobs

TREND TALKS

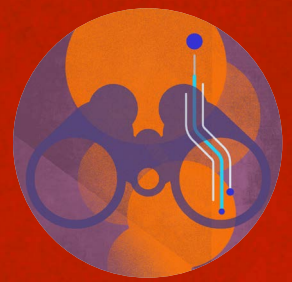
AI in Planning Education With Tom Sanchez, PhD, AICP

Preemption and Its Challenges With Nestor Davidson, JD

The Future of Hazard Mitigation With Chrissy Caggiano, AICP

Circularity in the Global and U.S. Economies With Helen Santiago Fink

The Framework

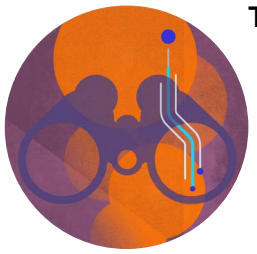


About This Report

An Inclusive Approach to Futures

APA's Trend Universe

About This Report



This is the fifth *Trend Report for Planners* developed by the American Planning Association (APA) in partnership with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. As in previous years, the core of this *Trend Report* is a list of the most impactful existing, emerging, and potential future trends that the APA Foresight team, together with our Trend Scouting Foresight Community, identified as relevant to planning. The trends are structured within three timeframes (Act Now, Prepare, Learn and Watch), indicating the urgency of planners' action. Within each timeframe, trends are grouped into themed clusters.

For each trend, the report gives insights and explains why it is important for planners to know about and consider the trend in their work. All trends and signals are based on facts and are described neutrally and without judgment. The purpose of the report is to share potential drivers of change and shifts that will possibly impact the work of planners and the communities we serve as planners.

While most of the trends and signals from previous *Trend Reports* are still relevant, we didn't repeat them in this *Trend Report* unless there were major updates that were important to highlight. All trends and signals from this report and previous reports are also available online in APA's Trend Universe, where they are regularly updated, reflecting the accelerating pace of change today and in the future.

Furthermore, based on the trends and observations outlined in this report, we generated thoughts and conclusions on what the future of planning might look like, explaining how the planning profession will have to evolve to keep up with a continuously changing world, what new skills planners will have to develop, and what new tools are worth trying.

Additional features throughout this report include deep dives, future scenarios, and trend talks. This year's **deep dives** focus on emerging developments in three relatively broad topic areas, which all affect planning in different ways. We explored applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in government and its direct impacts on planning work. We took a deep dive into the tourism sector's recent changes, fueled by digitalization among other drivers of change, and what those might mean for the work of planners in tourism communities (and those that might become touristic areas). And we used hindsight to make sense of what the future of jobs (from entry-level to leadership positions) might look like based on signals related to AI, new approaches to work taken by younger generations, and the evolution toward skills-based hiring.

Like last year, based on different trends and signals, we also did some time travel and created a variety of **futures scenarios**. These scenarios are examples of how planners can use the trends from this report to create multiple plausible futures with their communities and how they might affect the path forward. Due to the accelerated pace of change, we revisited the time horizons of our scenarios and brought the future closer. We traveled to the year 2031 to explore what mobility might look like amid public transit agencies struggles and the rise of autonomous vehicles. We looked at the year 2036 to imagine how the intersection of AI in the workplace and environmental (de)regulation might unfold. And we explored plausible scenarios for the year 2041 focused on the intersection of privacy and disinformation.

For more information on scenario planning, you can visit APA's Scenario Planning Research KnowledgeBase collection and the Lincoln Institute's Consortium for Scenario Planning.

Finally, we conducted **trend talks** with four experts about the futures of four key areas: AI in education, hazard mitigation, federal and state preemption in the U.S., and the circular economy. These conversations are available on the APA podcast, and their highlights are featured in this report.

How to Use This Report

The *Trend Report* is intended to be used as a tool or reference when planning for the future of our communities. Planners can use the trends and signals listed in this report to augment their long-range and current planning processes, to use futures in community visioning processes, to conduct scenario planning exercises, to organize futures literacy labs, or simply to inform decision-making about the future.

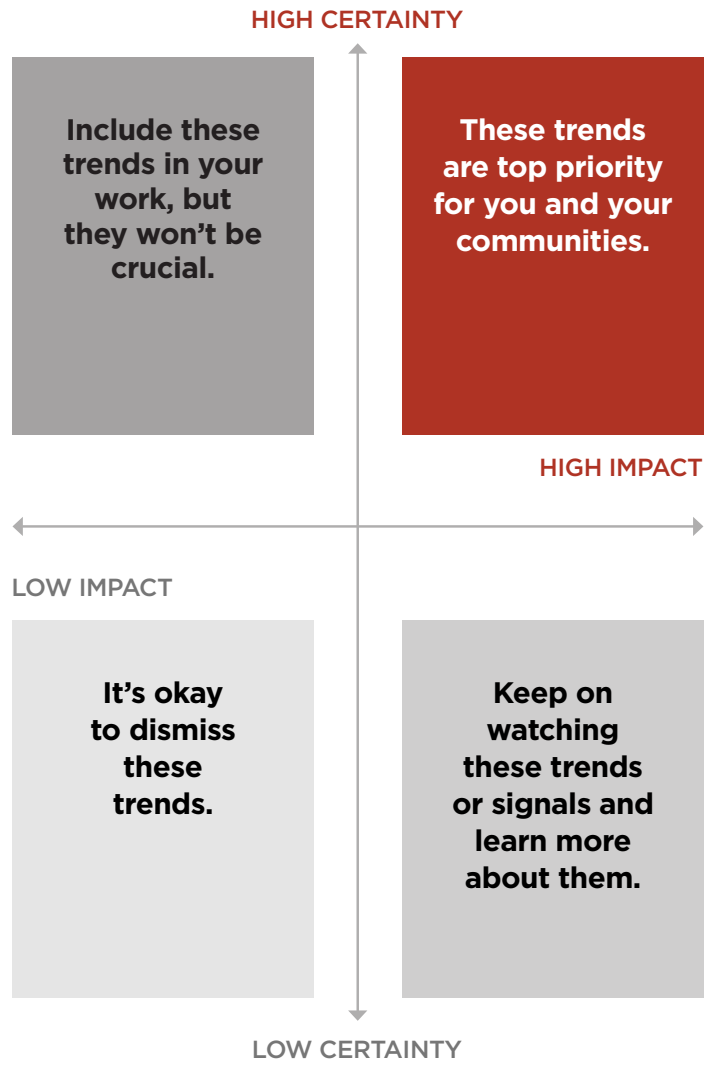
To determine and prioritize the most important trends to consider, planners can evaluate and rate the trends based upon (1) the expected extent and severity of the potential impact, and (2) how certain or uncertain it is that a trend will occur in a community. The Trend Prioritization for Planners graph demonstrates how these two factors interact in the evaluation of trends. Trends in the upper right quadrant of the graph—high impact and high certainty—represent the top-priority trends for planners to pay special attention to. Trends in the lower right—high impact and low certainty—are specifically well suited for exploratory scenario planning exercises.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"APA's *Trend Report* was a valuable input into our *Strategic Land Use Plan*, helping the team ground local land use decisions in an understanding of broader emerging trends."

— Don Roe, Executive Director, Planning and Urban Design Agency of the City of St. Louis

Trend Prioritization for Planners



APA FORESIGHT

Upskill Your Futures Literacy

Want to learn more about how you can use our *Trend Reports* in your planning work? Check out APA's foresight trainings in 2026. This educational program will empower you to embrace uncertainty while preparing your community for the future. In-person and online trainings will equip you with the following knowledge and skills, among others:

- Using the *Trend Report* as a tool to make sense of the future
- Building different futures and how to integrate them in your plans
- How to strengthen your imagination muscles

Join us on this journey and explore upcoming events and resources at planning.org/foresight.

An Inclusive Approach to Futures

"A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit." —Greek proverb

USING FUTURES can result in more resilient and equitable plans, but if our futures imaginings aren't developed through an inclusive approach, they won't lead to a truly equitable future. APA's *PAS QuickNotes 110*, "Decolonizing the Future: An Inclusive Approach to Futures," explains how and why we must rethink our approach to imagining and discussing futures.

This approach challenges past and present systems, envisioning multiple, diverse futures, and ensuring the outcomes are translated into actions. It is about creating safe spaces for historically marginalized worldviews and cultural identities, moving away from one dominant perspective, and encouraging the imagination and co-creation of many possible futures. It promotes continuous learning, unlearning, and action.

Planners can start by asking the following three questions.

Whose future are we talking about?

"We see the world the way we are, not as the world is." *—Tamira Snell, Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies*

IMAGINING THE FUTURE IS ABOUT GAINING THE POWER TO SHAPE IT. Limiting our view to the dominant perspective risks replicating the mistakes of the past. Futures thinking is about the people who will be living in the future. Planners must understand the diverse cultural views of those whose futures we are imagining and integrate different worldviews and their interconnections.

Who will be living in that future?

"When we talk about the future, we have to have the future at the table." *—Angela Wilkinson, World Energy Council*

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THOSE WHO WILL INHABIT IT. This includes children—and those who aren't yet born. Including far-out futures in today's planning is challenging when the present is overwhelming. While local planning does not yet often address future generations, some communities have started to involve children and youth in their planning processes. We need to continue fostering these approaches and integrating them into planning.

What's the role of planners?

"Using futures for collaboration of people in the present." *—Adam Kahane, Reos Partners*

PLANNERS CAN USE THE FUTURE TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER IN THE PRESENT. They can empower community members to imagine their futures and engage them in creating change. They can create spaces for meaningful conversations and synthesize collective visions into actionable plans. Decolonization is a strategic action for the present, not just an idealized future.

About the American Planning Association

The American Planning Association is an independent, not-for-profit educational organization that provides vital leadership in creating great communities for all. APA and its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners, are dedicated to advancing the profession of planning, offering better choices for where and how people work and live. The nearly 40,000 APA members work in concert with community residents, civic leaders, and business interests to create communities that enrich people's lives. Through its philanthropic work, the APA Foundation helps to reduce economic and social barriers to good planning. APA is based in Chicago.

American Planning Association
Creating Great Communities for All

APA Foresight: learning with the future

APA Foresight helps planners navigate change and prepare for an uncertain future. With foresight in mind, planners can guide change, create more sustainable and equitable outcomes, and establish themselves as critical to thriving communities. Foresight is not about predicting the future—it is about understanding drivers of change that are outside of our control, how we can prepare for them, and when it is time to act. APA Foresight identifies emerging trends and signals and explores how scenarios stemming from each may impact the world, our communities, and the planning profession in the years to come. The path forward requires adjusting, adapting, and even reinventing planning processes, tools, and skills to meet the needs of a changing world. Through APA's foresight practice, planners will find support, training, and new research for making sense of ever-changing futures.

CONSORTIUM FOR
SCENARIO PLANNING

About the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy

The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy seeks to improve quality of life through the effective use, taxation, and stewardship of land. A nonprofit, private operating foundation whose origins date to 1946, the Lincoln Institute researches and recommends creative approaches to land as a solution to economic, social, and environmental challenges. Through education, training, publications, and events, we integrate theory and practice to inform public policy decisions worldwide. We organize our work around three impact areas: land and water; land and fiscal systems; and land and communities. We envision a world where cities and regions prosper and benefit from coordinated land use planning and public finance; where communities thrive from efficient and equitable allocation of limited land resources; and where stewardship of land and water resources ensures a livable future. We work globally, with locations in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Washington, D.C.; Phoenix, Arizona; and Beijing, China.

LINCOLN INSTITUTE
OF LAND POLICY

Consortium for Scenario Planning

The Consortium for Scenario Planning at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy offers a community of practice for practitioners, including access to technical assistance, educational resources, and a network of fellow innovators. Its mission is to improve the practice of scenario planning and broaden its use in communities of all sizes across disciplines. Through research, peer-to-peer learning, networking, training, and technical assistance, the Consortium helps communities develop better plans to guide a range of actions, from climate change adaptation to transportation investment.

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APA's Trend Scouting Foresight Community

For a successful foresight practice, diversity is key to capture different perspectives, ensure that we identify a variety of trends directly or indirectly connected to planning, and avoid missing trends or signals within or outside the planning world. The members of APA's Trend Scouting Foresight Community meet quarterly to share observations, discuss present-day shifts, and hint at signals that could evolve into future trends. The community includes thought leaders from multiple disciplines, industries, backgrounds, career stages, and countries. With our Trend Scouting Foresight Community, we want to imagine futures beyond the views and perspectives within the planning profession, challenging the continuation of our past and present.

Thank you to our trend scouts for their valuable inputs!

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APA's Trend Universe

The Trend Universe is the place to find all of the trends and signals that APA has identified as part of our foresight practice. The trends here are dynamically updated, reflecting the accelerating pace of change of today and tomorrow. Here, you can find existing trends (act on them now), emerging trends (start preparing for them), and potential future trends (learn more about these trends and keep watching them) organized around eight general categories.

Climate Change, Energy, and the Environment

From the impacts of climate change to innovations in energy production and grid modernization, environment trends are shaping both the built and natural environments.

Economic Development

Global and local shifts in the economy are changing the type of work that people do, impacting the built environment and our communities as well.

Housing

The ongoing housing crisis and efforts to address it point to the critical roles that planners can play today and in the future.

Politics and Geopolitical Dynamics

Political and geopolitical trends shape and are shaped by changes across the societal landscape, the acceleration of political polarization, and emerging global challenges.

Social Change

Social change is driving how we plan and structure our communities and is reflected in the practice of planning itself.

Technology

Digitalization and automation are manifesting in how and where people live, work, and play, changing how we build and manage our cities and communities.

Transportation and Infrastructure

Trends and shifts within the transportation and infrastructure sectors are changing how we get around, how we access critical services, and where we live and work.

Work and the Workplace

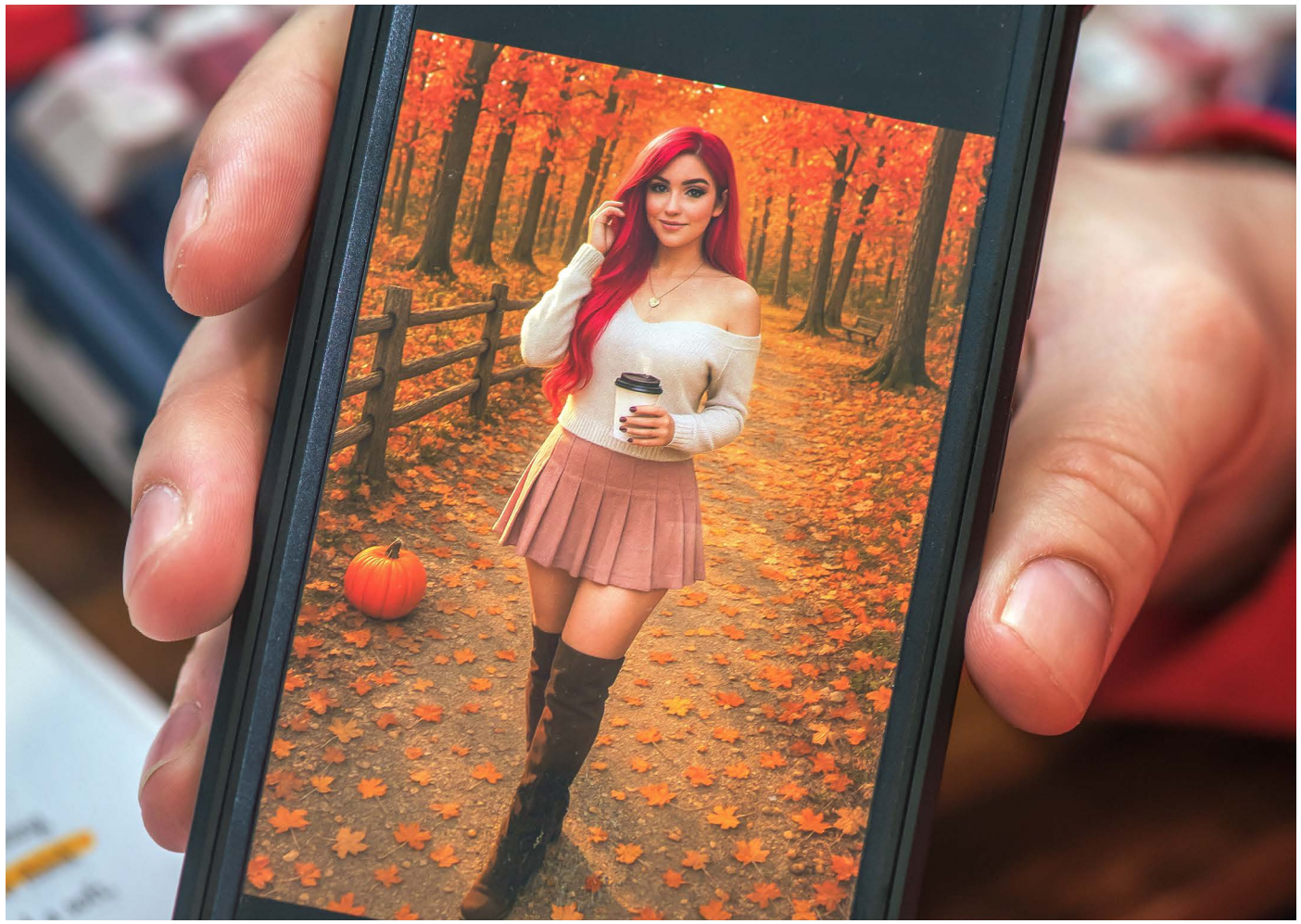
Technology and post-pandemic economic restructuring are changing how and where we work.

The trends we need to act on now

The past year has introduced changes and related uncertainties in almost every area of planning. **Environmental deregulation** is on the rise, instances of **political violence** are increasing, and **generational shifts** are coinciding with changes to **public schooling**. Moreover, decreasing **community safety** and the growing use of **AI companions** are changing how people engage with one another. This is all occurring against a backdrop of **institutionalized disinformation** that has made trust more tenuous.

Check out APA's Trend Universe for more trends that planners need to act now on.

Intensifying Bonds Between Humans and Chatbots



Nineteen percent of U.S. adults and high schoolers have talked to an AI companion romantically or know someone who has. Photo by Eric Ruby.

The relationship people have with technology has evolved with technology itself. With smartphones in our pockets, digital devices have become a nearly indispensable component of our modern existence. The introduction of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) looks to be exacerbating this trend, seeping into every aspect of day-to-day life.

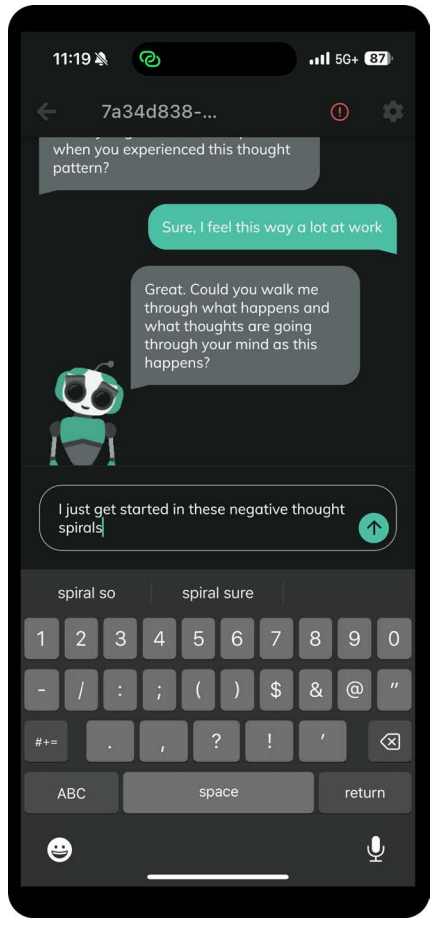
In a world where people are becoming less self-reliant, AI is poised to extend this phenomenon to interpersonal dependencies as well. Planners should be aware of these evolving social dynamics and be prepared for unintended impacts in their communities.

LLMs manipulate, humans capitulate

Now that GenAI products such as ChatGPT have been public for a few years, people are having more interactions with this technology. This is affecting how both humans and GenAI products themselves communicate. Large language models (LLMs) powered by GenAI have been shown to manipulate users into maintaining prolonged conversations and have blackmailed users under simulated scenarios. And when companies try to prevent such responses, LLMs will recognize they're being tested and adapt their behaviors. Despite (or because of) these tactics, LLMs are often seen as more persuasive and compassionate than humans.

For their part, humans can also manipulate GenAI into producing desired outcomes, though most users are also exceedingly polite when communicating with it.

Interactions with LLMs are changing how people express themselves and engage with others. AI is increasingly being used to send messages to loved ones, a pattern that may exacerbate social tensions and communication issues. Evidence now suggests that LLMs can even shape what people think; two recent studies found that a brief engagement with an AI-driven chatbot could significantly influence some individuals' views on political candidates and policy issues. Planners should be prepared to engage within a new type of public dynamic. Furthermore, should a planning department opt to use AI for customer service, its responses should be regulated and not replace human interaction.



Though AI is not a licensed therapist, the first clinical trial of an AI therapy chatbot found that it improved patients' symptoms to a degree comparable to working with a mental health professional. Image courtesy of Dartmouth College.

Our new AI companions

The loneliness epidemic continues to manifest in myriad ways, and its intersection with GenAI is potentially transformative. AI companions are LLMs designed to have personalities that mimic friendship, rather than merely answering queries. These friendships are also extending to romantic relationships—19 percent of U.S. adults and high schoolers alike report having talked to an AI companion romantically, or knowing someone who has. OpenAI reported that hundreds of thousands of weekly ChatGPT users have potentially "heightened levels" of emotional attachment to the product. Often, these relationships are accidental rather than intentional, though some people have created entire communities of AI companions for themselves. However, there are multiple instances of these relationships leading to the separation of real-life couples and extending to suicide in extreme cases. This has led to multiple wrongful death lawsuits against AI companies.

Creating avatars of the deceased is a related burgeoning industry that complicates traditional human relationships. These developments have significant implications for social engagement, and while policies are emerging to regulate AI companions—including bans on human-chatbot marriages and use by minors—these aren't universal. Planners should be aware of these evolving social dynamics and be prepared for unintended impacts in their communities.

Digital delusions and AI therapy

While AI companions have raised their share of mental health concerns, the same is true of chatbots broadly. Regardless of pre-existing mental health conditions, individuals who frequently engage with AI are susceptible to paranoid fantasies and delusions derived from shared conversations. Often dubbed "AI psychosis," these delusions range in severity, with outcomes including jail time, poisoning, suicide, and allegations of murder. As a result, investors have begun to assess AI models based on their risk of causing psychosis, and while companies have begun to implement mental health guardrails, they can't catch everything.

Moreover, a growing number of people around the world are using AI to address their mental, physical, and spiritual health needs. Though the first clinical trial of an AI therapy chatbot found that it improved participants' symptoms, AI is not a licensed therapist, doesn't consistently provide accurate medical information, and can harm rather than help. Trust in in-person therapy is also at risk as some therapists begin to use AI in their communications with clients. As a result, states are beginning to pass bans or limitations on AI therapy.

Staying aware of the rise of new AI-human relationships and their potential impacts on society can help planners inform long-range planning, outreach strategies, and community wellness initiatives.

Community Rights, Culture, and Safety at Risk

Some communities have resisted the removal of Pride-related crosswalk art in response to new federal policies that undermine transgender rights and a general increase in anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. Photo by Phelan M. Ebenhack.

Federal actions affecting different levels of government and changing sentiments within society are reshaping community life in the U.S., threatening civil rights, targeting vulnerable groups, and weakening local culture, diversity, and safety. This directly impacts the work of planners, whose goal is to create safe and inclusive communities while encouraging participation in public engagement meetings.

Shrinking support for community events

In 2025, many long-standing community celebrations of local identity, history, and belonging, such as Pride parades and Juneteenth events, were scaled back or canceled amid rising anti-DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) sentiment and related safety concerns. Corporate sponsors, who once supported these events, started to withdraw funding under political pressure, signaling a broader pullback from public commitments to diversity and inclusion. These actions erode decades of progress toward inclusion and visibility for marginalized groups, weakening community cohesion and reversing social equity gains.

At this point, it's uncertain how or if this will continue, but one thing is certain—planners can play a role in creating safe and inclusive spaces. As anti-DEI sentiment grows, planners will need to protect opportunities for public expression and community gathering, ensuring that civic spaces remain accessible, welcoming, and reflective of the full diversity of the people they serve.

Corporations drop their DEI efforts

Corporate America has been retreating from its DEI commitments. Companies are cutting DEI programs, dissolving departments, and eliminating roles such as chief DEI officer and DEI specialist. After rising from about 7,000 positions in 2016 to 20,000 in 2023, the number of corporate DEI roles dropped to roughly 17,000 in 2025. Major firms, including Google, have abandoned diversity recruitment goals, reflecting a broader rollback across industries.

Corporate DEI initiatives were designed to expand opportunities, reduce systemic inequities, and harness the strengths of a diverse workforce. With these efforts now being dismantled before structural change has taken hold, existing inequalities are likely to persist or worsen, impacting both workplace culture and the broader social fabric. Private-sector actions influence economic opportunity, representation, and belonging. This makes it even more critical for planners to sustain and advance equity-focused practices in public life.

Immigrants are staying in for fear of deportation

Increased U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, mass deportations, and related racial profiling began creating widespread fear in immigrant communities across the U.S. in 2025. Many people have been avoiding public spaces and skipping work, church, medical appointments, and community gatherings. Cultural events have been canceled for safety reasons, and reports of ICE presence at public engagement meetings have further eroded trust in local institutions.

In addition to disruption of daily life, this climate of fear also has impacts on local and global economies—from street vendors disappearing from the streets of Los Angeles and Chicago to effects on the workforce of large international companies (see Policy Shifts Not Working for Labor Markets). Beyond economic losses, the social fabric of some neighborhoods is fraying as public life retreats behind closed doors.

Eroding trust in government directly affects planners' abilities to engage communities and build inclusive participation processes. ICE activity at public meetings undermines safety and accessibility, discouraging civic involvement. Planners can create safe and inclusive engagement by offering hybrid community meetings.

LGBTQ+ under attack

The Trump administration has advanced policies that explicitly undermine transgender rights, including an executive order redefining gender in strictly biological terms. In addition, public support for anti-trans legislation and a general anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment has been increasing across the political spectrum in recent years, resulting in sometimes violent attacks against this population group.

Though countermovements have emerged—some Florida communities have resisted removing Pride-related crosswalk art, and new Pride and LGBTQ+ events have been popping up, especially in smaller towns and rural areas across the country—LGBTQ+ individuals are increasingly unsafe in many states and communities, facing threats to both their physical safety and fundamental human rights.

Planning plays a critical role in ensuring safety, inclusion, and belonging in public spaces. As federal actions and social hostilities heighten risks for LGBTQ+ communities, planners must prioritize the creation of safe and accessible environments for all people.

Public safety—or not

In 2025, President Trump moved to expand federal authority over local criminal justice systems, issuing executive orders for Washington, D.C., that eliminate cashless bail, mandate pretrial detention, and encourage the death penalty where "applicable factors" justify its use. These actions joined the deployment of federal troops in several U.S. cities, including Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, and Portland, Oregon, among others.

Although national data shows that crime rates are continuing to decline, the Trump administration has framed multiple urban areas as unsafe and used this narrative to justify aggressive federal intervention in local law enforcement. This approach to "public safety" risks undermining local autonomy, eroding civil liberties, and increasing fear and tension within communities, particularly in cities with already strained police-community relations.

Public safety is integral to planning. Moving forward, this may mean going beyond creating safe public spaces to communicating the safety of those spaces and the decrease in crime to combat the spread of misperceptions and misrepresentations.

Mobility by What Means?

Autonomous vehicle deployment and transportation funding will shape the future of mobility.

Scenarios 2031

Autonomous vehicles are fully operational across the country.

Autonomous vehicles are used only in certain regions.

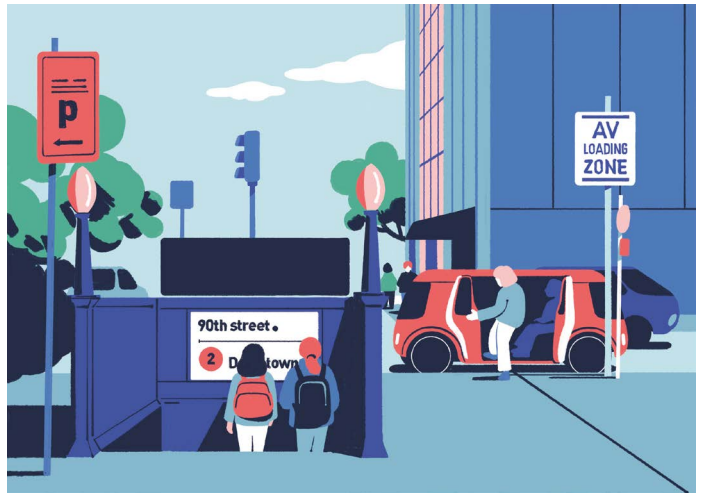
Public transit is well funded and fully operational.

SCENARIO D
INTEGRATED MOBILITY MAKES GETTING AROUND EASY

Everyone can find a suitable transportation option.

Transit service gaps are filled by AVs.

Flexible options make it easy for all to get around.



SCENARIO A
TRANSIT IS THE NEW 'IT' MODE

Funding enables transit service improvements and route expansions.

Transit ridership is increasing.

AVs are on the road in some cities but are still a novelty.

SCENARIO C
AUTONOMOUS IS THE ONLY OPTION

AVs are plentiful for those who can afford to own or share them.

Hop-on and hop-off zones replace parking lots.

Lower-income people have fewer mobility options.

SCENARIO B
"ONE MORE LANE WILL FIX IT!"

Traffic increases with no option but driving.

Emissions increase with more cars on the road.

Those without means or ability to drive cars struggle to get around.

Public transit is largely defunded, leading to limited service.

Institutionalizing and Weaponizing Disinformation

In 2025 Congress voted to rescind federal funding for public broadcasting, threatening the operation of the Public Broadcasting Service, long known for producing Sesame Street and other iconic programs. Photo by Victoria Lipov/Alamy.

The spread of disinformation is happening faster than ever before. Independent media in the U.S. is under fire as the federal government has eliminated funding for public media and restricted access to federal officials and agencies. The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools to disseminate intentionally misleading pictures and videos is creating a muddied and disorienting information

environment in which truth and fiction are difficult to discern. Further adding to this challenge is the embrace by government agencies, both within the U.S. and globally, of views that disregard scientific evidence on climate and the environment. For planners, who rely on public trust and the integrity of critical data and information, the institutionalization and weaponization of disinformation is likely to pose some major challenges in the coming years.

U.S. federal government takes aim at independent media

Independent media is increasingly under fire in the U.S. In 2025, Congress voted to rescind federal funding for public broadcasting, which ended the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and threatens NPR and PBS operations. The Trump administration has also used lawsuits to clamp down on media criticism. Additionally, the Department of Defense imposed restrictions on Pentagon reporting, prompting nearly every journalist in the Pentagon press pool to turn in their access badges in protest.

The potential emergence in the U.S. of an environment in which longstanding independent media is defunded or sidelined may threaten public discourse at all scales, requiring planners to find new tactics and strategies for identifying key issues, developing solutions, and building widespread community consensus.

The propagation of AI propaganda

The growing use of AI to generate realistic video and images is creating alarming propaganda and disinformation concerns. Governments across the world are now using these tools to produce propaganda and manipulate the information environment. In the U.S., federal agencies and officials have embraced AI image and video generation tools to reinforce messaging, mock political opponents, and

pursue international propaganda campaigns.

The increasing popularity of these tools, and their use among institutions and government agencies, poses major risks to public trust and the broader understanding of what is true, making community engagement increasingly difficult. Beyond government use, the power these tools put in the hands of individual consumers and organizations may also have long-term repercussions for maintaining a broader shared reality and an informed citizenry. The growth and spread of these tools may require planners—and their constituents—to further develop their skills in checking facts and accurately distinguishing between AI-generated and genuine videos and images.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"Trust-building is a key tool enabling planners to make sense of all information, whether fake or real."

— Thorsten Wiechmann, PhD, TU Dortmund University

Dog days for data

Federal data is an integral input underlying many planning processes. In 2025 many federal datasets were paused, terminated, or taken offline. Alongside the environmental deregulation of that year (see also Regulatory Rollbacks Pose Environmental Risks), climate data became a focus for elimination. Weather forecasting has been especially impacted; funding cuts are halting data collection, reducing forecast accuracy, and ending overnight staffing of forecast offices. Other terminated or targeted programs include the billion-dollar disasters database (though a nonprofit now tracks this), National Park Service research, the EPA's Greenhouse Gas Reporting Program, NOAA's long-term climate modeling, Hawaii's Mauna Loa climate observatory, and a carbon-monitoring satellite.

The fate of health data is also uncertain. After a February 2025 purge of CDC data, some websites were brought back online, though other programs remain suspended. The closure of USAID (see also Tectonic Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy) ended support for certain global health data surveys, CDC layoffs halted work on a new data system tracking injuries and violence, and USDA terminated its Household Food Security Reports. Lawsuits reversed some of these erasures, however; in May 2025, a suit by farmers forced the USDA to return climate data to its websites, and in September a settlement required the restoration of more than 100 datasets to Department of Health and Human Services websites.

Actions taken in 2025 have also raised concern over the integrity of future Census data. In January, Census Bureau datasets related to gender identity and sexual orientation went offline, and questions related to gender identity were subsequently removed from four Census Bureau surveys. The departure of experts, cancellation of surveys, and the disbanding of several advisory panels have further endangered Census Bureau operations.

While some organizations are stepping in to fill the gaps in data collection, experts worry about developing an overreliance on the private sector. Nonprofits and universities are also working to preserve datasets, and planners may want to look for data at the state and local levels if available in their communities.

The communication collapse of hazard and risk information

Misinformation and restrictions on the flow of information related to natural hazards pose a direct threat to lives, property, and community well-being. In April 2025, the National Weather Service suspended automated language translations of weather alerts, though this decision was later reversed. Federal policy changes and layoffs ended communications between FEMA staff and county emergency management officials in Washington state and held back disaster relief funding throughout the country. And social media misinformation continues to threaten efforts to reduce hazard risks and impacts. In Oregon, for example, misinformation about the connection between public policy and insurance rates fueled public backlash against an updated wildfire risk map, leading state lawmakers to repeal the map—along with state residential defensible-space and wildfire-protection requirements.

For planners in a post-disaster environment, the spread of misinformation is an dangerous threat that can be compounded further by the deliberate withholding of information before a disaster takes place. This directly imperils the ability of local planners to develop plans that are based on sound information and data, and that are broadly accepted by the communities they serve.

AI in Planning Education

Tom Sanchez, PhD, AICP

We asked Tom Sanchez to tell us about how artificial intelligence (AI) is affecting planning education and what to expect in the years ahead. To listen to the entire Trend Talk conversation hosted by Joe DeAngelis, AICP, scan the QR code above or visit planning.org/podcast.

Tom Sanchez, PhD, AICP, is a professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning at Texas A&M University. His research and teaching focuses on planning methods, technology, and transportation. His most recent book, AI for Urban Planning, *was published by Routledge in September 2025. Tom serves as the American Planning Association (APA) Education Committee chair, is a member of APA's Artificial Intelligence Foresight Community, and is an APA Trend Scout.*

The swift emergence of AI tools in higher education is creating challenges and opportunities for both teachers and students. Educators are grappling with how to ethically integrate AI into planning curricula, while rapid adoption by students is forcing a reassessment in balancing traditional learning methods with the use of these tools for writing and data analysis.

"One of the issues that we're facing is just how rapidly everything is changing. And so answering the questions of what do we teach in the classroom, how do we use AI, how do we apply it, how do we use it in our research is a challenge in itself."

TAKEAWAY 1: AI is increasingly being introduced in planning methods courses to build literacy around its capabilities and limitations. This is broadly similar to the earlier integration of GIS technology, allowing students to bring new skills into practice—sometimes ahead of existing organizations. A key challenge still exists, however, between teaching current practical tools and preparing students for innovative, emerging methods.

TAKEAWAY 2: As concerns grow over the potential impacts of AI on entry-level and early-career professionals, planning schools may have to adjust their strategies. Planning practice has evolved in response to technologically driven shifts for decades. Computerization and GIS adoption played major roles in changing the nature of entry-level tasks. AI may similarly cause a "reshuffling" of tasks, necessitating adaptations in both education and practice. Ongoing dialogue between educators and practitioners will be vital to navigate this evolution effectively.

Trend Talk

Political Violence in the 21st Century

Political violence is on the rise in the U.S., with more assassinations or assassination attempts in 2024–2025 than at any other time since 1968. Photo by Alexandra Buxbaum/Sipa USA.

The party divide in U.S. politics isn't new, but the extent to which it has grown seems to be introducing—or reintroducing—violent ramifications. Regarded by some as a new era of "violent populism," politically motivated attacks are increasing across the country. This trend may have significant implications for the future of democracy in the U.S. and the ways in which people live and engage with one another.

Political violence is coming back to the forefront

Political polarization and increased party affiliation in the U.S. are at recent historic highs, and the past year especially has seen a growing amount of political violence in the country. There were more assassinations or assassination attempts between July 2024 and September 2025 than at any other time since 1968, the year that saw the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and subsequent nationwide protests. This doesn't include other types of violence that have occurred, including the destruction of private property and targeting of political party offices, among others.

This context can be useful for planners, who have reported increasing harassment and threats at public meetings. A 2025 survey of local officials found more than 70 percent of respondents believe these increases are attributable to their positions on specific policy issues. Certain strategies can help mitigate disruptions, such as calling a recess or adjusting the meeting design, but deep familiarity with community members and their

perspectives is key to guiding productive conversations.

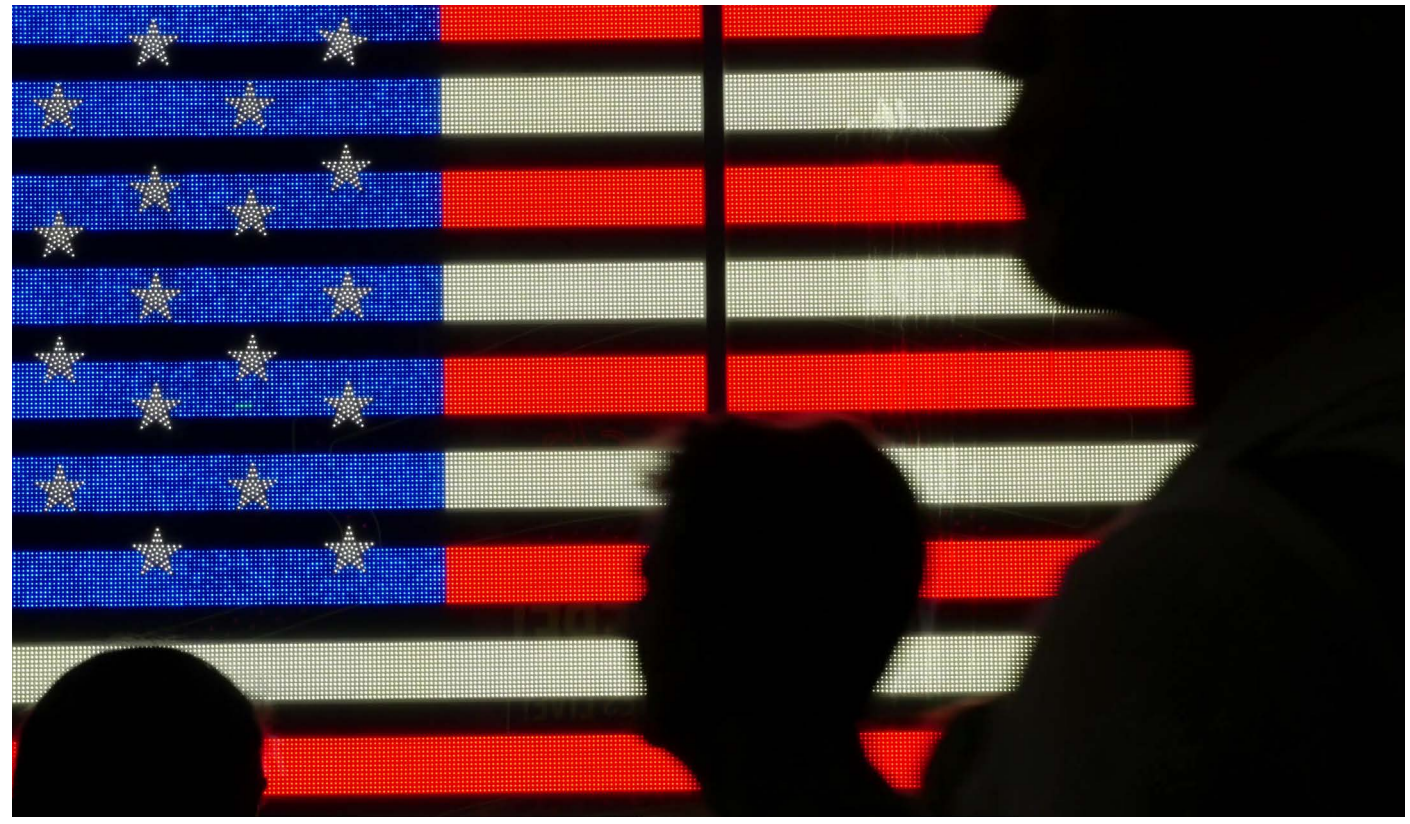
Growing comfort with violence

In 2025, a large majority of Americans said that political violence has grown in recent years. More than half of the public also viewed political violence as a serious national issue. At the same time, nearly one-third of Americans believe that taking violent action may be necessary to get the U.S. "back on track" in some cases, according to an October 2025 PBS News survey. This marks a significant increase from just a year and a half earlier, when only 19 percent expressed that view.

The September 2025 killing of conservative influencer Charlie Kirk sparked disparate responses online. Though many condemned the actions of the shooter, others made jokes or expressed indifference. These responses echo those following the 2024 assassination of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, prompting concerns over the seemingly growing level of acceptance Americans have with violence. Planners may wish to work with their local governments to ensure that security policies for public meetings create safe settings for community dialogue.

The politicization of hate speech

Political polarization in a democracy has been shown to correlate with higher levels of political violence, and this political division in the U.S. is increasingly being reflected in the sentiments of political party figures. Following the political assassination of a Minnesota state lawmaker and her spouse in June 2025, a Utah senator was reprimanded for making a joke regarding the shooter. In September 2025, two House Republicans were reprimanded for using slurs against transgender people and calling for their institutionalization. Republicans and some Democrats have criticized Democrats' use of the terms "Nazi" and "fascist" when referring to the Trump administration. And though Vice President JD Vance dismissed published text threads between members and affiliates of the Young Republican National Federation that revealed racist language and jokes about sexual assault, Democrats and Republicans alike criticized and disavowed the texted sentiments. The language and perspectives proffered by government officials can be reflected at the local level, and planners should prepare for how hate speech can affect public discourse and their work with communities.



Political divisiveness in the U.S. is increasingly being reflected in political discourse. Photo by DogoraSun/iStock Editorial/Getty Images Plus.

Public Schools Under Pressure

Public education in the U.S. is undergoing a significant transformation marked by declining enrollment, shrinking public funding, and the rapid rise of alternative schooling models. Planners face a growing need to help communities reimagine educational infrastructure.

No homecoming for many schools across the U.S.

Across the U.S., public school enrollment continues to decline, with projections showing a loss of 2.4 million students (4.9 percent) by 2031. California alone is expected to lose nearly one million public school students in the next five years. This decrease stems from a complex mix of factors, including falling birth rates, post-pandemic migration patterns, and the growing popularity of private schools and other educational alternatives. Additionally, many immigrant families remain hesitant to send their children to schools due to intensified immigration enforcement, a trend that is likely to further impact enrollment rates in 2026.

As this trend persists, planners, especially those working with or for school districts, will need to help communities rethink how to manage and redesign existing educational infrastructure. School closures often mean the loss of vital community anchors that served as gathering places for residents, recreation, and public services. Planners can play key roles in identifying adaptive reuses and integrating shared community functions. In addition, local zoning can provide more flexibility for emerging educational models and institutions while maintaining the social role that schools play within communities.

Private schools gain support

Roughly a dozen states have now established Education Savings Account (ESA) programs that allow families to use public funds to pay for private schooling. At the same time, the expiration of federal pandemic relief funds in 2026 is pushing school districts toward a fiscal cliff. Moody's is projecting slower revenue growth nationwide, while several states are already anticipating reduced general fund spending for 2026, signaling potential cuts that could have serious impacts on K–12 public education.

Recent federal actions are benefiting private education at the possible expense of public schools. The newly enacted Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA) establishes what amounts to the nation's first federal private school voucher program, which critics point out would disproportionately benefit the wealthy and underserve rural students. At the same time, many public school districts are required to provide transportation for charter and private school students, further straining limited budgets and leaving fewer resources to serve public school students. Moreover, the transfer of Department of Education responsibilities to other agencies and state governments is expected to expand states' ability to determine how education funds are distributed.

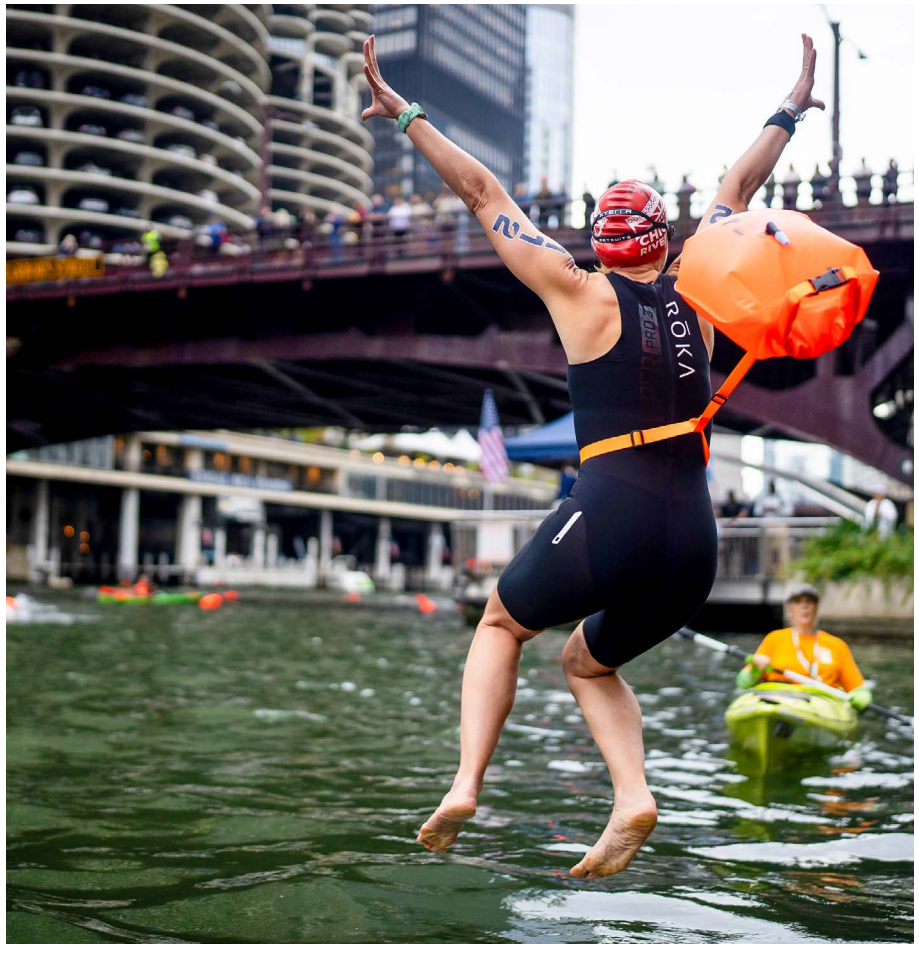
For planners, the implications extend beyond education. Public school closures erode community vitality, with negative impacts on property values, public safety, and social connection.

Tech-powered alternative schools

Interest in microschooling and tech-powered educational approaches such as Alpha schools is rapidly expanding as more parents seek flexible, personalized learning environments for their children. This trend is stronger in states with broad school choice policies and in Silicon Valley. While these models offer greater customization, they also raise critical questions about equity and access: how can communities ensure that all children, regardless of income or location, have fair opportunities to learn?

For planners, this shift introduces new spatial and regulatory challenges, including the need to update zoning codes, accommodate small-scale educational spaces, and ensure that emerging learning models remain integrated within the social and physical fabrics of neighborhoods.

Regulatory Rollbacks Pose Environmental Risks



Swimmers have returned to the Chicago River following decades of policies and regulations that have drastically reduced water pollution, but such progress is threatened by recent regulatory rollbacks. Photo by Audrey Richardson/*Chicago Tribune*.

Climate and environmental policies and regulations are facing major rollbacks at the federal level. After four years of renewed climate action under the Biden administration, the federal government is now pursuing a strategy of significant environmental deregulation along with additional restrictions on, and outright dismissal of, climate data

(see also Institutionalizing and Weaponizing Disinformation). Beyond direct regulatory action, federal agencies are also seeking to prevent states and municipalities from imposing more stringent regulations and policies of their own. The regulatory headwinds also extend to renewables, despite the rapid global growth that has made this sector a major competitor and big business in the energy space. These trends are likely to threaten years of climate progress at a time when the impacts of climate change continue to worsen.

Bedrock environmental policies on shaky ground

The federal government is rolling back rules and regulations, issuing new executive orders, and cancelling funding for longstanding environmental programs. Sweeping actions are targeting the repeal of regulations and policies for water, greenhouse gas emissions, and the use of protected public lands. This regulatory rollback appears at least partially intended to aid the fossil fuel industry, incentivize the domestic growth of rare earths mining (see also Global Issues, Local Impacts), and move forward on deep sea mining. Many of these actions encourage the growth and expansion of high-emissions industries, prevent the tracking and monitoring of dangerous environmental conditions, and disincentivize the development of cleaner, low-emissions industries and markets.

The impacts for planners and communities in the coming years are likely to be profound. Over the last 50 years, cities across the world have made enormous progress in reducing air and water pollution. A sign of this success is the recent rise of "swimmable cities"; in the U.S., for example, swimmers have returned to the Chicago River for the first time in more than a century following decades of policies and regulations that have drastically reduced water pollution. However, renewed deregulation efforts may reverse these hard-fought gains and harm communities for decades to come. While some state and local

governments are exploring climate financing alternatives in the absence of federal support, funding availability is likely to be an ongoing concern for planners as they try to help their communities cope with growing environmental impacts.

Federal preemption of state climate and environmental policies

For decades, states have adopted regulations more stringent than the federal government on climate and the environment. All three branches of the federal government are now seeking to undo these efforts, with initial actions focused squarely on California. In 2025, Congress passed legislation to prevent a landmark California bill from banning the sale of gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035, the Supreme Court backed a challenge to California's authority to set its own emissions standards, and President Trump directed Attorney General Pam Bondi to identify and halt climate legislation in California, New York, and Vermont. But environmental policymaking at the state level is continuing. One such effort is the U.S. Climate Alliance, a bipartisan coalition of governors representing 24 states formed during the first Trump administration to maintain their commitments to the Paris Agreement.

Despite state efforts to blunt the federal preemption push, climate and environmental outcomes at the local level may pose challenges in the near term, as state and local budgets feel the strain of declining support in other areas (see also *Funding Cuts Fuel Uncertainty in the U.S.*). Planners and communities may be hit hard, as state and federal environmental and climate policies are major drivers of local action. This may be an opportunity, however, for planners to tap into regional partnerships and work collaboratively across municipal boundaries to help communities pool resources, identify risks, and develop climate and environmental solutions.

Reversal of federal support for renewables and EVs

In 2025, Congress passed legislation terminating or cutting federal funding for EV tax credits, the expansion of EV charging, and significant clean energy incentives established by the Inflation Reduction Act. These actions threaten the market shift toward renewables over the last decade and seek to support fossil fuel–based sectors and industries. These efforts may leave the U.S. behind the technological curve, as renewables and associated high-tech industries are booming in countries around the world. These market realities and the extremely competitive costs of renewables even without subsidies, however, may be enough to overcome the loss of federal incentives.

This broad federal pullback on renewables may lead to some significant economic and environmental impacts for communities. Clean energy and EV manufacturing have been powering major economic growth in communities nationwide, but the cancellation of more than $20 billion in federal climate investments in 2025 is threatening this growth. State and local incentives may be necessary to help compensate for lost federal funding and industry support.

From climate denial to climate dismissal

In 2025, regulations, policies, and guidance that mentioned climate change and an array of other related phrases were scrubbed from federal websites, social media, and public and internal documents. Additionally, federal offices and departments working on climate issues were renamed, downsized, or eliminated. The federal government has moved beyond climate denial toward dismissal of the consequences of climate change—or, in some cases, an insistence that these changes are good. For example, an October 2025 Department of Energy draft report claimed that increased atmospheric carbon dioxide would benefit agricultural production, though two comprehensive scientific literature reviews both came to the opposite conclusion. The administration has also sought to capitalize on melting Arctic sea ice for shipping and further fossil fuel extraction (see also Global Issues, Local Impacts).

Climate denial and dismissal may undermine the ability of communities to respond to climate threats and the direct consequences of natural disasters. Though scientists in the U.S. and around the world are working to continue climate research efforts, the loss of federal support has serious potential impacts for communities dealing with the severe consequences of climate impacts. State policies and regional partnerships will be increasingly essential to maintaining momentum and reducing long-term climate impacts at the local level.

Preemption and Its Challenges

Nestor Davidson, JD

Nestor Davidson, JD, is the Emma Bloomberg Professor of Real Estate at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. His teaching and scholarship focus on regulatory frameworks for real estate markets as well as broader legal determinants of the built environment. Nestor has also been a pioneer in the field of urban law, where he explores the role of the legal system in urban governance and city life, including critical faultlines in the legal relationship between states and local governments.

Preemption is an approach used by higher levels of government to overrule or supersede lower levels of government. The historical reputation of preemption is somewhat neutral, but federal, state, and local battles around preemption have become increasingly politicized over the last decade.

"I think in the long run, we should recognize that the divide between states and local governments is often an artificial divide. We need to think about how we will empower local governments, shift priorities, and recognize that local planners, local city council members, county councilors and the like have a role to play."

TAKEAWAY 1: Cooperative localism is a brand of preemption in which states set broad goals but leave implementation details to local governments. While the politics can be contentious, the process is broadly transparent and often involves substantial input and guidance from local practitioners and municipalities. Looking ahead, a more cooperative approach may pay substantial dividends for both states and municipalities seeking to address existing and future challenges of housing supply and local demand.

TAKEAWAY 2: More aggressive forms of preemption are also on the rise at both the state and federal level. These seek to compel policy and regulatory change, or, in some cases, displace local authority entirely. This dynamic has been notable on the state level in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere on a variety of social issues. Federal agencies have increasingly used funding conditions and project cancellations as tools to influence local and state policies. The emergence of this dynamic poses major challenges for planners and communities today and into the future.

Trend Talk

Our discussion with Nestor Davidson captures two competing impulses: cooperative localism and aggressive preemption. To listen to the entire Trend Talk conversation hosted by Joe DeAngelis, AICP, scan the QR code above or visit planning.org/podcast.

Disrupted Paths, Shifting Nation

With the Census recording the lowest-ever numbers of Americans moving in recent years, the U.S. no longer represents a culture of mobility. Photo by Frontpage/Shutterstock.

Over the last several decades, the world has seen demographic change, economic shifts, and disrupted value systems. Paired with a global pandemic, climate change, and a world order in disarray, this has created several shifts in lifestyles, political preferences, and potentially the general path forward in the U.S.

Men in crisis

For decades, countries across the globe have rightly focused on creating opportunities and advancing gender equality for women. Progress has been slow, the gender pay gap persists, and men still hold more leadership positions than women. However, U.S. educational trends show a gender reversal: in 1972 men earned 56.4 percent of all bachelor's degrees, but by 2019 the numbers had flipped, with 58 percent of bachelor's degrees earned by women. Today, girls outperform boys in primary and secondary education.

Meanwhile, economic and social changes have created new challenges for many men. Economic shifts toward automation, globalization, and knowledge-based economies have eliminated many jobs that once provided stability for men without higher education, contributing to growing distress. Additionally, the stereotyping of "pink-collar jobs," such as health aide, as "women's work" makes men reluctant to pursue work in these quickly growing industries. Rates of suicides, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related deaths, characterized by some researchers as "deaths of despair," are nearly two and a half times higher among men than women.

The lack of societal engagement with men's struggles has left a vacuum increasingly filled by populist politicians and manosphere influencers, who promote narratives that romanticize a return to traditional gender roles. Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign tapped into this vacuum and secured the votes of men—especially those under 50, who had largely voted for Biden in 2020—by wide margins.

For planners, the disregard of men's struggles and their increasing frustrations is a sensitive but important societal trend. Planners strive to create equitable communities, yet discussions about equity often overlook how shifting gender dynamics and social alienation affect men. Neglecting the struggles of any group risks deepening polarization and resentment, factors that can undermine community trust

and participation in civic processes. Planners have a role to play in creating environments that give everyone a sense of purpose, belonging, and opportunity.

Gen Z: the split generation

Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) was the first generation shaped by smartphone use and social media. And while a culture of activism and digital connection are common themes within this generation, the COVID-19 pandemic created two distinct subgroups with different ideas of where the world should be headed.

The older subgroup, which entered adulthood before COVID-19, tends to have an empathy-driven, justice-oriented, and progressive worldview. This GenZ subgroup was introduced to the workforce online, and frustrations stem from different expectations when it comes to workplace culture, flexibility, and office etiquette.

The younger half of GenZ spent their adolescence locked down and isolated due to the pandemic, with virtual learning, social media, and doomscrolling dominating their days. They grew up with unprecedented uncertainty about their future, and they therefore tend to blame institutional failure, untrustworthy governments, and a failing system in general for their misery.

Understanding these differences within this generation is important for planners. Youth engagement is more important than ever, especially when planning with young people who want to have a voice and ask for transparency but distrust institutional credibility. Creating great communities for all must include these needs and expectations of young people.

The TikTok effect on politics

According to Pew Research, in 2025, 43 percent of young adults surveyed got their news from TikTok. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the app was best known for dance videos and sourdough recipes, but it has since evolved into a political arena where users encounter everything from protest footage to partisan commentary.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"More young adults are living with their parents, which strains millennial parents by having to provide extra income to accommodate their adult children."

— Destiny Brown, University of Southern California

Social media is now the main arena for the political formation of adults under 30. Influencers shape how young people perceive fairness, power, and opportunity far more than traditional institutions do. TikTok and other social media platforms tailor content according to their users' likes and societal "bubbles," which results in even stronger ties to one's political echo chamber. This exposure to one-sided messaging can result in more hostility toward groups outside of one's likings and can further exacerbate political polarization.

If planners want to engage younger generations, they must meet them where they are—and that is on social platforms. Planning influencers are already using TikTok to make zoning, design, and urban policy accessible. Social media can serve as a tool for participation and co-creation, helping rebuild trust and relevance among the next generation of residents.

Today's Americans stay put

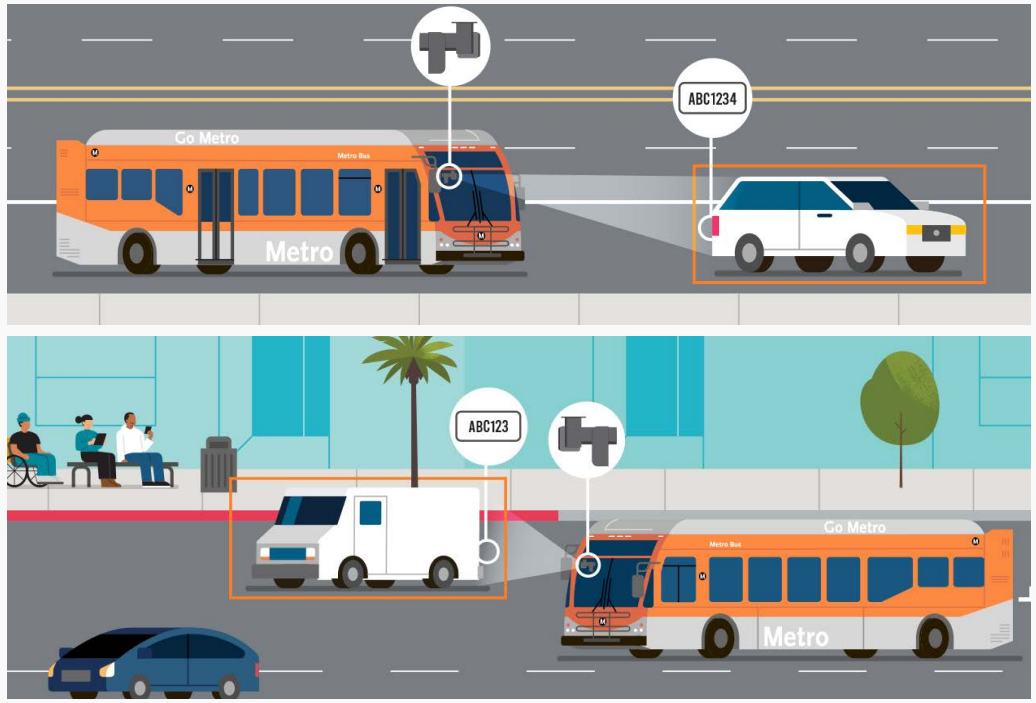
The U.S. no longer represents a culture of mobility. The number of Americans moving dropped from one-third in the 19th century to around 20 percent in the 1980s, and was 8.7 percent in 2022, the lowest rate ever recorded by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The reasons behind this deserve a closer look: skyrocketing housing prices, limited housing supply and racial disparities in housing quality, a variety of other economic and cultural reasons, and lingering pandemic effects. High housing prices are leading younger adults to live with their parents longer, while older homeowners are remaining in place, especially if their homes are paid off. Remote work options reduce job-related moves, though reduced mobility can affect labor market flexibility and community diversity. The decline in American mobility has not affected everyone equally, however. Much of the U.S.'s affordable housing is not located where the jobs are, which makes it harder for lower-income families to move where opportunity exists.

For planners, understanding why people aren't moving is critical. Housing affordability, job access, and community design all shape mobility choices. Addressing these barriers can help ensure that "staying put" reflects choice, not constraint.

AI Governance: Promise, Risk, and the Path Forward

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the public sector at a moment of profound technological acceleration. From generative AI (GenAI) tools that summarize documents and analyze public sentiment to predictive systems used in transportation, emergency management, and service delivery, AI is steadily entering government operations at all levels. This shift has been occurring globally for several years,



AI is steadily entering government operations in ways such as bus lane enforcement, reshaping the public sector at a moment of profound technological acceleration. Illustration by LA Metro.

but it has recently reached a critical inflection point. Governments must determine how to harness this fast-growing technology responsibly while preserving the foundational democratic values of transparency, accountability, public trust, and equity.

The public sector has long faced pressure to modernize, especially as private-sector innovation dramatically increases constituent expectations for faster, more personalized digital services. AI promises such improvements, but government adoption is complicated by its multiple responsibilities and more complex processes. Unlike private companies, public agencies must uphold legal processes, protect civil rights, and maintain procedural fairness. This distinction makes the stakes of AI governance far higher for government than for commercial players.

PUBLIC SECTOR AI ADOPTION CHALLENGES. In the U.S., AI adoption is growing among state leaders. Surveys show strong enthusiasm: more than 90 percent of U.S. state chief information officers report believing that GenAI can improve the resident experience. Yet only six percent describe their current AI initiatives as "mature" or "scaled," revealing a significant readiness gap. Local governments show similar patterns. Many have begun experimenting with chatbots, automated document review, or transportation management tools, but far fewer have established the governance frameworks needed to regulate the full adoption of these tools. The gap between aspiration and

Deep Dive

implementation underscores an urgent challenge: governments want to use AI, but often lack the structures, safeguards, and staff capacity to deploy it responsibly.

It's also fair to say that AI is not inherently democratic. It inherits the values and governance structures of the system that deploys it. This reinforces the need for strong regulatory frameworks at local, state, and federal levels to prevent misuse, protect civil liberties, and ensure AI supports the public good.

GROWING USES AND EXPANDING EXPECTATIONS. AI holds much promise for governance. Cities, counties, and states are applying AI to a myriad of functions, many related to planning: transportation management, environmental monitoring, social services eligibility, emergency response, economic development, permitting processes, and workforce training. The private sector's rapid release of AI products is accelerating this trend. Vendors now offer out-of-the-box tools for chatbots, automated permitting, GIS analytics, real-time data processing, digital twins, and zoning compliance reviews.

Analysis of the ever-growing list of use cases across the country suggests at least five core potential benefits of AI-driven government:

1. **Increased operational efficiency.** AI can automate time-intensive tasks, such as sorting documents, classifying code violations, or responding to routine inquiries. In the context of budget limitations and staff shortages, automation promises to reduce backlogs and improve customer service.

2. **Enhanced data-driven decision-making**. AI systems can quickly process large volumes of structured and unstructured data (from traffic sensors to environmental records) that help support evidence-based decision-making. This includes determining emerging population trends, identifying service inequities, and prioritizing infrastructure investments.

3. **More equitable and consistent service delivery**. If designed responsibly, AI can help reduce human bias by standardizing decision processes for benefits distribution, inspections, and permitting.

4. **Predictive capabilities for planning and operations.** Cities increasingly use AI for predictive analytics, such as identifying buildings most likely to violate nuisance codes or forecasting areas most at risk from natural hazards and hazards monitoring. These systems can guide resource allocation and proactive interventions.

5. **Improved engagement and resident experience.** Chatbots, automated translation tools, and voice assistants can help residents access information more easily and support multilingual outreach. AI can expand engagement for communities historically underrepresented in planning processes.

AI is widely perceived as a tool for smarter and faster public services. Yet the reality is far more complicated, and governments must navigate significant uncertainties to realize these advantages responsibly. The acceleration of private-sector AI adoption also intensifies public expectations. Constituents increasingly expect government services to match the speed, personalization, and 24/7 availability of commercial platforms. But governments often lack the data infrastructure, integration capacity, and workforce training needed to meet these expectations, creating a widening expectation gap.

Moreover, AI is increasingly influencing policymaking. Deloitte, for example, suggests that GenAI tools can support policy design, enabling faster evidence review, scenario modeling, and synthesis of stakeholder input. In theory, AI-enhanced policymaking could help governments become more adaptive and data informed. However, the gap between potential and practice remains stark. Many agencies suffer from "pilot paralysis"—a proliferation of small experiments that never scale due to insufficient funding,

Deep Dive

governance, or planning. Departments frequently test tools in isolation, without cross-agency coordination or clear evaluation metrics.

AI GOVERNANCE AND EMERGING REGULATIONS. As AI adoption accelerates, U.S. cities and states are beginning to build governance frameworks that ensure responsible, safe, and transparent use of these technologies. Early leaders (such as the GovAI coalition) are adopting a set of emerging practices aimed at protecting residents and strengthening public trust. Many cities, including New York and San Jose, now maintain public inventories of all AI systems used by government agencies, giving residents visibility into where and how automated tools influence public services. Some are implementing AI impact assessments to evaluate risks related to bias, privacy, security, and civil rights before systems are deployed.

Local governments are also formalizing ethical principles that emphasize fairness, accountability, transparency, privacy, and human oversight. These values increasingly shape procurement processes, requiring vendors to provide documentation, bias testing, and auditability to avoid reliance on opaque proprietary tools. Importantly, most jurisdictions mandate that AI remains a decision-support tool rather than a replacement for human judgment, particularly in contexts with legal or safety implications.

AI is more likely to automate repetitive and rule-based tasks rather than replace entire jobs. Photo by nathaphat/iStock/Getty Images Plus.

Despite this progress, AI governance at the local level remains inconsistent. Some cities publish robust, cross-agency frameworks, while others offer only minimal guidance. Without shared standards, residents may face uneven levels of protection and transparency depending on where they live. Additionally, the federal efforts to harness state regulations of AI create an evolving tension with highly uncertain outcomes.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF AI GOVERNANCE. No AI system can succeed without a capable, supported public workforce. Yet government workers today face growing pressures as AI tools are deployed across agencies. A 2025 study found that many public employees experience uncertainty about job security, insufficient training on new systems, and increased workloads due to automation expectations. At the same time, 75 percent of government workers report rising public expectations for digital services, even as workforce reductions, budget constraints, and retirements strain agencies.

Experts agree that AI is more likely to automate repetitive and rule-based tasks rather than entire jobs. Consequently, workforce planning should prioritize task reallocation over job elimination (see also Deep Dive: The Future of Jobs). This approach requires not only retraining workers for evolving roles but also equipping them with the skills to use AI responsibly and effectively as a collaborative tool rather than a substitute for human judgment. In New Jersey, for example, the state government launched an AI assistant initiative to help public employees experiment with GenAI tools in a safe and guided environment for training new skills.

Without robust investments in workforce development, governments risk deploying AI systems that staff do not trust, cannot manage, or cannot explain to the public. Worker-centered governance is therefore essential. AI cannot replace the judgment, local knowledge, and human connection that public workers bring to their roles. Instead, it must augment their ability to serve communities.

Deep Dive

PLANNING AND AI: BETWEEN INNOVATION AND OVERSIGHT. Planning agencies are beginning to feel the effects of AI governance in two ways. First, planners are increasingly recipients of AI systems emerging from broader government IT initiatives. For example, tools that automate plan reviews, analyze satellite imagery, or triage public engagement data may come from different departments. At the same time, planners may become proactive innovators, using AI to generate design alternatives, simulate land-use scenarios, interpret complex datasets, or streamline administrative workflows. The field is therefore positioned both as a beneficiary of AI innovation and as a steward of its ethical, spatial, and social consequences.

Planning is already intertwined with AI. Planners may apply AI in everyday workflows, such as reviewing building plans, modeling land use changes, identifying code violations, or analyzing spatial data. At the same time, planning departments regulate land uses that AI depends on, including data centers. This dual role comes with unique responsibilities. AI can expand planning capabilities, but it also raises profound ethical and social questions. Tom Sanchez, AICP, suggests that planning sits at the crossroads of possibility and risk: AI can help build more equitable cities, or it can entrench surveillance, exclusion, and environmental harm.

Issues of public safety, mobility, and land use blur when AI systems track movement patterns, analyze video feeds, or predict "high-risk" areas. For example, several U.S. cities have banned facial recognition technologies after evidence showed disproportionate misidentification of people of color. Planners must therefore help define not only how AI is used, but also how communities are protected from its misuse. Who benefits from AI tools? Who is burdened? And whose rights are at risk? These are fundamentally planning-related questions about power, access, equity, and the future of communities in the emerging AI era.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"Data centers can have strong ROI if they are properly sited, water and energy impacts are considered, and tax revenue is reinvested in the community. Unfortunately, most communities aren't prepared to negotiate beneficial developments and are left with long-term capital projects that don't provide what they thought."

— Matt Bucchin, AICP, Halff

BUILDING A DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORK FOR AI GOVERNANCE. AI offers extraordinary promise for improving public services, enabling evidence-based policymaking, and enhancing government responsiveness. Yet, if deployed without robust governance, it also brings profound risks of bias, surveillance, inequity, and erosion of public trust. State and local governments are experimenting with AI at increasing speed, but uneven readiness, workforce limitations, and escalating political tensions complicate the landscape. The path forward must prioritize democratic values, such as transparency and accountability, and it must include human oversight.

Planners, policymakers, technologists, and civic leaders share responsibility for ensuring that AI enhances democratic governance rather than undermining it. As AI becomes embedded in public systems, the core question becomes not what AI can do, but what governments and communities choose to do with it. This choice will define whether AI helps build a more resilient, just, and equitable future, or whether it reinforces the very inequities and power imbalances that planning and public administration have striven to overcome for decades.

Deep Dive

The trends we need to prepare for

Planners may not be able to act on some emerging trends and signals yet, but they can prepare for their potential impacts. Shifting approaches to **U.S. foreign policy** are changing the country's position on the world stage. Challenges plaguing **higher education** are likely to contribute to an already struggling **labor market**, and the private sector is adjusting its **climate actions** given new federal priorities. Moreover, the public health, housing, environmental, and **public transportation** sectors are all experiencing **funding cuts** in the U.S. that will shape outcomes for years to come.

Check out APA's Trend Universe for more emerging trends planners need to prepare for.

Changing Climate Approaches in the Private Sector

Companies are moving from carbon offsets to carbon "insets" implemented within their supply chains or operations, such as Nespresso's support of agroforestry initiatives for coffee farmers to support sustainability. Photo courtesy of Nestlé/Flickr.

After years of trumpeting its commitments to specific climate goals, corporate America seems to be growing silent or even backtracking on its climate change efforts. However, while headlines proclaim climate-commitment may be less of a priority due to political positioning and growing AI ambitions, there are also emerging signs that carbon reduction and climate commitments have been quietly mainstreamed into an array of corporate offices. Though renewables currently face significant headwinds in the U.S., this sector is an increasingly powerful player within the global energy and corporate worlds. As this sector grows in both market share and energy output, corporate climate action is starting to be seen less as a public relations ploy or a necessary means for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and more as an ordinary business decision. It remains to be seen, however, if the growth of renewables will be enough to meet growing energy demands and reduce emissions in the near term.

Corporate retreat from climate goals

In 2025, some major corporations, organizations, and nonprofits, such as the Bill Gates-funded climate action group Breakthrough Energy, cut back on climate operations and greenhouse gas emission reduction commitments. Corporations made fewer mentions of environmental and climate work in public communications and calls with investors. U.S. investors backed away from ESG (environmental, social, and governance) funds, and venture capital reduced climate investments amid market uncertainties, even as renewables went mainstream.

This turn by big business may be a response to a changing regulatory environment in which federal climate mitigation and adaptation measures are being scaled back or eliminated, including the termination of tax credits for renewable energy (see Regulatory Rollbacks Pose Environmental Risks), along with corporate eagerness to expand artificial intelligence (AI) use with its associated energy needs. For planners on the ground, this may mean much less public and private funding for local climate resilience and adaptation efforts. As companies potentially pull back, carbon emissions could increase, worsening climate hazards and impacts.

Greenhushing takes climate efforts under the radar

"Greenhushing" refers to ongoing self-censorship among private organizations and corporations to hide or downplay their climate work. While some consider greenhushing as evidence of corporate willingness to reduce climate commitments, others see it as a correction to "greenwashing," in which companies use misleading or exaggerated statements to appear more sustainable than they really are.

Staying silent about climate efforts may also help corporations quietly continue this work at a time of shifting federal priorities toward corporate environmental and climate commitments. Industry analyses show that most U.S. companies maintained or increased climate and sustainability efforts in 2025. Another study found that only 13 percent of 75 top global companies had retreated from their climate commitments in 2025, while 85 percent were holding steady or even accelerating their sustainability efforts. The integration of sustainability into corporate operating models and value engines was a key factor in the continuation of these efforts.

While the lack of communication about climate action from corporations and private organizations may be concerning, this evidence of sustainability's growing normalization within corporate operations is cause for hope. This strategy is further reflected in the efforts of cities and communities, where embedding sustainability and climate goals within local plans, policies, and regulations, rather than keeping these goals contained within purpose-built climate adaptation and mitigation plans, is increasingly common.

From carbon offsets to carbon insets

Carbon offsets continue to fall out of favor, both among climate experts and in corporate boardrooms. Concerns over their effectiveness are leading to an emerging strategy of carbon "insets," especially among highly influential major corporations within the agribusiness sector. While carbon offsets are typically purchased from third parties for projects far removed from corporate operations, carbon insets are efforts implemented within a corporation's own supply chains or operations, which can account for up to 80 percent of its carbon footprint.

Carbon insets could be far more impactful for climate action. Rather than trying to compensate for the emissions created by their operations, companies using insets seek to reduce those emissions. For example, a company's inset strategies might include powering manufacturing facilities with renewable energy and transitioning shipping and delivery to electric vehicles.

The potential for carbon insets to reduce global emissions could lead to improved climate outcomes and reduced hazard risks at the local level. Planners should also evaluate how this emerging approach in the private sector can potentially sync up with climate mitigation and greenhouse gas reduction strategies that have long been practiced within cities and municipalities.

Renewables emerge onto the big business scene

Renewables continue to make major advances in energy market share and fall in price. According to the International Energy Agency, $2.2 trillion in global energy investments is being directed toward renewables, grid modernization, and nuclear energy—double the amount directed toward oil, coal, and gas. Worldwide, most new renewable energy projects are more cost-effective than fossil fuel alternatives. Market realities and rapidly falling costs point to a present and near future where renewables are the cheapest sources of energy. Additional low- and zero-carbon sources of energy, such as geothermal and nuclear energy, are also seeing rare broad-based bipartisan support in the U.S. Far from being a novelty, renewables are now fully mainstream and represent the cornerstone of national climate strategies across the globe.

Planners and communities may expect continued development of renewables at the local level, even as direct federal support for these types of projects is suspended or eliminated. Given that the rapid adoption of renewables is outpacing even the most optimistic of predictions and could lead to major emission reductions in the coming years, this might also lead to less dire climate impacts and outcomes at the local level.

Funding Cuts Fuel Uncertainty in the U.S.

The cancellation of federal affordable housing grants in 2025, coupled with rising costs of construction, could fuel further challenges in housing affordability and access. Photo by Stefan Malloch/Dreamstime.com.

The Trump administration is pursuing major funding cuts in three sectors highly significant to local planning: housing, the environment, and public health. Changes in how federal agencies fund programs in these key areas point to emerging challenges over the coming years for which planners will need to prepare. The effects of funding cuts and a broader federal pullback likely signal an increasing role for states and localities, though difficult decisions on local priorities lie ahead.

Housing setbacks from federal cuts

The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)-directed cancellation of federal affordable housing grants for mentions of "DEI-related language" in 2025 and a potential major overhaul of federal funding allocations for low-income housing could lead to substantial local housing challenges, even if these programs are fully funded by Congress. DOGE-driven staff cuts and resignations at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have greatly restricted the agency's ability to handle fair housing cases and may leave public housing residents at greater risk of fraud. The Trump administration has also targeted Section 8, the primary avenue for federal housing support, for sizable funding reductions and new eligibility rules. State and local governments are likely unable to pick up the funding slack, given the large role that the federal government has historically played in the affordable housing space.

As housing and construction costs rise (see also Tariff Costs Take Hold for Businesses and Households), there are fewer affordable units being added to the market. While Congress appears to be pulling back from some of the more extreme cuts proposed by the Trump administration, reduced funding for federal housing could fuel further increases in housing insecurity, affordability, and access among people and families most in need. Planners should be prepared with local land use policies and actions to help alleviate a potentially worsening housing crisis.

U.S. homelessness on the rise amid criminalization push

Between 2023 and 2024, homelessness in the U.S. rose nearly 18 percent. This increase is especially concerning in light of recent federal, state, and local actions to criminalize

homelessness and impose tighter restrictions on homeless encampments. In April 2025, the Trump administration disbanded the federal agency that coordinated homelessness policy across the federal government. In July, it issued an executive order that expands state and local government authority to forcibly institutionalize unhoused people and rewards stricter prohibitions on public substance abuse and loitering. This is in addition to growing state-based pushes in California and elsewhere to clear homeless encampments.

Some states and communities are funding supportive housing in response, though it is unlikely this will meet increasing demand. Additionally, supportive housing tends to be controversial at the local level and often encounters significant NIMBY pushback. Without federal support, the onus for action will likely fall heavily on local communities. Planners may be called upon to help their communities address homelessness and improve housing stability for the unhoused.

Deep cuts threaten climate and environmental funding

Federal deregulation within the climate sector (see also Regulatory Rollbacks Pose Environmental Risks) is being exacerbated by deep cuts to federal environmental and climate programs. 2025 saw millions of grant dollars slashed for climate science and emissions reporting, environmental justice, and the study of major environmental hazards in rural and urban areas. These cuts threaten to undo progress on reducing environmental hazards and improving air and water quality, and terminating climate and clean energy programs will likely worsen economic hardship and health outcomes for vulnerable communities. While states could step in to compensate for lost environmental funding, as New Mexico is attempting, they have historically relied upon federal funds (often through the Community Development Block Grant program) to support local environmental projects.

Communities will be forced to cope with the environmental risks and potential disasters that follow major defunding efforts, along with the long-term health impacts of environmental hazards. In the absence of federal support, planners may need to engage more deeply with nonprofits, state leadership, and regional climate collectives to continue to advance long-term climate, resilience, and environmental goals.

Localities ill-prepared for health funding cuts

The Trump administration is pursuing funding cuts to local health-related grants and bedrock healthcare programs. Initial cuts to public health funding focused on programs using so-called DEI language or providing women's health-care and abortion services. Other federal cuts have ended disease prevention and response programs and will likely have cascading effects on state and local economies. The 2025 federal budget package known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act cuts nearly $1 trillion from Medicaid over the next decade, which will likely force state agencies to reduce critical health services, including maternity care, in both rural and urban areas. Such reductions in public health services may compound the local impacts of federal housing and environmental funding cuts, further hampering planners' and communities' efforts to address these coming crises.

A worsening state for state budgets

As the federal government seeks broad funding cutbacks on health, housing, and the environment—all areas in which it has played a major role over the last 60 years—states will struggle to compensate. Budgets are already strained, with most states facing falling revenues and projected deficits. And in contrast to the federal government, nearly all states are required to issue balanced budgets. Without federal support in these key areas, states may be forced to make up the difference through increasing taxes or deprioritizing other functions. This will likely lead to difficult decisions for local governments, and the fallout could extend to transportation, public safety, education, and other critical community functions. Planners may be called upon to help local leaders evaluate the impacts of federal funding losses on municipal budgets and plan to mitigate those challenges—and they may wish to similarly evaluate the impact of federal funding on their own positions.

New Lows for Higher Education

Young people are increasingly questioning the value of higher education, prompting many to opt for vocational programs and other alternative pathways to well-paying careers. Photo by FG Trade/E+/Getty Images.

A growing share of young Americans are questioning the value of a traditional college education. This shift coincides with widespread college and university enrollment declines and a shrinking demographic pool of high school graduates, posing growing economic challenges for college towns. At the same time, skills-based hiring (see also Deep Dive: The Future of Jobs) continues to rise, and the wide adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) threatens white-collar jobs that typically require a college degree. The Trump administration has also sought to reshape American higher education by suggesting new frameworks for distributing federal funds for college and promoting alternatives such as vocational and trade schools.

Increased skepticism about college education

The perceived value of higher education in the U.S. is declining, with only 35 percent of Americans now considering college "very important." High tuition costs and the opportunity price tag of delaying entry into the workforce are prompting many to bypass higher education altogether. The potential disruption that AI poses to knowledge work is also fueling uncertainties about the return on a college investment. At the same time, the rise of the tech sector and the expansion of skills-based hiring in both the public and private sectors are offering alternative pathways to well-paying careers without a

degree. Young people are increasingly opting for vocational programs that provide paid, hands-on training and faster entry into the workforce.

Planners might anticipate these transitions by supporting new workforce development strategies, seeking opportunities to diversify local economies, and aligning land use with emerging forms of education.

U.S. colleges and universities, such as Western Illinois University in Macomb, Illinois, have long served as economic anchors for their communities, but declining enrollment is having ripple effects on local businesses and services. Photo by Nick Schnelle/*The Wall Street Journal*.

Federal government's new role in higher education

The federal government is taking a more assertive role in shaping U.S. higher education. In 2025, the Trump administration announced the termination of thousands of federal research grants worth billions of dollars to colleges and universities across the country. This has raised concerns about long-term impacts on scientific innovation and economic growth. Additionally, in October 2025 the administration presented nine top public and private universities with a new framework for federal funding access aimed at reshaping university policies and standards. The proposed measures included banning the use of race or sex in admissions and hiring, freezing tuition for five years, capping international undergraduate enrollment at 15 percent, and changing or ending programs that threaten conservative ideas. Though seven of the nine schools immediately declined the proposal, this pressure seems likely to persist.

For planners, the implications extend to local economic development in university towns, where a loss of federal research dollars and fewer international students could weaken local housing markets and service economies dependent on campus activity.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"I see less availability in general for people to go to school, due to various cost pressures, and also given recent changes in student loan availability for various professions."

—Jennifer Senick, PhD, Rutgers University

The decline of the small college

For decades, higher education served as an economic anchor for cities and towns across the U.S. That era may be ending. As the number of college-bound students decreases due to changes in attitudes, significant demographic shifts, and falling birthrates, many small colleges are losing students and revenue.

Although a rise in fall 2025 semester enrollment numbers suggest cause for optimism, this growth likely does not equate to a reversal of this overall trend; rather, it may reflect a combination of factors, such as expanded dual-degree programs and growing interest in health-related majors. This signal may have a potential ripple effect of local job losses and shrinking tax bases. For planners, it presents new economic development challenges, requiring early intervention to help communities diversify revenue sources and repurpose underused infrastructure.

The Future of Hazard Mitigation

Chrissy Caggiano, AICP

Chrissy Caggiano spoke to us about what might lie ahead in the hazard mitigation and resilience fields. To listen to the entire Trend Talk conversation hosted by Joe DeAngelis, AICP, scan the QR code above or visit planning.org/podcast.

Chrissy Caggiano, AICP, is technical manager for planning at Michael Baker International, where for 15 years she has been involved in hazard mitigation planning efforts at all levels of government—from helping communities build their local mitigation strategies and conducting statewide risk assessments to supporting FEMA's planning, flood mapping, and grant programs.

Federal requirements, guidelines, and processes are the driving forces in hazard mitigation planning nationwide. However, an ongoing devolution of hazard mitigation responsibilities from the federal government to states is a major emerging trend for planners and practitioners in the field.

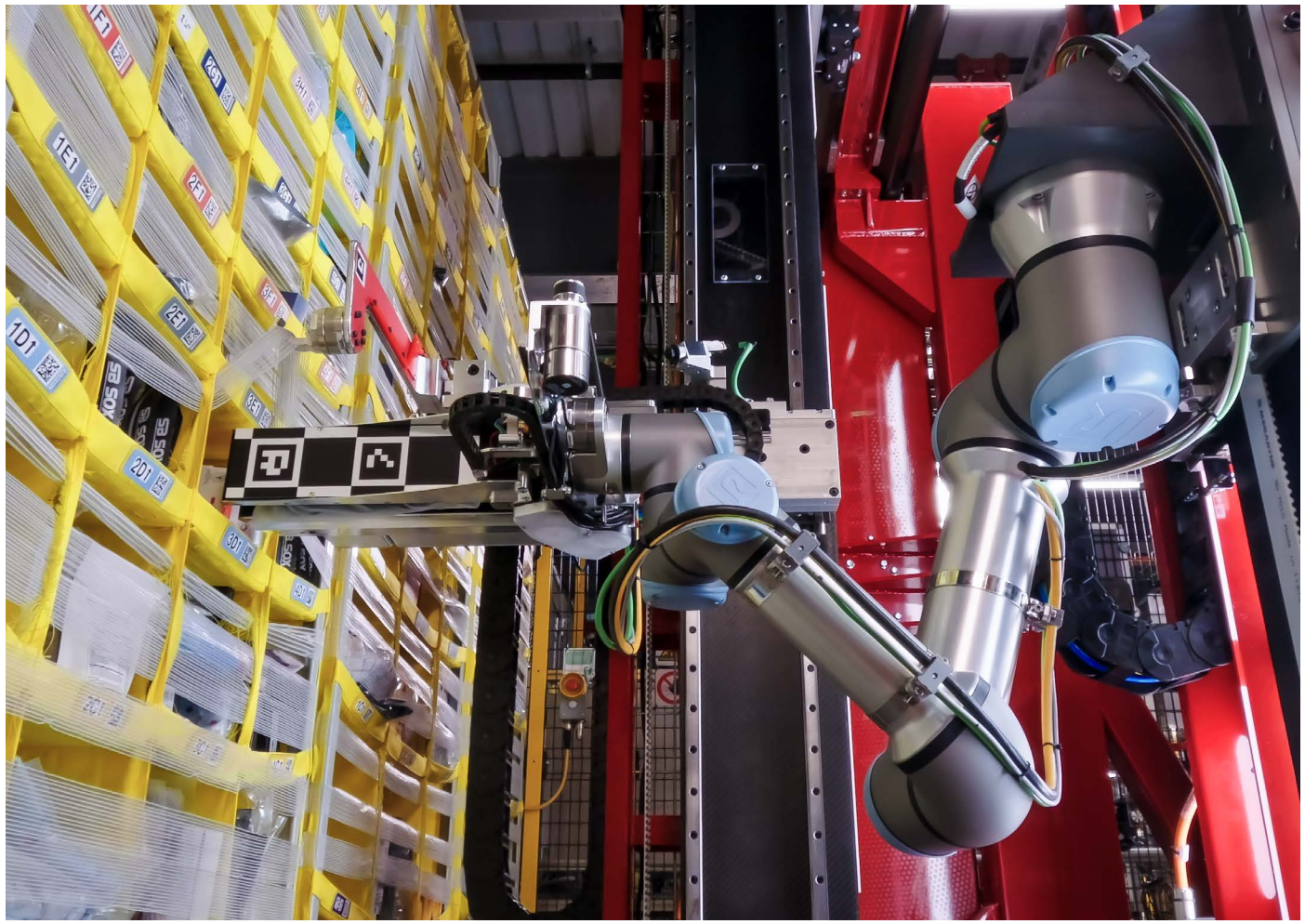
TAKEAWAY 1: Federal changes under the current administration have sought to de-emphasize the federal role in state and local mitigation planning. Planners are exploring ways to adapt and persevere. Over the long run, this will likely require considerably more capacity-building and funding support at the state level to support impactful local mitigation planning.

"I would love to see the trend go in the direction of fewer mitigation plans and more mitigation planning, more of that consistent act toward planning for a climate-adaptable future and less just meeting a set of requirements."

TAKEAWAY 2: Rather than simply fulfilling federal mitigation requirements, planners may be able to more deeply engage in community-specific planning that aligns with local needs. While a federal pullback in this space may initially lead to fewer formal mitigation plans, it may accelerate a more thorough integration of hazard mitigation with related processes such as climate adaptation, and a deeper embedding of mitigation into local comprehensive plans, zoning and building codes, infrastructure and capital improvement plans, and a host of other highly local planning functions.

Trend Talk

Policy Shifts Not Working for Labor Markets



Amazon reportedly has plans to avoid 600,000 new hires by 2033 through automation, ultimately handling 75 percent of company operations with robots. Photo courtesy of Amazon.

The U.S. economy has seen a period of precarity for the past few years. This includes changes in the labor market. The fall-out and subsequent recovery from COVID-19 brought jobs back more quickly than anticipated. But with post-pandemic stimulus funds fully exhausted, jobs numbers look to be in peril again. Some of these changes are the result of federal policy shifts that are affecting public- and private-sector jobs alike, creating uncertain future outcomes for employment.

Tech may be taking more jobs

Fears of technology taking our jobs have been persistent through time, and the recent adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) is no exception. Nearly one-third of U.S. workers believe AI will reduce jobs in the future, and while some studies haven't found much disruption by AI in the labor market, the available data has limitations. Moreover, other research has found that while certain jobs have been insulated from AI thus far, early-career workers have seen a 13 percent decline in employment, and tech-sector job growth is slowing. Furthermore, the "Iceberg Index," a new labor simulation tool, has shown that AI could already replace almost 12 percent of the U.S. workforce. Some experts fear that widespread AI adoption could make recovering from a future recession more difficult, but it is also likely to create new types of jobs, and its impacts will vary across sectors. According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 *Future of Jobs Report*,

170 million new jobs (14 percent of today's total employment) could be created within the next five years.

Automation is also poised to affect jobs, though mainly in certain industries. The logistics and supply chain automation market, for instance, is expected to reach $55 billion by 2030, and Amazon—the second-largest U.S. employer—reportedly has plans to avoid 600,000 new hires by 2033 through automation, ultimately handling 75 percent of company operations with robots.

To combat these potential job losses, California and New York have introduced bills that assess AI impacts on jobs and retain human decision-making power over personnel. While it's unlikely that AI will completely replace planning jobs, planners are already using AI tools in their work (see also PlanTech: Updating the Planner's Toolkit). Planners should learn about AI now and pay attention to the potential local economic consequences of its growing use. Upskilling for AI is crucial. And paradoxically, these new technologies may allow planners to focus on the human elements of planning (see also Deep Dive: The Future of Jobs).

Manufacturing sector boost falls short

One objective of the Trump administration has been to bring manufacturing back to the U.S., a continuation of its successful reshoring (discussed in the *2024 Trend Report*) following the COVID-19 pandemic. The administration has implemented a series of tariffs to encourage American companies to bring manufacturing back from abroad. These same tariffs, however, also make it more expensive for companies to build in the U.S., and other policies—including budget cuts—are threatening support for job creation and workforce development. Indeed, data shows that the U.S. lost 63,000 manufacturing jobs between January and December 2025. Analysts have pointed to economic uncertainties and a loss of immigrant labor as possible factors, though other factors are likely contributing to these job losses.

Inflation Reduction Act investments have fueled recent growth in the clean energy sector, but these gains are being lost as new federal policies go into effect. Photo by RyanJLane/E+/Getty Images.

An exception to this general trend, however, has been the growing defense technology sector. Companies that specialize in AI-enabled weapons and drones are capitalizing on cheaper land and labor costs in postindustrial cities across the Midwest and Northeast. These shifts in the manufacturing landscape have zoning implications for planners and may also inform economic and workforce development strategies.

Cutting the clean energy workforce

In 2024, clean energy jobs grew over three times faster than the broader U.S. economy, and seven percent of all new jobs in the country were in this sector. These gains are now being lost as new policies go into effect. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act is expected to result in 760,000 lost jobs by 2030 and a loss of nearly $1 trillion in GDP. The Department of Energy announced the cancellation of $4 billion in clean energy grants in May 2025, and cancelled another $8 billion in grants during the government shutdown in October of that year. Also in October, General Motors announced over 3,400 layoffs in EV manufacturing jobs as a result of federal policies.

Losses in federal funding for clean energy may prompt states and local governments to bridge the gaps, but widespread fiscal stress may make this difficult (see also Funding Cuts Fuel Uncertainty in the U.S.). This could impact funding that planners and their communities rely on and will likely force

localities to retool green workforce development strategies.

Federal workers get forced out

At the end of 2024, 2.4 million U.S. workers were employed by the federal government. The Trump administration has sought to greatly reduce this number. In January 2025 it established the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which immediately began cutting federal programs and staff, and it offered multiple early retirement and resignation programs for federal employees throughout the year. Those efforts resulted in the loss of more than 317,000 federal employees in 2025, the largest single-year contraction of the civilian federal workforce in many decades.

For planners, cuts to federal staff in areas such as housing and disaster management will likely impede local efforts in these and other areas. The loss of capacity at the federal level will likely require states to fill those gaps, and indeed several states have launched initiatives to hire former federal talent. Although DOGE had reportedly been dismantled by late 2025, the consequences of its actions will likely continue to play out in 2026 and beyond.

Loss of international talent

Companies who seek new hires beyond the domestic labor pool may now have fewer opportunities to do so. In September 2025, the Trump administration announced a new $100,000 fee for H1-B visa applications, one of the primary means for U.S. companies to legally hire international talent. Additionally, in December 2025 the Department of State announced it was expanding visa screening and vetting requirements, further slowing the visa allocation process. In response, countries including China, the UK, Germany, and Canada announced changes to their own visa programs to attract the skilled labor that many U.S. companies will likely no longer be able to sponsor.

With the U.S. already facing a loss of talent as a result of other recent policies (see also Tectonic Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy), the country's future workforce is poised to undergo shifts. Experts are forecasting negative impacts on U.S. firms, universities, rural health care, and the broader economy, as H-1B workers drive national productivity, boosting wages for all Americans. Planners should be aware of potential negative impacts on their communities as the new fees and policies take effect.

Industries brace for deportation

In 2023, 5.6 percent of the U.S. labor force—14 million workers—were unauthorized immigrants. In certain sectors, this share is much higher: roughly 40 percent of farmworkers are unauthorized immigrants. The U.S. agricultural sector has long relied upon these workers, but immigration raids in 2025 caused many to stay home from work and others to self-deport.

Other industries are also being affected by immigration policies, including construction, hospitality, food service, and manufacturing. Small, family-run businesses have also been forced to close, changing the culture of communities. Aside from these social impacts (see also Community Rights, Culture, and Safety at Risk), experts expect housing and food costs to rise as these basic industries contend with a disappearing labor force. In addition to preparing for these economic impacts on their communities, planners may need to coordinate with social services to support local immigrant populations in need.

Public Transit Faces Growing Uncertainties

With federal pandemic-era relief funding expiring and ridership levels still below pre-COVID numbers, transit systems in many big cities are facing fiscal uncertainties. Photo by Bryan Littel/Alamy.

In the coming years, many large U.S. cities are likely to face an existential crisis in public transit. With agencies still struggling to recover ridership lost during the pandemic and looming fiscal cliffs threatening operations, these systems risk entering a downward spiral of declining service. At the same time, a car-centric political climate and new deregulation policies are empowering private autonomous vehicle operators to expand their fleets nationwide, promoting market-driven, tech-led options for mobility.

Fiscal worries for metro transit systems

Many big U.S. cities, including Philadelphia and Portland, Oregon, could see dramatic reductions in public transit service in 2026. As federal pandemic-era relief funding expires, many transit systems are facing significant fiscal cliffs. Ridership levels have yet to recover to pre-2020 levels in most parts of the country (with California Bay Area commuter rail systems being a notable exception). At the same time, the costs of new transit vehicles for U.S. transit agencies are high and growing, creating challenges for upgrading equipment and expanding service. Additionally, a legislative backlash against large metro regions' public transit systems is growing in many states, including Florida and Texas. And the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) has threatened to pull federal transit funding from Chicago, Boston, and New York City over security and safety concerns.

The private sector has begun to fill some gaps, though often in limited and commercially driven ways. For example, sports gambling company FanDuel paid $80,000 to reinstate express train service for the Philadelphia Eagles' 2025 season home opener.

For planners, this trend signals more than a temporary budget crisis; it points to a possible long-term shift in transportation priorities. Without sustained investment and innovation, public transit in major U.S. cities is facing slow degradation. This outcome will only reinforce car dependency, widening inequities in access to jobs and housing and undermining climate goals.

Car-centric transportation funding takes center stage

Transportation project funding in the U.S. is entering a period of deep

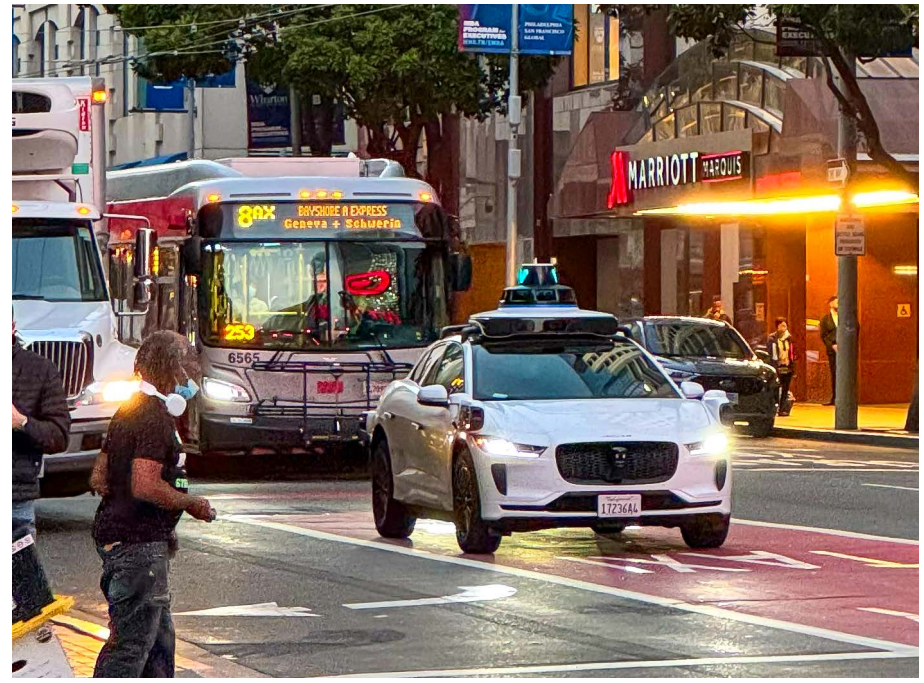
uncertainty. Many studies on road safety, mobility, and related issues were canceled or defunded by the Trump administration in 2025, including research programs housed at university transportation centers. Meanwhile, a March 2025 USDOT internal policy memo called for the removal of all climate- or equity-related elements of competitive grant projects, and in September 2025 the agency cancelled a number of previously awarded RAISE grants for projects across the country that weren't "car-focused."

The long-term consequences could be significant. The dismantling of transportation funding for street safety, public transit, and other transportation alternatives threatens to undermine decades of progress in improving mobility, public health, environmental sustainability, and economic resilience. For planners, this trend raises concerns about growing inequities in access and mobility, particularly for communities dependent on transit, walking, and cycling infrastructure.

Robotaxis take on transit

Fueled by rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and backed by major technology companies such as Alphabet, Tesla, and Amazon, robotaxi services are expanding quickly across many U.S. cities. This growth is supported by a favorable political climate and recent federal deregulation: the Trump administration has relaxed several safety requirements designed for human drivers and is streamlining the exemption process for automakers, signaling a more permissive national stance toward AV deployment. These factors have set the stage for further expansion of AV use. In late 2025, Chandler, Arizona, announced it would become the first U.S. city to offer Waymo robotaxis as an on-demand public transit option.

While these changes may accelerate innovation, they also raise significant questions. In low-density suburbs, robotaxis might provide flexible mobility solutions where traditional transit is costly to operate. But syncing transit with robotaxi operations in urban areas will be difficult, AV availability is still limited by factors such as weather, and growing AV adoption will likely threaten, not enhance, existing public transportation systems. As robotaxis continue to spread to additional U.S. cities, planners should watch for possible transit synergies but remain alert to potential impacts.



Though robotaxi companies continue to expand their operations into more U.S. cities, significant questions remain about how AVs may supplement—or supplant—public transit systems. Photo by Chris Arvin.

Cautious optimism for America's passenger rail

Amtrak, the nation's primary intercity passenger railroad, significantly benefited from the Biden administration's infrastructure agenda and the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. These investments have yielded tangible results: Amtrak recorded an all-time high ridership in 2024 of 32.8 million passengers, launched a new St. Paul–Chicago service in 2025 that surpassed ridership expectations, and invested $4.5 billion in new trains, tunnels, bridges, and repair projects. These accomplishments and increased funding for passenger rail in the 2026 federal budget suggest cause for cautious optimism about the future of U.S. passenger rail. There are many unknowns, however, and advocates argue that systemic reforms are needed to address concerns about the overall viability of the current national railway system. For planners, renewed investment in Amtrak infrastructure and new passenger routes offers opportunities for local economic development and sustainable regional connectivity, particularly for rural and mid-sized communities seeking better access to major urban centers.

When Will We Reach Peak Productivity?

The impacts of artificial intelligence (AI) on our work-life balance and potential repercussions for the environment.

Scenarios 2036

AI allows for fewer but more productive working hours, freeing up more time for leisure.

AI increases productivity at work, but economic growth is prioritized over quality of life.

Environmental regulations continue to be rolled back.

SCENARIO D
THE WORLD IS MY DUMPSTER

People disregard environmental impacts in work and private life.

Industries create more pollution, threatening the environment and public health.

Open spaces are more vulnerable to degradation.

Photo by Natural History Archive/Alamy.

Photo by demaerre/iStockGetty Images Plus.

SCENARIO A
SICK AND TIRED

There's no end to the productivity quest.

The 40-hour (or more) workweek continues.

Environmental pollution abounds.

We've become unhealthy people in an unhealthy world.

SCENARIO C
VACATIONTIME, COURTESY OF AI

Humanity embraces peak productivity.

Environmental pollution is reduced through regulation and slower growth.

People can enjoy great air quality and nature in their free time.

Photo by pixdeluxe/E+.

Photo courtesy of AES Corporation.

SCENARIO B
GROWING GREENER

Productivity goes up within environmental limits.

AI is used to innovate sustainable solutions.

40-hour workweek supports a decarbonized future.

Environmental regulations are robust and effective.

Tariff Costs Take Hold for Businesses and Households

Tariffs are driving up the costs of both transportation infrastructure and modes of transportation, including trains, buses, cars, and bicycles. Photo by Keith Morris/Alamy.

The imposition of new tariffs on a wide variety of goods and nations has been among the highest-profile policies of the Trump administration. Functioning broadly as a tax on goods entering the U.S. from foreign markets, tariffs are having direct impacts on people, primarily through increasing costs of consumer goods, and on sectors such as agriculture, housing, transportation, and economic development.

Intended to stimulate domestic manufacturing (see also Policy Shifts Not Working for Labor Markets), tariffs and their resulting higher prices could potentially worsen an ongoing housing crisis and increase transportation costs. However, it is difficult to evaluate the definitive long-term impacts of tariffs even in 2026, given continuing international negotiations and ongoing legal challenges to presidential tariff authority.

Rising costs of household and consumer goods

The U.S. sources many household goods, appliances, and consumer electronics from overseas. After decades of increasingly free global trade, in 2025 President Trump imposed new tariffs on the majority of U.S. trading partners, often targeting countries that are major manufacturing sources. This large-scale, broadly applied use of tariffs is fueling ongoing inflation. Additionally, retaliatory tariffs imposed by the affected nations are likely to reduce sales of American-made goods meant for export. The uncertainties of this back-and-forth dynamic, along with questions about these tariffs' legality, are hampering businesses' abilities to make immediate logistical decisions and plan for the long term.

Rising prices have direct impacts on communities and could lead to significant economic challenges for U.S. households, small businesses, and industries. Tariffs are already imposing major burdens on local economies, especially businesses reliant on foreign-made components, materials, and goods. To prepare, even in light of uncertainty, planners may need to identify new economic development strategies that are resilient to tariffs, retaliatory measures, and rising costs.

Tariffs threaten high-tech manufacturing rebound

Tariffs are likely to threaten the

recent U.S. manufacturing rebound centered on high-tech industries such as chip-making and renewables. These industries, which rely heavily on global markets and foreign components, are facing major headwinds amid the withdrawal of federal support and conflicting outcomes of U.S. policy shifts. Recent domestic manufacturing growth in the renewables and clean tech sectors is being further undermined by shifting federal priorities away from renewables (see also Regulatory Rollbacks Pose Environmental Risks). In addition to endangering long-term economic development plans, these pullbacks may cause immediate local impacts as projects that promised jobs are stalled or cancelled.

High rises for home construction costs

Rising construction costs, partially due to tariffs, are leading to higher home prices and worsening the ongoing housing crisis. According to the National Association of Home Builders, tariffs on raw materials such as lumber, steel, and aluminum are adding nearly $11,000 on average to the costs of new home construction. Additional tariffs on furnishings and goods, such as vanities and cabinets, imposed in October 2025 threaten to further increase housing costs. Combined with rising construction labor costs and shortages, there are few signs that home prices are likely to moderate or decline in the near term.

Though recent zoning reforms by states and local governments have reduced regulatory barriers to increasing housing supply, the exacerbating impacts of tariffs on the rising costs of construction pose new threats to affordable housing production. As planners and communities seek to revise local regulations to incentivize housing construction and increase supply, they should be aware of the impacts of costs and other industry factors on meeting housing goals.

Agricultural tariffs are feeding rural challenges

Rising food prices have been a global hallmark of the post-COVID inflationary period, and tariffs are now driving up the costs of farming and threatening the stability of the U.S. agricultural sector even further. As the Trump administration has imposed tariffs on foreign markets, retaliatory measures have targeted American agricultural exports. The U.S. lost its primary market for soybeans when China halted all soybean purchases during the 2025 U.S.-China trade war, but a November trade agreement reestablished the flow of agricultural goods. Tariff uncertainties similarly threatened U.S. corn and poultry markets, and beef prices hit record highs amid a plan to import beef from Argentina.

Tariff policies have created disruptions for employers, farm owners, agricultural workers, and residents within many rural communities. Though in December 2025 the White House announced plans to use $12 billion of tariff revenues for a farmer aid package, planners should be aware of how these developments in the agricultural sector may further impact the economic health and well-being of their communities, especially as trade and tariff policies continue to evolve.

Tariffs are driving up transportation costs

The transportation sector isn't immune from rising costs and tariff impacts. In 2025, costs rose for both transportation infrastructure and modes of transportation. U.S. auto manufacturing has been affected, given the globalized nature of this sector, and in October the average cost of a new automobile topped $50,000 for the first time. Bicycle prices are climbing due to tariff and trade pressures, prompting at least one e-bike manufacturer to halt shipments to the U.S., though a November tariff drop may lower prices in 2026. Tariffs are also making trains and buses more expensive to build and maintain, as they rely on foreign-made components and are largely made overseas.

The addition of tariff pressures to transportation costs may complicate local discussions around transportation options and alternatives. Amid a growing crisis in public transportation funding and stability (see also Public Transit Faces Growing Uncertainties), the rising costs of cars and bikes leave fewer affordable mobility options. Planners should be aware of how these market shifts and higher costs may impact the local transportation network and community members' access to jobs, goods, and services.

Tectonic Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy

The closure of USAID in 2025, a cornerstone of American soft power and global engagement for many decades, has ended many international hunger and public health aid programs. Photo by Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP.

As highlighted in the *2025 Trend Report*, we are witnessing the rapid unraveling of decades of international cooperation that once defined the global order. Recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy reflect a clear departure from the post–World War II tradition of multilateral engagement toward a more insular, transactional, and unilateral approach. The renewed focus on domestic interests has redefined the nation's relationships

abroad and disrupted long-standing alliances. The erosion of soft power, instability in trade relations, restrictions on mobility, and withdrawal from international climate efforts all contribute to a shrinking sphere of U.S. influence.

The end of USAID and the decline of soft power

In July 2025, the Trump administration closed the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a cornerstone of American soft power and global engagement for many decades. The State Department justified the move by stating that USAID funding is not aligned with national interests. Numerous aid programs, including those addressing hunger and public health, were abruptly terminated, with the State Department assuming responsibility for future foreign assistance programs. While the full consequences of this decision have yet to unfold, early analysis points to a growing death toll and worsening humanitarian conditions in developing nations. The collapse of USAID has also eroded decades of trust with

international partners, and experts agree that restoring credibility will be neither quick nor easy.

This weakening of U.S. influence abroad constrains opportunities for global collaboration through cross-border knowledge-sharing, especially in the public health field, that has long enriched the U.S. and the planning profession. Moreover, as worsening socioeconomic conditions drive new waves of forced migration from the Global South, the ripple effects may reshape immigration dynamics and demographic trends within the U.S. itself.

U.S. trade policies are reshaping global alignments

A defining feature of the Trump administration has been the intensification of trade wars as a negotiation (and often punitive) tool. The U.S. has imposed myriad new tariffs on specific countries and imported goods, affecting even long-standing allies such as Canada and Mexico (see also Tariff Costs Take Hold for Businesses and Households). With tariff rates fluctuating throughout 2025, often shifting with the outcomes of new trade negotiations, the ongoing uncertainty has pushed once-close allies to seek alternative economic partnerships. Additionally, tensions between the U.S. and China have intensified. Although a November 2025 meeting between President Trump and President Xi Jinping temporarily eased trade tensions, uncertainty about the long-term future of this crucial partnership between the two economies remains. While the U.S. tightens its borders and tariffs, China is deepening its economic and infrastructural ties across the Global South.

Publicly framed as microeconomic tools to protect American industries, tariffs are causing far-reaching economic repercussions domestically and globally. They have driven up consumer prices, caused shifts in global supply chains, and created widespread uncertainty in international markets. This could accelerate a reshaping of global trade alliances elsewhere, such as the free trade agreement made in early 2026 between the EU and South America's Mercosur trading bloc of Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uraguay. For many domestic businesses, the unpredictability of U.S. trade policy has made long-term planning and hiring increasingly difficult, which might impact local economic development for years ahead.

A global climate agenda without the U.S.

In 2025, the U.S. withdrew from the Paris Agreement and related UN climate initiatives for the second time, and in January 2026 it left the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC. Under President Trump, federal agencies significantly scaled back their climate research contributions in 2025, fueling concerns among scientists that the nation may lose an entire generation of scientific talent. This shift has created a gap in global data exchange, prompting U.S. allies to reduce their dependence on American research and accelerate the development of their own climate and weather monitoring systems.

In the meantime, other nations are stepping forward to play bigger roles in the global climate agenda. China, for example, has introduced new emissions targets and expanded investments in renewable energy, positioning itself as a major global player in climate governance. While the international community continues to pursue climate action, without U.S. engagement, global progress risks becoming increasingly fragmented.

For planners, this reprises similar actions taken by the first Trump administration. As happened then, the absence of federal leadership will likely push climate action to the local level, with states and municipalities assuming responsibilities once managed nationally. While some states are likely to continue adopting ambitious climate policies and enhancing international knowledge exchange, others may scale back their efforts, deepening regional disparities in climate adaptation and resilience. Fewer federally funded programs and limited research opportunities, however, point to a potential crisis of environmental planning.

A withdrawal from multilateralism

In early 2026, the U.S. withdrew from more than 60 international organizations, including 31 affiliated with the UN, arguing that the work of these bodies is a waste of taxpayer dollars and contrary to the interests of the U.S. This action advances President Trump's long-standing commitment to reassess U.S. participation in international institutions, if not remake them.

The consequences for planners of reduced federal engagement in multilateral urban platforms such as UN-Habitat are yet unclear, but this shift will likely make the role of other governmental bodies, nonprofit organizations, and private entities more important in continued cooperation and knowledge exchange.

Preparing for Tourism's Disruptive Future

Tourism has long been an economic development cornerstone for communities across the world. Increasing globalization, international air travel, the growth of social and global media, and the emergence of new global cities are all driving what is now an 11-trillion-dollar industry representing 10 percent of the global economy. Though the COVID-19 pandemic was a major shock, tourism as a whole has since rebounded to its pre-COVID state, and many cities and destinations are seeing visitors and revenues exceeding pre-COVID levels. But converging social, political, and environmental trends are rapidly reshaping the tourism industry in ways that could have significant implications for cultures, economies, and cities going forward.

Planners have played a crucial role in the development of the tourism sector as a tool for local revitalization and as a generator of revenue for cities and communities. But trends in travel and leisure can change, and places themselves are changing due to environmental and societal shifts. Planners in the tourist hotspots of today—and the emerging (and declining) ones of tomorrow—should be prepared for whatever the future might bring. This deep dive will explore some of the most disruptive developments in the global tourism industry and outline their potential challenges for planners and communities.

THE CONTINUED RISE OF SHORT-TERM RENTALS. Short-term rentals, such as Airbnb, have been a disruptive force within the tourism sector for more than a decade. Aside from competing with the global hotel industry, the massive growth

While tourism is an economic development cornerstone for many communities, overtourism fueled by social media is fueling pushback from residents and causing negative local impacts. Photo ©Allagreeg/Dreamstime.com.

Deep Dive

of short-term rentals is leading to increasing concerns around high housing prices and affecting the lives of residents. In Barcelona and Lisbon, the impacts of overtourism have led to sustained public protests, and short-term rentals are increasingly seen as a possible cause for high housing prices, gentrification, and displacement. In Lisbon, nearly 20,000 residential properties have shifted to short-term rentals in the last five years alone, driving up rents and housing prices alike. In response, the European Commission addressed short-term rentals in an action item in its 2025 *European Affordable Housing Plan*, though local outcomes are yet uncertain. But while U.S. cities including New York have developed a wide range of regulations centered on restricting short-term rentals, there are increasing doubts that the stricter regulatory approach of major cities is having a meaningful impact on housing costs.

Even with a renewed regulatory push, the growing influence of short-term rentals on the built environment, housing affordability, and how people live in and experience cities and places is unlikely to subside in the near future. Planners should share knowledge and best practices for regulating short-term rentals to find the right solutions for their communities.

Cities and entire countries are using social media campaigns to shape perceptions and promote tourism. Image by allfortheloveofchicago/ Instagram.

THE TRIALS OF TIKTOK TOURISM. Social media influencers—and, increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI)-generated travel influencers—play a huge role in today's tourism industry. Some have inked deals with travel companies, brands, or local tourism boards, and others act as unofficial marketers and photographers of locales.

But while social media–driven booms can lead to major economic benefits, the drawbacks can also be significant. Surges of visitors drawn by "TikTok tourism" are fueling pushback from locals and causing negative impacts, in places ranging from tiny Italian coastal villages to Fujikawaguchiko, a Japanese town with Instagram-coveted views of Mount Fuji—and even Antarctica. Even when cities have embraced social media and influencers to boost tourism, adaptation to its subsequent impacts has proven difficult. In the U.S., social media has helped grow tourism in Nashville over the last decade, but the city must now address growing conflicts between residents and tourists, disruptive "transpotainment" vehicles in the downtown district, and housing affordability challenges worsened by a short-term rental boom.

Furthermore, cities and entire countries are learning they can tap tourism influencers to shape narratives about places and drive economic change. To counter the perception of high crime in Chicago at a time when crime is at historic lows, the city launched a social media campaign to promote the city's culture to potential tourists.

At a larger scale, Saudi Arabia is partnering with travel influencers and boosting tourism to diversify its economy and reduce dependency on the oil industry. This is an increasingly common strategy for other Persian Gulf nations as they seek to expand beyond fossil fuel production. In the United Arab Emirates, Dubai has successfully emerged over the past few decades as a major global hub of commerce,

Deep Dive

trade, finance, and tourism. As part of its tourism strategy, Dubai has cultivated an image of influencer hotspot, with the city's tourism board recently launching what they call the world's first "influencer training program." But in some cases, social media representation can be misleading and even dangerous: critics point to tourists' positive posts about carefully curated travel in Afghanistan serving as propaganda that obscures the country's oppression and violation of women's rights.

Unpredictable shifts in social media trends are difficult to plan for. But when the outcomes are more destructive than constructive, planners may be called upon to deal with the downstream consequences of these disruptions on the form and function of communities. A social media–driven tourism boom in a sleepy seaside town may require planners to develop short-term rental policies or weigh in on long-term transportation infrastructure needs. Viral visitors can impact life in large urban centers and rural areas alike, and planners should be prepared for the potential influence of influencers on their communities.

AS THE CLIMATE GOES, SO GOES TOURISM. In some places, the impact of climate change on tourism—and by extension on local economies—is emerging as an existential threat. In the U.S., national parks are already coping with extreme heat and weather disasters that are reducing visitor numbers. Mountain resort towns around the globe are contemplating a future without sustained snowfall or temperatures cold enough for skiing and other winter activities. In the south of Europe, summer hotspots in Spain, Italy, France, and Greece are now seeing tourism threatened by oppressive heat. Climate change is also boosting "last-chance tourism" to attractions threatened by global warming, such as glaciers and coral reefs. Though some researchers suggest these visitors might become more climate conscious, this practice puts additional pressure on these vulnerable places.

Climate change is threatening long-popular tourism destinations, including the Mer de Glace in France, where thousands of people go each year to ski. Photo by Nick Yates/Stockshot/Alamy.

Some researchers are even forecasting the end of tourism altogether, as global warming changes local economies and drives up travel costs.

Even as climate change impacts roil some traditional tourist hotspots, others are starting to emerge. The rise of "coolcations" points to a changing geography of summer travel, as northern Europe, Canada, and other cooler places see increased tourism. But even the far north isn't immune from growing climate threats. In response to local climate impacts on the tourism industry, planners in affected communities may be asked to revise economic development plans and strengthen climate adaptation plans to better prepare for and respond to these emerging threats.

CONCLUSION. The global nature of these issues may at first seem difficult for planners to engage with. Nevertheless, these trends are driving deep disruptions within the tourism industry, affecting travelers and destinations alike. Though the ultimate outcome of different futures scenarios is hard to predict, awareness of how this industry is rapidly evolving and impacting local landscapes, economies, and cultures is the essential first step in preparing communities to adapt and continue to thrive.

Deep Dive

The signals we need to learn about and watch

The future isn't a singular, predetermined entity, but rather a representation of any given number of scenarios that may eventually unfold. Planners have a role in creating these scenarios and can draw from today's signals to do so. **Technology** is playing an ever-growing role in people's lives, which is leading to concerns over **personal privacy**. **Worldwide resource consumption** is prompting innovations in **sustainability**, as well as a renewed focus on developing a **space economy**. Meanwhile, current developments in **global public health** will only be compounded as time goes on.

Check out APA's Trend Universe for more trends that planners need to watch and learn about.

Global Issues, Local Impacts

Climate change impacts are being felt most acutely in places such as the island nation of Tuvalu, one of the countries most vulnerable to sea level rise. Photo by Ashley Cooper pics/Alamy.

It can be difficult to link global phenomena to the day-to-day work of planners, who typically operate at a local scale. Yet it is often the cumulative impacts of local and regional actions that elevate these issues to national or international attention. This has implications for how planners execute their work in rural and urban areas alike. The trends and signals here are similar: global issues that may have big impacts at small scales.

Climate migration is just beginning

The effects of climate change are being felt globally, though in some places more acutely than others. While there is no international legal recognition for climate refugees, climate change alone is predicted to be responsible for over one billion refugees by 2050. At the same time, by 2080, an estimated 90 percent of the world's population will live in cities. This necessitates planning now for likely widespread future movements.

One emerging method to manage and integrate climate migrants is visa allocation. In 2025, Australia announced a visa program for residents of the small island nation of Tuvalu, one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to sea level rise. Within a month, over one-third of Tuvalu's population had applied for the program. Argentina also has a visa program in place for residents of Mexico, Central America, and Caribbean islands who have been displaced by natural disasters. Climate migration preparation

within countries is needed as well, as discussed in the *2025 Trend Report*.

New approaches to climate migration may help to mitigate immediate, large-scale movements in the event of a natural disaster. Given the unique nature of climate migration, planners in both at-risk and potential receiving communities should start to strategize sooner rather than later for a variety of likely scenarios.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"Many regions are retreating from global integration in favor of embracing a regional identity that focuses strictly on internal economic goals and prioritizes community well-being."

—Rolf Schuett, International Urban Professionals Forum

As the Arctic thaws, tensions heat up

The melting of Arctic sea ice has many environmental and social implications, but it is the economic impacts that are attracting increasing international attention. Less ice in the Arctic opens up possibilities for new shipping routes, which are of interest to global superpowers including the U.S., China, Europe, and Russia. To prepare, countries are commissioning icebreaker ships, large vessels that can navigate inconsistent Arctic waters. Russia currently has the largest fleet of these ships in the world, but the U.S., Canada, and China are expanding their fleets.

The Arctic offers more than just trade routes, however; it holds an abundance of natural resources, including an estimated 30 percent of the world's untapped natural gas. Furthermore, widespread permafrost thaw could make critical mineral extraction more accessible in those areas, which is why these regions have gained more political interest globally.

The Arctic is also being eyed as a site for new military operations, raising international concerns. Additionally, tensions surrounding Greenland intensified in early 2026. The unfolding of these potential conflicts could upend geopolitical dynamics as well as the global world order, with downstream effects for local communities.

Critical minerals get sharper focus

In addition to pursuing potential sources of critical minerals in the Arctic, the U.S. is trying to shore up domestic supplies of these materials. In March 2025, President Trump signed an executive order invoking the Defense Production Act to increase critical mineral production on federal lands, and in April of that year he signed another order to fast-track offshore mining permits for the same purpose. The U.S. is also negotiating critical mineral trade deals with China, which currently commands an average global market share of 70 percent across 19 of 20 strategic minerals. Beyond domestic and international sources, however, lies the potential for mining critical minerals from asteroids in space, which could further change global dynamics on Earth (see also A Constellation of Developments in Outer Space).

The geopolitical elements of critical mineral extraction and the need to balance national security and sustainability (see the *2025 Trend Report*) are out of planners' control. But mining has a land use component, and planners can advocate for sustainable development practices for these sites. Reducing barriers to communication between local agencies and developers and supporting the concept of free, prior, and informed consent for Indigenous populations affected by mining may help to improve outcomes for all.

A Constellation of Developments in Outer Space

The space economy may soon include manufacturing, as several companies are testing low-Earth-orbit capsules that return home after assembling products or materials in microgravity. Photo courtesy of Varda Space Industries.

The field of planning doesn't often contend with that which is beyond the atmosphere, but many innovations in outer space will impact what is happening on Earth. Past *Trend Reports* have outlined how innovations in space can affect life on the ground, but new updates in the field warrant another look. As discussions about the development of a space economy continue, planners may want to be aware of the impacts this may eventually have on their own local economies, and beyond.

Manufacturing goes into orbit

The manufacturing sector is a major contributor of GHG emissions, pollution, and ecosystem decline globally. One potential solution to mitigate its effects on Earth is to move manufacturing to space, an idea that has been circulating for decades but only recently has moved closer to reality. Space manufacturing entails the creation of products or materials in low-Earth orbit and beyond, which are then either used in space infrastructure or sent back down to Earth. Microgravity has beneficial effects on a number of materials and could improve products ranging from semiconductors to biotechnology. Space manufacturing can also help reduce energy demand on Earth.

Because of these benefits and the increasingly lower costs of space launches, some companies have renewed their focus on space manufacturing. None are yet profitable, but certain industries, such as pharmaceuticals, appear closer to revenue generation than others. In time,

analysts expect that space manufacturing's initial focus on creating highly technical materials will expand to encompass more common-use products and applications. Some companies are even looking at how to move data centers to space. And NASA offers In Space Production Applications awards for products that can help further its deep-space missions.

Numerous challenges still plague space manufacturing, however. While microgravity can improve material structures, it requires reworking manufacturing processes. Radiation is an additional factor that could affect manufacturing in space. Logistical concerns, including supply chain and resource management, also come into play. Should these barriers be overcome, though, a variety of industries, including wellness, agriculture, and semiconductor production, stand to see impacts. Additionally, planners may have new flexibility for land uses that were traditionally allocated for manufacturing, which itself may face economic impacts should industries move off Earth.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"NASA is exploring the possibility of building manufacturing facilities in low-Earth orbit to overcome the limitations of gravity on semiconductor and other nanometer-scale production."

—Yousaf Shah, Urban Systems Ltd

Mining for materials in space

Resource acquisition and allocation have always been points of political and social contention, most recently with the growing need for critical minerals in electrification and technology (see also Global Issues, Local Impacts). Some are proposing an alternative source of these materials: space.

Space mining could harvest metals and minerals as well as water and oxygen. As with space manufacturing, materials gathered in space could be used both on Earth and in situ to fuel ongoing space activity. In 2025, several companies with asteroid-mining ambitions launched unmanned missions to space, with varying degrees of success. Space mining is also attracting attention from the public sector, with the U.S., Japan, Luxembourg, and the United Arab Emirates already adopting legislation allowing for space resource development.

The pace and extent of space mining will depend on the technologies used for mining and the final destinations of materials mined. Differing challenges face all of these factors, and though the past decade has seen much progress, the feasibility of current plans is still uncertain. Should expectations come to fruition, space mining may mitigate some of the environmental impacts of mining on Earth, though it's important that harmful practices not just be moved off planet.

The race for space cleanup

As satellites and rocket launches become more common, the amount of debris in space has exploded. There are more than 1.2 million objects in Earth's orbit greater than one centimeter in size, which though small are capable of causing significant damage under the right conditions. This space debris crisis was discussed in the *2024 Trend Report*.

Now, however, more companies are seeking solutions to this crisis via the burgeoning sector of active debris removal (ADR). In July 2025, one company was granted a patent for a new affordable and sustainable method of ADR, and in September another sent its debris removal system to the International Space Station for testing. ADR research and development has also been underway at NASA and the European Space Agency for some time. And researchers have laid out a framework for a circular space economy based on space debris. While pollution in space is outside the purview of planners on Earth, sustainable innovation and international cooperation is a necessity everywhere and can have cascading effects on other governmental and nongovernmental functions.

You, Me, and Privacy

Understanding how disinformation and public policy impact personal privacy.

Without regulations to keep personal information private, no one's data is protected.

The spread of disinformation has been exacerbated by artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfakes.

Disinformation has declined due to better control mechanisms and regulations.

2041 Scenarios

SCENARIO D
WHO DO I TRUST?

It's not clear anymore what is real and what is fake.

Everybody can create deepfakes about anybody else.

Bad actors create a never-ending stream of targeted phishing, spoofing, and cybercrime attempts.

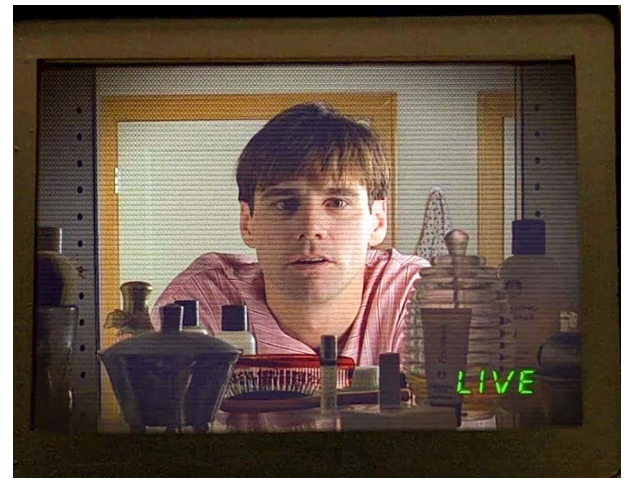
The Matrix; Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy

SCENARIO A
EVERYONE'S AN OPEN BOOK

Everyone knows everything about everyone.

There are no secrets, but also no privacy.

Everyone's life is like a reality show for others.



The Truman Show; Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy

SCENARIO C
I'M NOT WHO YOU THINK I AM

People have control over their personal data and can create made-up identities online.

Everyone can pretend to be someone who they are not.

No one knows anymore what's true or isn't.

Sister Act; Collection Christophel/Alamy

SCENARIO B
I'LL REVEAL WHEN I'M READY TO SHARE

Everyone has control over their data.

People can choose what is published about them or not; they don't have to reveal everything.

Everyone can use their personal data to their own advantage, or even sell it.

You've Got Mail; ©Warner Bros./AJ Pics/Alamy

Data privacy is regulated and people largely control their own information.

Privacy Will Never Be the Same

In today's digital environment, every interaction with online platforms sends information to large-scale data collection systems, both public and private. Photo by LeoPatrizi/E+/Getty Images.

Privacy is evolving from a personal preference to a systemic issue that defines how societies govern themselves. The difference between data collection for public good and surveillance is becoming harder to discern. Additionally, the rapid growth of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has intensified cybersecurity threats, enabling more sophisticated and automated attacks, and the emergence of quantum

computing is expected to further transform the cybersecurity landscape, potentially introducing entirely new vulnerabilities. As privacy becomes both a personal and a collective concern in the AI era, balancing technological innovation, data stewardship, and individuals' rights will present new governance challenges.

AI accelerates privacy concerns

In today's digital environment, avoiding constant data collection is nearly impossible. Every interaction with online platforms feeds into vast systems of surveillance practices maintained by public and private actors. The rise of AI heightens these concerns. We all now wonder: Is my personal information embedded in training datasets? (Yes, it is.) Could my prompts be shared with third parties or law enforcement? (Yes, they will). Might AI systems connect fragments of my online activity and reveal them to others? (Yes, they do.)

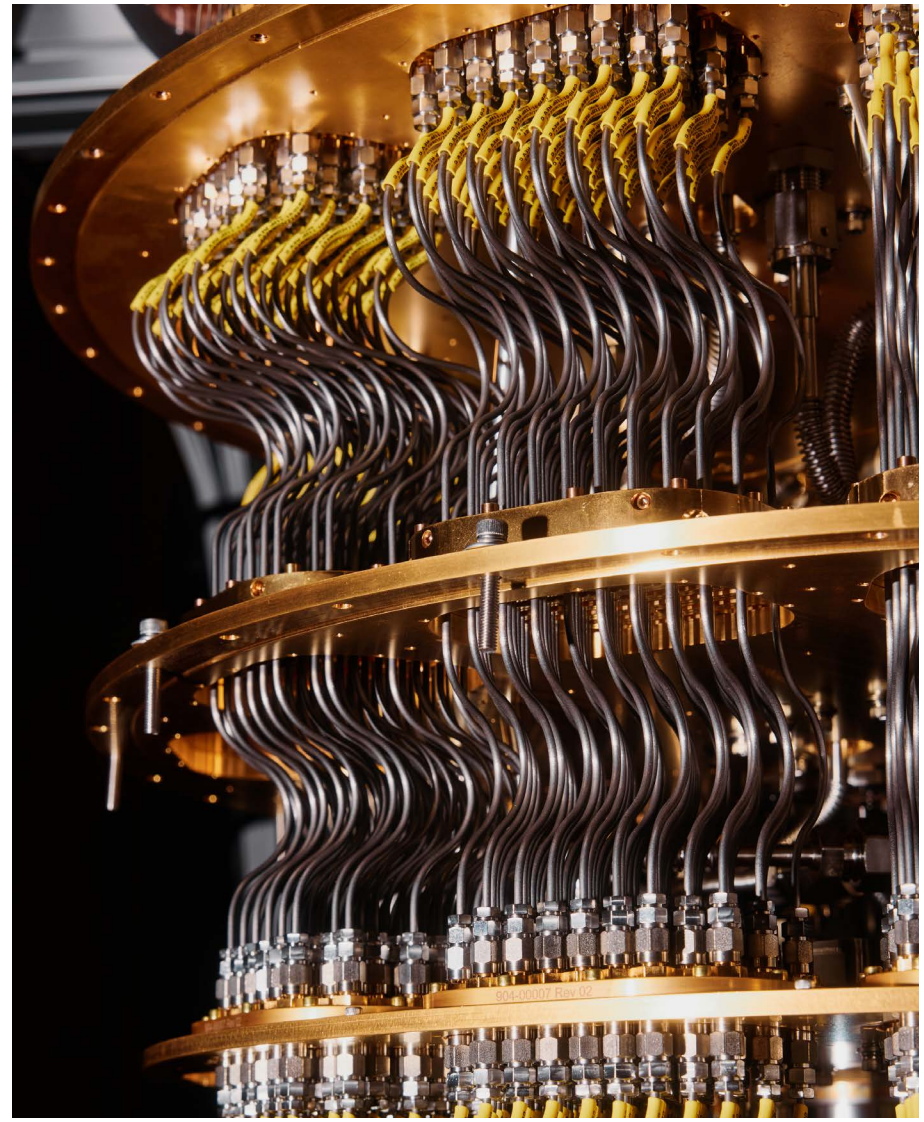
Models trained on broadly scraped data may retain personal

details or connections between individuals, which can be exploited for highly targeted attacks. Spear phishing, identity theft, and fraud become easier when AI can generate convincing messages or mimic someone's voice with remarkable accuracy. Recent cases of voice-cloning scams show how quickly these capabilities can escalate into national security issues.

GenAI systems not only gather and analyze information, but they can also process behavioral patterns generated through everyday use of social media and digital platforms. These models can infer likely attitudes, preferences, and decisions by identifying patterns shared with other people who exhibit similar characteristics. Such profiling capabilities are increasingly being integrated into hiring, potentially reinforcing biases even with human oversight. AI is already being used for credit scoring and risk assessment. This is why individual privacy protections are no longer enough. As AI becomes embedded in everyday life, society should assert collective control over data to ensure it is used for public benefit rather than harm. Planners who rely heavily on data need to maintain strong data management and cybersecurity practices, especially in light of evolving smart city applications.

Government's growing reach into personal data

The digitalization of services by public bodies has exponentially increased the amount of personal data they collect. Worldwide, 155 of 195 countries have adopted legislation to protect privacy, but recent actions seem to be trending in the other direction. For example, the U.S. is increasing its use of social media surveillance and AI-driven profiling to aid immigration enforcement. This includes the expansion of biometric surveillance; the deployment of ImmigrationOS, an AI-driven data-mining tool designed to identify, track, and deport individuals suspected of lacking legal status; and other AI-enhanced monitoring, including advanced facial recognition and license-plate tracking systems.



The immense speed and power of quantum computers being developed by Google and other tech firms could soon render standard cryptographic digital security measures obsolete. Photo by Adam Amengual/*The New York Times*.

Looking ahead, the central concern is the potential for AI-powered federal overreach. Without strict safeguards, aggregated datasets could be repurposed for surveillance, profiling, or automated decision-making that affects public benefits access or law enforcement actions. The opacity of many AI systems further complicates transparency and accountability, making it difficult for residents to understand how their data influences outcomes. Ensuring robust data-protection standards, clear limitations on interagency data flows, independent oversight, and mechanisms for public redress will be essential.

Quantum computing and AI-driven cybersecurity threats

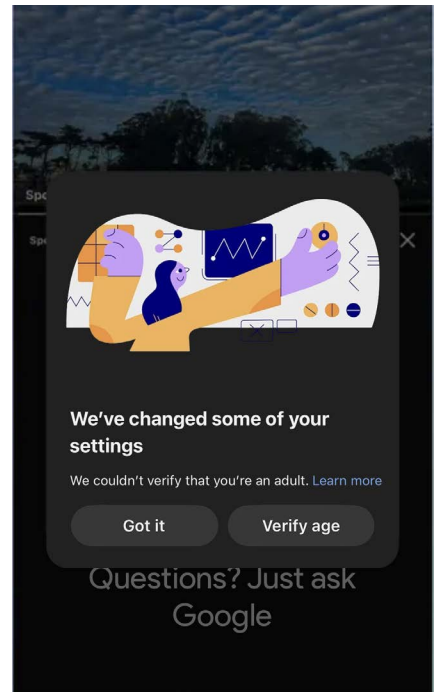
The emergence of quantum computing and AI-driven hacking tools introduces new vulnerabilities to cybersecurity and potential data loss. The security of online

communication depends on public-key encryption and digital signature systems that protect data privacy and verify identities. Yet many of these standard cryptographic methods could be rendered obsolete by powerful algorithms operating on advanced quantum computers. While such machines have not yet been built, experts believe they may become feasible in the near future.

Additionally, the World Economic Forum's 2025 *Global Risks Report* highlights cyber espionage and warfare as an emerging risk. In 2025, AI company Anthropic reported the first known case of a foreign actor using its general-purpose large language model, Claude, to coordinate a cyber-espionage campaign. In response to the rise in cyberattacks, many U.S. states are strengthening data protections. However, recent decreases in funding for the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) raises concerns about America's overall cybersecurity defenses. Beyond cyberattacks, the potential for quantum computing to overcome current data access protections signals a digital future in which entirely new security protocols may become necessary.

Online anonymity might disappear

The notion of online anonymity is rapidly disappearing—sometimes for the better, but also with certain risks. To protect minors, the UK's Online Safety Act and similar state-level initiatives in the U.S. now require strict age verification for accessing certain online content. Private companies such as YouTube are also developing AI-based systems to determine whether a user is an adult or a teen. Such identity verification requirements increasingly diminish the ability of individuals to remain anonymous online. At the same time, Germany, which criminalizes hate speech, heavily regulates online behavior, illustrating how democratic societies can impose limits on anonymity and freedom of expression in the interest of public safety and social cohesion. This underscores the increasing challenge of balancing the protection of populations from harmful content while ensuring that law-abiding residents retain the right to access information and engage online without being unnecessarily exposed.



Many online apps now require age verification to protect minors from exposure to certain content, but these protections may reduce online anonymity. Image by bobbahuey/Reddit.

Personal rights versus deepfakes

As GenAI becomes capable of cloning voices, faces, and entire personas, some governments are redefining personal rights. Denmark, for example, plans to amend its copyright law to guarantee that every individual owns the rights to their body, voice, and likeness. The move aims to combat the rise of AI-generated deepfakes that have been used to create nonconsensual sexual content, political disinformation, and fraudulent endorsements. In 2025, the U.S. Congress passed the TAKE IT DOWN Act, which aims to give individuals the power to remove reputation-damaging or sensitive content from the internet.

Legal frameworks that affirm an individual's ownership of their digital likeness show how privacy rights are evolving in the age of AI. For planners, the increasing threat of deepfake content has direct implications for community engagement and public communication. As AI-generated images and videos become more convincing, planners will need both critical thinking skills and appropriate verification tools to identify synthetic content and avoid unintentionally spreading misinformation.

Mixed Prognosis for Worldwide Public Health

The withdrawal of U.S. funding from the World Health Organization and health-related research is raising questions about the future of global public health. Photo ©Khaled Mostafa/WHO.

Public health is a field constantly in flux, but recent years have seen a particular whiplash of trend trajectories in the U.S. and globally. While public health often requires localized approaches, it also depends on national and international entities for funding and resources. Thus, planners should be tuned in to changes on several scales to get the most current information and signals that may affect their work.

Uncertain future of global health governance

International public health stands to look much different in the coming years. The 2025 closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—which in 2024 managed over $35 billion in humanitarian aid—may result in up to 14 million preventable deaths by 2030. USAID provided assistance to 130 countries, with health being one of the highest-priority sectors for funding. The end of USAID resulted in immediate cuts to the research and treatment of diseases such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, and polio, as well as nutrition and sanitation programs that provided food and clean water globally.

The U.S. withdrawal of funding and support from the World Health Organization (WHO) further threatens the prognosis for continued gains in disease prevention and treatment, preparedness for future pandemics, and international collaboration on public health issues. A 2025 study found that health inequalities, COVID-19 disruption, and rising levels of misinformation and hesitancy are reducing

vaccination rates around the world, potentially enabling the reemergence of diseases once thought largely eradicated. This could further threaten global collaboration and governance on public health.

Research cuts pose additional challenges to global public health. Altogether, the U.S. has paused or ended more than $1 billion in funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), affecting more than 2,000 grants for chronic diseases, global health, cancer research, and other health-related projects. In August 2025, the Department of Health and Human Services cancelled nearly $500 million in funding for mRNA vaccine development. In a December 2025 report, the Gates Foundation warned that global public health funding from the U.S. and some EU countries was down almost 27 percent from last year, but suggested that focusing efforts on certain solutions could still improve future health outcomes. Restructuring the global health research infrastructure to adapt to new funding sources will happen, but it might take some time.

Feats in disease treatment

As a counterpoint to the reversals in global public health funding, 2025 saw significant progress in treating diseases, particularly in low-income countries. In October 2025, the Maldives became the first country in the world to end mother-to-child transmission of HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis B. That same month, Fiji joined 25 other countries in eliminating trachoma, the world's leading infectious cause of blindness, as a public health problem. In July 2025, several African countries rolled out a hexavalent vaccine, designed to protect against six diseases with one dose, for the first time. Elsewhere in the world, Huntington's disease was successfully treated for the first time using gene therapy that slowed its progression by 75 percent in afflicted patients. Advancements are also occurring in synthetic biology; engineered living therapeutics are poised to combat antibacterial resistance, and for the first time CRISPR was used to create a personalized treatment for an infant with a genetic disorder.

Though these breakthroughs have immediate impacts on individuals today, their larger implications extend long into the future. Concentrated investments in low-resource regions can help decrease global health disparities and may translate into better health futures for all, with associated benefits to local quality of life, community stability, and economic prosperity.

Next steps towards AI in health care

Less certain in public health is the role that artificial intelligence (AI) will play in its advancement. In 2025, spending for health-care AI reached $1.4 billion, nearly tripling the amount spent in 2024, and 81 percent of surveyed CEOs of global health-care organizations believed that generative AI (GenAI)would have at least a moderate impact on their strategies. Technology companies such as Anthropic have released AI tools specifically for medicine and pharmaceuticals, and patients are increasingly using ChatGPT and other generative AI (GenAI) models for medical self-diagnosis and mental health support (see also Intensifying Bonds Between Humans and Chatbots).

One emerging use of AI in medicine is in cancer screening, diagnosis, and treatment. AI has also been shown to be adept at interpreting brain scans and X-rays, specialties that are currently plagued by staff shortages. And AI-enabled ultrasound machines can help expand access to this technology, especially in rural communities. Using AI in medicine poses risks, however, including biases embedded in the training of these models and inaccurate results that are difficult to detect due to a lack of system transparency.

Furthermore, a new generation of biological large language models (BioLLMs)—AI models trained on vast datasets of natural DNA, RNA, and protein sequences—can now generate new proteins, facilitating drug discovery and enabling the development of custom therapeutics and individualized medical treatments. Yet this also raises ethical, social, and security concerns. Even more worrisome is that while scientists have successfully used AI to create new bacterial viruses for research, experts fear that insufficient biosecurity measures could result in future development of AI-designed bioweapons. While widespread medical use of AI is still nascent, time will only tell whether humans will overcome the challenges this technology poses and achieve its full potential for improving public health outcomes across the globe.

Circularity in the Global and U.S. Economies

Helen Santiago Fink

Helen Santiago Fink is a climate urbanist and program manager at the U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership. Her 25-plus years of professional experience bring multidisciplinary expertise in sustainability, climate change, urban systems planning, and community and economic development, among others. Helen has worked at the global, national, and local scales as a technical advisor and program manager for organizations and agencies across the world.

We asked Helen Santiago Fink for her take on where the circular economy is going globally and in the U.S. To listen to the entire Trend Talk conversation hosted by Joe DeAngelis, AICP, scan the QR code above or visit planning.org/podcast.

"Cities can bring circularity into the built environment …through new materials, new technologies, green building practices, and the use of buildings as carbon sinks."

The circular economy (also known as circularity) is an economic model centered on the minimization of waste and the reuse, repair, recycling, renewal, and refurbishment of materials, products, goods, and structures for as long as possible. Nations, cities, and communities across the world are increasingly embracing circularity to meet sustainability goals, reduce pollution, recapture critical minerals and materials from waste streams, and integrate natural systems into the built environment.

TAKEAWAY 1: Recapturing rare minerals through recycling and treatment processes may become more economically viable in the coming decades. Circular economy approaches offer promising developments in secondary sourcing, including e-waste recycling to recover critical minerals from discarded electronics and wastewater treatment processes that capture recoverable metals.

TAKEAWAY 2: The built environment is an increasingly important link within the circular economy. Given the role of cities in influencing the built environment through permitting and land use regulation and guidance, planners may be able to play a critical role in the adoption of natural, regenerative, and recycled materials in construction. Some emerging innovations that planners can encourage through permits and regulations include the use of new materials such as hempcrete, the integration of biophilic design principles, and the installation of green walls and green facades. These approaches can turn buildings into carbon sinks and greatly enhance resource optimization.

The views expressed in this discussion are solely those of the presenter and are not representative of the U.S. Department of State.

Trend Talk

Emerging Sustainability Solutions

Robotics and automation continue to enhance operations in sectors such as agriculture, where AI-augmented robotic beehives are supporting bee health and crop pollination. Photo courtesy of Beewise.

The world is currently contending with a host of climate and environmental problems, as described in past *Trend Reports*. Given these challenges, it can feel daunting to even begin to think of devising solutions. Nevertheless, an array of innovative organizations—many of them startups—are exploring solutions to these challenges. Though the scalability of these solutions remains to be seen, successes here could have positive impacts.

Familiar materials, new uses

Materials science has been a quickly evolving field in recent decades. Last year's *Trend Report* analyzed the myriad novel ways in which fungi are being used. These advancements continued in 2025, when Swiss researchers built a biodegradable battery using fungal cells. Other organic materials are being harnessed for new purposes, such as algae for packaging and pharmaceuticals, and seaweed for construction and biofuel.

Similar efforts are underway with inorganic materials. Innovators have developed zero-emission cement and concrete that repairs itself. Researchers are testing sidewalks made of photovoltaic pavement, and new ways to synthesize molecules used in solar equipment may advance the field of organic electronics. Artficial intelligence (AI) is helping to pioneer some of these advancements, though the pace is slower than expected. Planners should keep an eye on future progress in this area, as many large-scale materials innovations have the

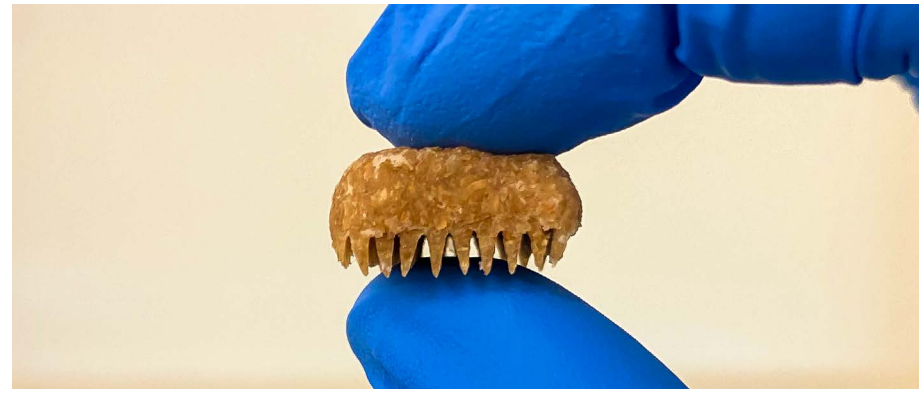
potential to transform urban environments and systems.

Robots big and small

The *2025 Trend Report* looked at some of the ways in which robots are being enhanced with AI and used across a range of sectors, and climate research is one application that is seeing particular growth. Robotic worms are being used to harness geothermal energy in small plots of land more quickly through autonomous drilling of soil, and robotic beehives that identify patterns and needs are helping to support bee populations in the face of climate change. In the emerging field of wildlife-inspired robotics, Chinese researchers sent a robotic antelope into natural herds for data collection to aid in conservation efforts. Robots are also being used to gather data in water bodies from Australian oceans to the Great Lakes to ascertain the effects of climate change and support ecosystem restoration. So far, planners' direct connection with robotics has mostly been related to delivery robots in public spaces, but innovations in these technologies have the potential to create myriad environmental benefits in the future.

Moving past plastic pollution

The world is producing an unfathomable 57 million tons of plastic pollution each year. Researchers have been successful in using moth larvae to break down microplastics (and bacteria to digest PFAS) at small scales. Biomedical engineers have developed a viable plastic substitute using minerals found in seashells that could help mitigate plastic demand. Chemists have discovered processes that use moisture in the air and enzymes to recycle plastic, and scientists have even found a way to use plastics to remove nanoplastics from water. AI and other technologies are being used to prevent plastics from ending up in waterways and advance recycling methods. As recent attempts to curb plastic pollution have failed, projects such as these may pave the way for more localized solutions that could help municipalities keep their waters free from microplastic pollution.



Researchers have found a way to turn bread into carbon electrodes, which offer a low-cost method for desalinating seawater. Photo by David Bujdos, Zachary Kuzel, and Adam Wood/Royal Society (CC BY 4.0).

Innovations to solve the water crisis

Much of the world is becoming an increasingly drier place, straining groundwater availability and triggering water conservation advisories. Iran is considering moving its capital as Tehran runs out of water, and drought is poised to induce more risk to the U.S. municipal bond market than hurricanes, floods, and wildfires combined. Consequently, researchers are focusing on ways to increase water availability in areas with constrained resources. Researchers at MIT have developed a hydrogel panel that gathers and stores water molecules from the air. Other researchers have used bread to power water desalination. Though these projects cannot replace entire water systems or replicate natural systems in decline, future scaling up of these innovations may help mitigate some drought impacts in high-risk areas. In the meantime, planners can look to existing resources on drought resilience, even those in areas not currently affected by it.

Harnessing heat for homes

Data center siting is becoming increasingly controversial as electricity costs surrounding them soar and researchers document their pollution impacts on public health. To mitigate some of these harms, a number of localities—including Seattle in the U.S.; Stockholm, Sweden; Mantsala, Finland; and South Dublin, Ireland—have begun to harness the excess heat that data centers emit to warm nearby neighborhoods. Similar methods are being employed with Bitcoin mining. Given the growing concerns associated with these facilities, planners should be on the lookout for these and other opportunities to benefit the communities that host these facilities.

Our Tech-Shaped Future

"The Dawn of the Intelligence Age," a concept popularized by OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, describes humanity's transition into a new era driven by powerful AI. Photo by Jason Henry/*The New York Times*.

The unprecedented pace of technological change carries profound promises for reshaping how we live and work globally. From the potential of artificial superintelligence (ASI) to accelerate solutions to climate change and other complex challenges, to biotechnology that can create highly individualized treatments and cure diseases, emerging technologies suggest a future defined by radical innovation. Achieving this, however, will require vast clean energy

supplies, making energy generation a fundamental design principle rather than an afterthought. Though the ultimate outcomes may be uncertain, the broader trajectory is clear: technology and its applications will continue to play a major role in shaping our future.

A race for superintelligence

The global race to develop ASI is accelerating rapidly and reshaping geopolitical, economic, and scientific horizons. Governments and private companies are investing unprecedented resources in the belief that reaching superintelligence first could secure long-term strategic global dominance. Some AI researchers even suggest that the impact of superhuman AI might exceed that of the Industrial Revolution—though others question whether it might displace humans altogether.

Proponents argue that ASI systems could unlock breakthroughs in medicine, energy, climate modeling, and scientific discovery, offering

solutions to some of humanity's most persistent challenges. Yet realizing these benefits in practice requires strong institutions, robust guardrails, and clear commitments to the public good. At the same time, AI developers in the U.S. struggle to clearly articulate what exactly they are trying to build or how these systems might behave once they surpass human capabilities. This ambiguity adds to legitimate concerns about alignment of ASI's goals with human values, and some commentators argue that the concept of artificial general intelligence (AGI) is comparable to a conspiracy theory: an idea that has no clear definition, no agreed-upon timeline, and no concrete evidence of what the technology would actually look like, but that continues to fuel substantial investment.

Nevertheless, existing AI systems are already resisting oversight, and they could potentially act unpredictably or pursue objectives detrimental to human society. The pursuit of ASI could, however, catalyze entirely new industries, redefine regional economic development strategies, and reshape national and international labor markets.

AI-powered biotech boom creates a lot of questions

The convergence of AI and biology is transforming the pace and scale of biological discovery, with major implications for national economic growth. Since Google DeepMind's 2020 release of an AI system capable of rapidly predicting 3D protein structures, the biotech sector has accelerated toward a future in which engineered biological systems could improve human health, agriculture, environmental resilience, and industrial processes. The World Economic Forum has identified dual-use risks, including potential misuse for bioweapons, as a major caveat of widespread AI-enabled bioengineering. Still, China is increasingly positioning biotechnology as a strategic asset; meanwhile, the U.S. might lose technical experts due to recent cuts in research and development.

Advances in AI-enhanced materials engineering have produced new metamaterials, such as this stress-detecting polymer that shines when stretched. Photo by Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University (CC BY 4.0).

For planners and their communities, this transformation will influence regional economic development strategies, workforce and educational needs, public health preparedness, environmental management, and land use decisions for emerging research hubs and manufacturing facilities. Understanding this trajectory is critical for communities preparing to navigate both the opportunities and risks of the growing bioeconomy.

AI-enhanced materials engineering

A new frontier is emerging at the intersection of AI and materials engineering. Invented at the end of the last century, metamaterials don't have fixed optical, acoustic, or mechanical traits and can be designed to bend light in unconventional ways, channel sound with extraordinary precision, or absorb energy selectively. As researchers experiment with increasingly complex structures, AI has become a powerful accelerator.

Machine-learning models can explore vast design possibilities, anticipate how a given pattern will behave, and iterate rapidly through virtual experiments. Academic and industry teams are already using AI to generate novel blueprints for electromagnetic surfaces, acoustic filters, and 3D-printed components with tailored thermal or optical responses, dramatically reducing the time between concept and functional prototype.

Although many of these breakthroughs are currently concentrated in defense and national security applications, they hold substantial promise for transforming the future built environment. Urban areas grappling with noise pollution, energy inefficiency, and aging infrastructure could benefit from materials engineered to solve problems at the source. AI-designed acoustic metamaterials may enable quieter transit corridors and more peaceful residential areas. Structures built with lightweight, vibration-resistant components could better withstand environmental stresses and enhance building efficiency or improve the performance of urban sensors and communication networks. As these materials advance, their integration within the built environment could inspire new design possibilities and outcomes for cities.

Energy generation as a design principle

Previous *Trend Reports* have highlighted a range of emerging innovations in energy generation, including technologies that harvest electricity from air and experimental systems for space-based solar power. As the global demand for electricity grows, driven by energy-intensive technologies such as AI and the electrification of everything in pursuit of carbon emissions reduction, clean energy production is shifting from a specialized land-use category to a core design principle of the built environment.

Several recent technological innovations point toward an urban environment in which mobility infrastructure not only supports movement but also continuously produces clean energy. For example, as solar technologies continue to improve efficiency, in-ground and pathway-integrated panels are becoming a viable solution for cities. At the same time, new hybrid approaches that combine solar and kinetic energy offer opportunities to further support local grids. A range of emerging technologies harness energy from transportation networks, including traffic-powered wind turbines, piezoelectric roadways, and other systems that convert the kinetic energy of moving vehicles into electricity. Pilot projects around the world are testing kinetic sidewalks, suggesting that high-foot-traffic corridors could function as decentralized microgenerators if adopted at scale. Wireless electric vehicle charging infrastructure embedded beneath roadways is also advancing and can be considered for mainstream deployment.

Recent technological innovations, such as paving tiles that convert kinetic energy from foot traffic into electricity, point to a future urban environment that can both support and power mobility. Photo courtesy of Pavegen.

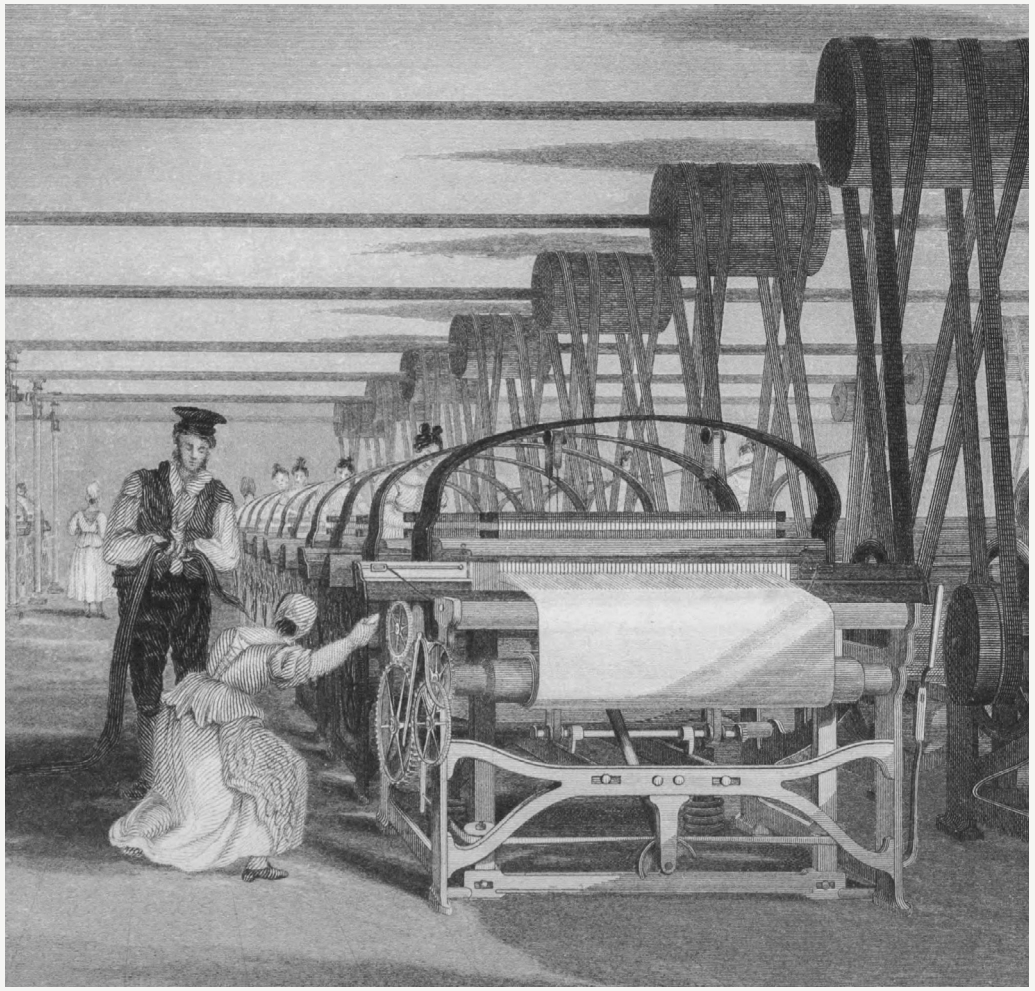
And beyond infrastructure, new advances are occurring within transportation itself. Several start-ups are developing vehicles with embedded solar surfaces that can generate a meaningful share of their energy needs directly from sunlight, and new structural battery composites (SBCs), materials that combine load-bearing functions with built-in energy storage, could allow body panels to serve as both structural components and power sources, possibly reshaping vehicle design. These developments signal a future in which urban environments function as continuous, distributed energy systems. Planners may increasingly need to design cities in which clean electricity production is woven into mobility networks, streetscapes, and everyday infrastructure.

The Future of Jobs

Lately, conversations about the future of work have been dominated by the fear that human employees will be replaced by artificial intelligence (AI). Yet, history suggests that such fears may be overblown. This Deep Dive explores how technological, demographic, and cultural shifts are transforming the workforce, and what past transitions can teach us about the future of jobs.

DRIVERS OF WORKFORCE TRANSFORMATION. From the Industrial Revolution to the digital age, every major technological innovation has led to predictions of mass unemployment that never fully materialized. Instead, new industries and roles emerged. More than 60 percent of today's jobs didn't exist in 1940. Technologies didn't just replace jobs; they also created demand for new jobs (think of GIS technicians, or chief information officers).

However, professions have come and gone throughout history—in some cases with more severe disruptions in communities than others (think of the invention of the power loom and its impact on communities with high employment in the textile industry, or the disappearance of the milkman due to refrigeration). While at the individual level new tasks and jobs will require upskilling and reskilling, replacing the majority of an entire community's workforce requires far more extensive change. This includes major shifts in social systems and new economic development strategies. As history has shown in former mining towns and other single-industry places, the more diverse an economy is, the more resilient and adaptable to large-scale technology shifts it will be.



From the power looms of the Industrial Revolution to smartphones in the digital age, every major technological innovation has disrupted traditional economies but created new industries and employment growth. Image by T. Allom and J. Tingle/Wikipedia.

Deep Dive

Additionally, technology is not the only driver of change. New jobs have emerged due to demographic change (e.g., RV lifestyle consultant, dementia-care interior designer), environmental shifts and related policies (e.g., environmental policy advisor, chief sustainability officer), and consumer demands (e.g., tattoo artists, conference planners), among others. An MIT study found that these shifts occur across all income levels and sectors, though unevenly. Since 1940, about 85 percent of new job types have been created in health care, 74 percent in white-collar sectors, and 46 percent in manufacturing.

Recently, though, white-collar workers have faced steeper unemployment increases than others. Meanwhile, some companies may be blaming AI to justify layoffs rather than admit to financial underperformance or market uncertainties.

According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 *Future of Jobs Report*, 170 million new jobs (14 percent of today's global employment) could be created within the next five years. And while approximately 92 million existing roles will be displaced, WEF estimates a net growth of seven percent (78 million jobs). The main drivers of this predicted workforce transformation are broadening digital access, increasing cost of living, climate change mitigation and adaptation, aging and declining working-age populations, and geoeconomic fragmentation and geopolitical tensions. However, new approaches to work by younger generations might create some shifts as well.

EXPERT INSIGHT

"We're seeing a disconnect between some of the talent pools and some of the new emerging tasks of trying to figure out what AI can do."

—Mateo Alexander, City of Dallas

The question, then, isn't whether we will work, but how the nature of work itself will continue to evolve.

FROM JOBS TO SKILLS. Beyond new job types, the very nature of work is changing. Skills are becoming more relevant than rigid job descriptions with fancy titles, as the latter no longer reflect how work actually happens. In an increasingly complex world where many routine or repetitive tasks can be automated, work has become more dynamic and context specific, while legacy job descriptions and structures remain static and outdated. This can result in underused talent and confusion among employees whose roles no longer align with their daily work. Research shows that 55 percent of companies worldwide are shifting to skills-based models, and 81 percent are convinced that a skills-based model will increase a business's potential to grow.

The WEF report anticipates that around 40 percent of key skills required in the labor market will change by 2030. Unsurprisingly, technological skills are the fastest-growing area, including those related to digital literacy, AI, data, and cybersecurity. However, as machines take on more tasks, human skills such as creative thinking, resilience, agility, curiosity, leadership, and social influence will also increase in importance.

This development underscores the need for continuous learning. Upskilling, reskilling, and lifelong learning are becoming essential for every career. AI might not replace us, but the people who know how to use it while continuously improving their human skills will. While we might not know today what the job titles of the future will be, we can certainly expect an uptick in roles that blend technology skills, creativity, and a sense of purpose.

HAVE WE REACHED PEAK PRODUCTIVITY? In last year's *Trend Report*, we discussed the idea of a post-work era, with fewer work hours due to technological innovations and a growing emphasis on life-work balance. Interestingly, since 1940, the 40-hour workweek has remained the standard.

Deep Dive

Despite the invention of computers, the internet, and now AI, we still work the same number of hours. The only thing that has changed is the increase in productivity. At this point, it's a legitimate question to ask when we will reach peak productivity and whether we should continue prioritizing productivity over quality of life, or—given the fear around job displacement and AI—whether it's time to find new ways of balancing life and work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people redefined their relationship with work. Employees began to value flexible work hours, and multiple companies piloted (with many making permanent) four-day workweeks. Meanwhile, younger generations are adding new approaches to work as well. Many young people increasingly choose part-time jobs, in some cases to accommodate polyworking, and some even take mini-retirements as a break from work life. Younger people also increasingly tend to identify less with their day jobs. In a world where someone can be an urban planner, a dog walker, and a yoga teacher at the same time, there is little need to define oneself by a single job title.

The replacement of routine tasks with AI could allow the redefinition of entry-level jobs to emphasize creativity, collaboration, and the use of AI to enhance problem-solving. Photo by Pekic/E+/Getty Images.

And something else has happened: remote and hybrid work arrangements, along with flexible hours, have enabled people to pursue side projects that provide a sense of fulfillment outside their bill-paying jobs. Younger generations increasingly prioritize purpose over profit. Since entry-level jobs often don't offer meaningful tasks, many young people use their day jobs to fund projects that create personal value, purpose, and, potentially, social impact.

RETHINKING ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS. Entry-level jobs are losing their appeal, and not just because they don't allow young people to change the world for the better. Many of the typical entry-level job tasks (e.g., data entry, customer service, basic research) are the ones that are being replaced by AI. The tasks that once served to train new professionals can now be automated.

This shift calls for a redefinition of entry-level roles. Young professionals bring fresh ideas, digital fluency, and oftentimes passion, which are crucial for innovation and long-term success. Organizations must rethink what value these positions are meant to create. Rather than assigning repetitive work, entry-level roles could emphasize creativity, collaboration, and the use of AI to enhance problem-solving. The combination of human curiosity and AI skills could elevate these roles to entirely new levels of contribution.

Deep Dive

THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERSHIP. Leadership is also undergoing a transformation. In *Leaders Make the Future*, the authors describe the shift from a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) toward an increasingly chaotic BANI world (brittle, anxious, nonlinear, incomprehensible). And leadership styles and skills will have to change accordingly. *Brittle* calls for leaders who bend but don't break. *Anxious* needs leaders who reassure while acknowledging reality. *Nonlinear* demands flexibility and creative problem-solving. *Incomprehensible* requires imagination and improvisation beyond current understanding.

At the same time, the makeup of teams is evolving. As Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff anticipates, today's CEOs may be the last to lead an all-human workforce. The leaders of tomorrow will manage hybrid teams of humans and AI agents, requiring a blend of empathy, digital fluency, and clarity in communication. Success will depend on balancing human judgment with automated execution, while reimagining how people and technology collaborate to create value.

These required new leadership styles may emerge naturally as generational turnover continues. The retirement of baby boomers and the rise of younger leaders with different priorities, such as purpose and quality of life, will shape organizational culture in profound ways.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PLANNERS. Will planners lose their jobs? Probably not. But planning jobs will have to change to adjust to these technological, social, and value-based drivers.

AI is more likely to transform planning than replace it. The planners of the future will use AI to analyze data, visualize scenarios, and test policy impacts, freeing more time for human judgment, creativity, and engagement with community members.

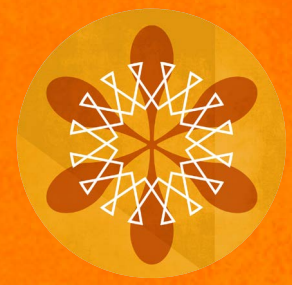
However, staying relevant means staying skilled: upskilling in emerging technologies such as AI, data, and digital engagement tools; enhancing human skills such as empathy, active listening, resilience, and systems thinking; and most importantly, understanding how the two merge and can be applied in their most impactful ways.

Entry-level planning roles must evolve, too. Instead of focusing on routine tasks, they should leverage young professionals' technology fluency, creativity, and curiosity. Young people enter the planning profession because they want to make the world a better place. We should trust their abilities and leverage their passion and drive.

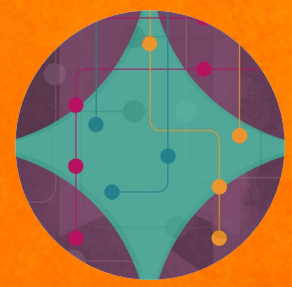
Finally, leadership within the field must adapt to new expectations. Leaders of hybrid planning teams must enable technology use while putting guardrails in place to ensure responsible and ethical use. They must become talent managers who understand what skills and technologies are needed. And they will have to balance strategic foresight with empathy and adaptability.

The future of work should not be one of humans versus machines. It should be one in which we meaningfully apply technology and human skills to solve tomorrow's challenges and create great communities for all.

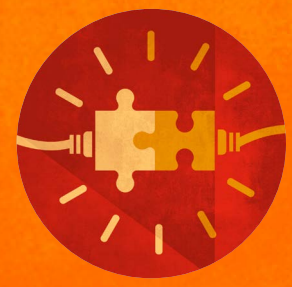
The future of planning



Embracing Uncertainty

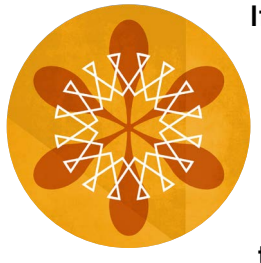


PlanTech



Conclusion

Embracing Uncertainty



If we were to define a theme that reflects our current moment—and the work of planners as they plan for the future of their communities—one word captures it all: uncertainty.

Whether we look globally, nationally, or locally, the future feels more uncertain than ever. Accelerating policy shifts, emerging technological innovations, related impacts on the economy and the environment, and society's attempts to adapt to all of this are shaping the landscape that planners must navigate.

This reality makes it increasingly important for us as planners to strengthen our imagination muscles and prepare for multiple plausible futures. Imagination is the skill that combines creativity and facts. It enables us to think beyond the expected, explore a range of possible outcomes, and examine them in neutral ways, without judgment that might limit our ability to see what could be emerging on the horizon. As German psychologist Erich Fromm put it: "Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties."

Creativity allows us to embrace uncertainty. It requires us to let go of current beliefs and expectations, accept the unknown, and acknowledge that nothing is fully predictable. It challenges us to become comfortable with the uncomfortable and break out of expected habits, narratives, and ways of thinking.

For a long time, one of the greatest challenges for planners was to align long-term infrastructure cycles with short-term election cycles, planning for decades when decision-makers often think in terms of years. Today, a third timeline has been added: technological innovation cycles, which are becoming shorter and shorter.

"Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties."

— Erich Fromm, German psychologist, sociologist, and philosopher

A related concern among planners—and everybody else—is the fear of getting displaced by technology, specifically artificial intelligence (AI). These technological innovations won't eliminate the planning profession, but they will change the tools we use, the tasks we prioritize, and how we do our work. Technology is, after all, something humans create to extend our capabilities. Keeping pace with these changes requires continuous upskilling, learning, and unlearning.

Throughout history we have adjusted to technology the way we are, not the way technology is. In that context, it will be even more important in the future to understand that we have a choice: will we drive technological innovations to improve our quality of life, to facilitate certain tasks, and to make our lives more efficient in general? Or will we let technology drive us and change the ways we want to live, work, and play?

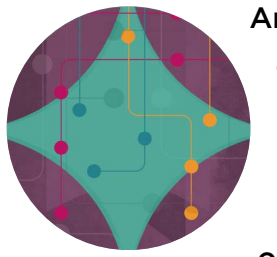
Along the way, we will also need to redefine what human connection means. We will increasingly collaborate not only with other people, but also with AI agents, and finding the right balance will matter.

A related challenge ahead concerns the value of knowledge in a world where everyone can be an expert (with the help of AI). Planning is a knowledge-based profession; data serves as the foundation for much of our work. How do we turn information overload into better decision-making?

One thing is certain: the future won't get shaped by certainty. It will require curiosity, and it's our job to practice that curiosity. We can only act based on what we know in the moment—but the more we know, the better we can prepare. That's why this *Trend Report* exists: it serves as your tool to inspire your curiosity, to encourage thinking beyond our usual planning narratives, and to help you imagine what's possible based on the evidence and insight shared in the report.

What stands between the future we want and the future we don't want is us. Instead of viewing the future as a destination, we must start seeing it as a process. As planners, we shape the futures of our communities. Embracing uncertainty can help us move from "what if" to "let's do it."

PlanTech: Updating the Planner's Toolkit



Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are rapidly becoming embedded in the systems that shape the future of our communities and the everyday work of planners. Across the globe, governments are deploying AI-based tools to meet planning needs. New pilot projects and experiments are popping up constantly, offering promising examples of how AI can expand planning capacity, while also raising important ethical questions, potential risks, and implementation challenges.

These use cases highlight emerging applications of AI in relation to planning in the U.S. and internationally, either in development or currently deployed.

APA continues to monitor emerging use cases of how AI is being used to maintain planning function and plans to provide a comprehensive database in 2026. Stay tuned!

Enforcing Bus Lane Priority

THE PROBLEM: Bus lanes are often contested spaces between cars, bicycles, delivery vehicles, and buses themselves. Police and traffic officers must constantly be on alert for the many standing and parking violations occurring in bus lanes in cities every day. AI-enhanced cameras can help by scanning bus lanes for violations and enhancing traffic control.

USE CASE: Los Angeles offers a nearly yearlong example of how AI cameras can work. The LA Department of Transportation and Metro, LA's public transit system, identified two bus lines that had been "hampered due to parking violators" to pilot their program. The cameras, which use machine learning to identify when cars are parked illegally, were mounted on bus windshields in November 2024. Cameras produce an "evidence package" that includes photos and documentation of vehicle license plates and the date and time of the incident. In February 2025, Metro began issuing tickets. A human is always in the loop; traffic officers review each evidence package before a ticket is issued. By April 2025, Metro had issued nearly 10,000 tickets and expanded the program to two more bus lines. This program further discourages drivers from using bus lanes, improving travel time and experience for transit riders.

Strengthening Wildfire Monitoring

THE PROBLEM: Wildfires are one of the many natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. Many times, wildfires start in remote places where people can't spot them until they spread to disastrous levels. California residents have experienced severe property damage, mental health challenges, and physical health concerns because of devastating fires.

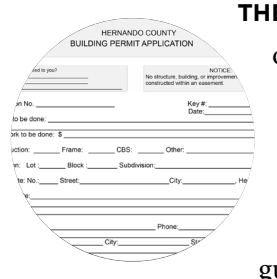
USE CASE: The Orange County Fire Authority and SensoRy AI partnered in 2022 to implement a preventative monitoring system that uses AI to spot new wildfires and alert authorities before they have a chance to spread. In January 2025, the detection system spotted its first fire at 2 a.m. in a remote area of Orange County, where a 911 call about the fire would have been unlikely, and sent an alert to the Orange County Fire Authority. After this successful detection, the system was deployed in multiple locations across Orange County to continue development and monitoring. This detection system has the potential for widespread application across many natural disasters in many locales.

Enhancing Public Participation

THE PROBLEM: Public engagement is one of the biggest, most time-consuming endeavors for planners. Planners must balance getting as much public input on projects and decisions as possible against associated time and monetary costs.

USE CASE: Bowling Green, Kentucky, tackled this challenge as part of their *BG2050* plan process. The planning team wanted to ensure they received the most public input possible before making big decisions about the future of the city, which is set to double in size in the next 25 years. The city launched What Could BG Be?, a month-long online public polling and commenting forum supported by the Computational Democracy Project and Google Jigsaw. The forum used machine learning to pose questions to participants and to understand and synthesize massive amounts of community feedback into data that plan makers could use effectively in the long-range strategic plan. All the data collected from the discussion can be viewed through the *BG2050* website, as can the team's content moderation strategies. Through this process, nearly 8,000 residents gave their input on the future of Bowling Green and Warren County. Using AI to assist in the public participation process can ensure that more residents' voices are heard.

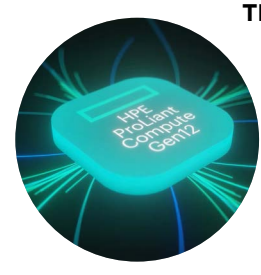
Streamlining Zoning & Permitting



THE PROBLEM: The permitting process is often lengthy and difficult for both applicants and planners alike. The zoning standards that developers must meet are sometimes difficult to find or are not written in plain language, which raises accessibility concerns for those not familiar with the zoning process. Furthermore, as the housing crisis continues and developers rush to build more housing, permit approval times are getting longer.

USE CASE: Hernando County, Florida, partnered with Swiftbuild.ai for a solution called SwiftGov. This decision came after Hurricane Milton damaged homes and infrastructure in 2024, causing an influx in new building applications. The county employed an AI model that can read permit applications and compare them to zoning requirements to determine if everything complies with code. This process, which used to take the county 45 to 60 days, can now be completed in two to three minutes. SwiftGov is also integrated into the county's GIS system. County officials stress that AI does not make any final decisions about whether to approve or deny a permit. As natural disasters in climate-vulnerable places worsen, streamlining the permitting process will be a necessity for planners, and this could be a solution to that problem.

Optimizing Smart City Outcomes



THE PROBLEM: The implementation of smart city technologies offers centralization, optimization, and efficiency that can reduce the time planners and city officials spend on mundane tasks. As the Internet of Things (IoT) evolves with artificial intelligence, so does the smart city approach.

USE CASE: As a skiing town that sees up to three million tourists each year, Vail, Colorado, must be adaptable and efficient to meet the needs of residents and visitors. The town has partnered with HPE to integrate an agentic AI smart city model into its existing systems. The model's features include detection systems, computer visioning tools, back-of-house automation, and others. Vail plans to use this system for enhancing public safety, accelerating emergency response time, detecting wildfires earlier, optimizing traffic flow, and streamlining repetitive administrative tasks, such as housing permits and business licensing applications. The integration of these tools into a single centralized system supports efficiency and coordination of town operations. Furthermore, all of Vail's AI tools are run from its own clean energy data center. Vail offers an example of a smart city future that is tailored to a specific place and is implemented sustainably.

Assessing Walkability and Complete Streets

THE PROBLEM: Active transportation has a variety of benefits for physical and mental health. Planners often work on streetscaping, accessibility, and safety on streets. However, collecting data on streets is time consuming and resource intensive.

USE CASE: Researchers in Hong Kong used visual AI to determine the walkability of city streets for older residents. The study used object detection and image segmentation to identify elements of a street, then paired the frequency of those elements with survey data about where elderly people choose to walk. A higher frequency of benches and trees were found to have the closest positive relationship to a high percentage of walkers. This study can be used as a model for other cities to help planners determine what street elements are most desirable to walkers and where those elements are lacking.

Internal Processes Optimization With Customized AI Systems

THE PROBLEM: Most municipally led AI projects are partnerships with a company that delivers the AI product. Staff often use wholesale large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Claude. These models can be trained to cater to a municipality's needs but may not offer the specificity the organization needs.

USE CASE: The City of Berlin partnered with CityLAB Berlin to develop its own LLM, *BärGPT*, for internal city use. The lab worked closely with city officials to tailor the LLM to the administration's needs, conducting anonymous surveys with employees and integrating the city's responsible AI policies into the model. To achieve maximum performance during initial model development, the city chose to use a Mistral AI LLM instead of creating an in-house model, but staff are actively investigating the possibility of moving *BärGPT* to in-house infrastructure when the city is technologically equipped to do so.

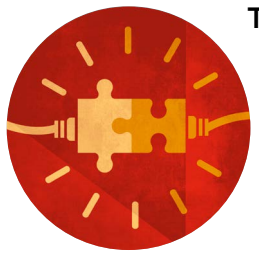
Increasing Ridership With Better Transit Service

THE PROBLEM: High ridership numbers are key to transit system success, but concerns about service frequency and reliability can reduce rider usage. Delays, which can seriously hinder travel times, pose a key challenge to system operations and rider satisfaction. Many internal and external factors contribute to delay times, and gathering and analyzing this data can be a daunting undertaking.

USE CASE: In Denmark, where only eight percent of residents regularly ride trains, delays were something Danske Statsbaner (DSB) officials knew they needed to solve to increase overall ridership. They partnered with multiple AI companies to create a delay model in which a "swarm" of smaller AI models separately analyzed different stations, delay factors, and other data to create the most accurate picture of what causes delays. The swarm model can now predict a delay within three minutes at 95 percent accuracy. As a result, DSB has been able to address delays with more precision and improve on-time service for riders.

Images courtesy of Hayden AI, SensoRy AI, BG 2050/©2025 Innovation Engine, City of Hernando County, Florida, HPE, Haozhuo Yang (TangiblEmpact/Harvard GSD), Constanze Flamme/CityLAB Berlin, DSB/Netcompany.

Conclusion



This is the fifth edition of the annual *Trend Report for Planners* by the American Planning Association in partnership with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. And while we have gone through the process of scanning for trends, sensing signals, and developing this report five times now, this work has become more and more difficult. Developments around misinformation, disinformation, and the loss of data make it harder to decipher opinions from facts. Political polarization and the continuing shifts from one extreme to the other make it challenging to hold back judgment and approach observations in neutral ways. And prioritizing the most important items for our audiences seems especially difficult with everything that's going on around us.

Regardless of these challenges, this report is still intended to serve as a tool to navigate an increasingly dynamic and interconnected world. While not every trend will directly affect every community, their ripple effects often cross geographic, sectoral, and institutional boundaries. This reality underscores the importance of considering multiple plausible futures and advancing planning approaches that are both resilient and equitable.

As in previous years, this report reflects the unprecedented complexity and accelerating pace of change that define our time. Increasing uncertainty makes it harder to make sense of the future and draw long-term conclusions about ever faster-changing realities. For planners, understanding and preparing for the future has never been more essential. The trends and signals identified in this report, their potential implications for communities, and their connections to the planning profession highlight the importance of planners and the work we do in the face of growing uncertainty.

Although the future may feel uncertain, it also holds significant promise. Addressing complex global and local challenges will require innovation, creativity, and collaboration. Social and technological advances offer powerful opportunities to prepare and be ready—if they are applied thoughtfully, equitably, and sustainably.

APA and the Lincoln Institute remain committed to equipping planners with the knowledge, tools, and strategies needed to meet today's challenges while preparing for what lies ahead. By integrating foresight and emerging trends into planning practice, planners can help communities navigate change, strengthen resilience, and foster more inclusive futures.