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Three Essential Questions for Better Planning

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Planning for and with people is a complex and challenging undertaking.

Planning practice spans the social and physical sciences, requiring planners to gain a comprehensive understanding of the many aspects of a proposed topic and offer recommendations for objectively making decisions. The high expectations placed upon our profession for finding and communicating multidisciplinary answers to complicated human questions means that as planners, we must develop savvy political acumen, extensive research and analysis proficiencies, clear and concise writing styles, and advanced facilitation and presentation skills.

We prove ourselves as reliable, valuable professionals. And while the widely used term "the planning process" can mean different things to different planners, the essence of planning for and with people is simple: we want our work to benefit as many people as possible, to negatively impact as few people as possible, and to include as many people as possible.

Figure 1. The three essential planning questions.

What if we as planners addressed these intentions directly across all our work by asking three essential, explicit questions?

Who is helped?
Who is harmed?
Who is missing?

This *PAS Memo* introduces these essential questions and explains how they can create a foundation for good planning practice by better defining and strengthening the "why" for any planning idea. It stresses that we should always have these questions in mind for all our work and offers ways to best ask them throughout a wide range of planning work routines.

Effectively integrating these questions throughout planning practice can enhance the breadth and depth of our developed professional skills. It can also create opportunities for us to take stronger leadership positions in community conversations around more inclusive decision-making, empowering planners to have even more valuable professional roles.

The Essential Questions Explained

We ask versions of these questions all the time, but perhaps not explicitly, intentionally, and often as we might.

Answers arise from seeing and understanding the people we serve more meaningfully. Planners already consider the people who become the end users of our processes, plans, policies, programs, and projects, but asking the essential questions for any planning idea allows us to better recognize the potential impacts of planning outcomes on the people in our communities.

Who Is Helped?

Asking who is helped—identifying the readily apparent users or beneficiaries of a planning proposal—commences the essential question-asking process.

At its core, the field of planning is about helping people. We become planners because we want to help people, and our purpose is to help make great communities a reality for everyone. Knowing who we help when we practice plan-

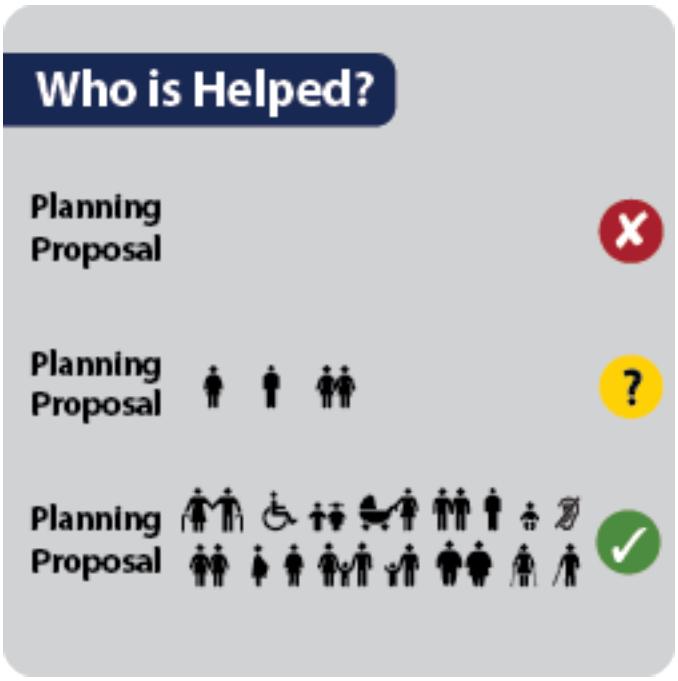

Figure 2. Answering the essential question "Who is helped?" justifies a planning proposal.

Figure 3. Answering the essential question "Who is harmed?" spotlights potential negative outcomes planning proposals have on people.

ning is a tenet of our profession, so we must begin with this question.

Figure 2 illuminates the simple test of asking "Who is helped?" that we can use to double-check the "why" of a planning idea to establish that the idea is good—that is, it helps more than it harms.

If we cannot answer this straightforward question quickly and easily for any proposed planning intervention, the intervention should not be necessary. We can use this information to justify and to build support for a good idea.

Who Is Harmed?

Part of helping the communities we serve means doing our best within the sphere of our influence to prevent them from harm. We can build on our planning profession's ethical expectations in deliberately and actively asking for any planning proposal, "Who is harmed?"

Doing so can lead to building trust among people we work for and with. Purposefully asking who is harmed by a planning idea—directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally—forces a proactive assessment of its potential negative impacts on real people.

Figure 3 shows how identifying who will be harmed by planning work provides reasons for not implementing that work. If an idea negatively impacts people, it lessens the idea's value; the "why" becomes less clear. If we can answer this question quickly and easily, that idea would likely not be worth considering. We can also use the answers to this question to improve a planning idea by mitigating any negative impacts to people we identify when considering who may be harmed by that idea.

To assess the potential negative impacts to as many people as possible to create great communities for all, when answering "Who is harmed?" by a planning proposal, planners should consider people who may be:

- **Financially harmed.** Will someone's livelihood be affected by an incompatible land-use decision, or will an infrastructure proposal negatively impact someone's property?
- **Physically harmed.** Will someone suffer from unsafe or unhealthy physical or environmental conditions caused by the outcomes of a planning proposal?
- **Culturally harmed.** Will someone's ties to the built environment such as important buildings, sites, or landmarks, be negatively impacted?
- **Psychologically harmed.** Will someone's state of mind be impacted, such as having one's home demolished against one's will? Or will someone be subjected to potentially overwhelming new sensory inputs (e.g., blinking lights, loud noises) caused by changes in land uses?
- **Harmed by neglect.** Will groups containing many loud voices be harmed by being ignored? Will people with quieter voices suffer by not being loud enough?

Answers in any of these "harmed" categories should prompt reflection and a reset in our planning strategy. Figure 4 summarizes these categories in a checklist for planners.

Planners can modify our scans by coming up with additional categories to represent specific circumstances for different contexts, always being frank about the potential for harm. Doing so invites authentic and caring engage-

Figure 4. A general checklist planners can use when scanning for people who may be harmed.

ment during the conception of a planning idea, its evolution towards fairer and more equitable outcomes, and its implementation.

Intentionally showing a willingness to acknowledge and understand the potential for harm—including legacies of past planning-related harms both direct and indirect—manifests in the simple, deliberate question, "Who is harmed?" This should be asked of everything we as planners do.

Who Is Missing?

People opposed to or negatively impacted by a planning idea may not be present at a decision-making meeting. They may not be aware of the public hearing—or if they are aware, they may not show up because they do not think they will be allowed to speak, are afraid to speak up, or may not have time or access to attend a meeting. Any variety of barriers can keep someone from participating, and people without connections or power may not be seen or heard.

Asking and answering the final essential question "Who is missing?" brings challenges. Though we know not everyone can or should participate in every planning situation (depending on the context and location of planning proposals), people who can and should be there may be missing from the conversation. But identifying people who want to lend their voice to a planning process or decision can be difficult because we might not think of them, know they are there, or understand the context for why they aren't there.

The following set of scan questions offers a framework to help identify who is missing from the table. Planners should look for people who:

- **Are interested in the subject matter.** We should identify people who could enhance knowledge around topics associated with any planning situation. Updated lists of agencies, organizations, clubs, and other groups associated with planning topics can help. For instance, we should inform and invite local hikers and fishing clubs to provide input on a proposed new park with hiking trails and a large fishing pond.
- **Live in the greater area**. We should work within legal requirements for public notification with an awareness of those farther away who have a right to be informed and engaged. Groups out of the jurisdiction of the range of work may be interested in and have a stake in the proposed idea. For instance, annual vacationers to a beloved beach town, alumni of a college considering a campus reconfiguration, and property owners near to but outside of the required notification area for a transformational land-use development proposal will likely bring valuable input.
- **Have different abilities and needs.** We should continuously scan for people with different physical and mental abilities and health needs who should be at the decision-making table, keeping continuously updated contact lists for reaching out across the spectrum of community members' abilities and special needs and building notification partnerships with agencies that serve various populations.
- **Are diverse in a variety of ways.** We should insist on representation for as many people as possible who represent the demographic makeup of the people we serve. Notification partnerships can include service providers, places of worship, schools, and as many organizations as possible to bring representative voices into planning conversations.

Figure 5. Planners should carefully consider who is missing from the conversation for all planning ideas.

- **Live in communities that are underrepresented or are otherwise disproportionally left out of the conversation.** Every community will have groups who seem to be always left out and are therefore not represented in local decision-making processes. Planners must look back on how previous planning implementations negatively affected people, identify who was missing from those processes and thus unable to ask questions or raise concerns, and work forward to ensure current conversations include all individuals and groups who should have a chance to weigh in.

In addition to finding additional individuals or groups who may be harmed by a planning idea, answers to the question "Who is missing?" can also uncover more people who are helped. We can invite newly discovered beneficiaries to participate in supporting and improving an idea.

Figure 6. A general checklist planners can use when scanning for missing people.

Answers, Action, and Leadership

As planners, keeping the essential questions front of mind compliments our professional skillsets and our leadership potential. As efficient researchers nimbly learning and making sense of knowns and unknowns, we now can include previously unrecognized people who are helped, harmed, and missing. With this information, we can lead richer community conversations about planning ideas in ways that help applicants, community members, and decision makers better understand the potential impacts of those proposals, and we can help ensure to the best of our abilities that our work benefits as many as possible, harms as few as possible, and includes everyone possible.

Here, being a leader does not mean being the boss: it means taking agency in activating knowledge and skills gained from studying and practicing planning, stepping up with confidence, and bringing fairer solutions to problems that we as planners were trained to solve. Leading by answering the three essential questions can expand planners' curiosity and comprehensive ways of thinking, making it easier to see both the big picture and the small details necessary for taking action.

Actions we decide to take can have many forms depending on each situation's needs. Different planning organizations or firms will have different methods for taking action; therefore, no one-size-fits-all approach can cover all possibilities in the planning field. Because we want our work to benefit as many people as possible, negatively impact as few people as possible, and include as many people as possible, taking appropriate action (recommending, altering, including, extending, revising, inviting, encouraging, empowering, and every other conceivable possibility) can help make our work fairer, and therefore, better.

Asking the Essential Questions Across Planning Practice

It is implausible (impossible!) to expect that planners will ask all three essential questions out loud, all the time, in all planning situations. And we may not be taken seriously if we ask who is helped, harmed, and missing all day long.

However, as planners, we should always have those questions in mind for everything we do. Keeping those questions front of mind will help us encourage better outcomes. Integrating these questions will take time, and we will have to think carefully about how best to incorporate them into our work routines.

Consider where and when more detailed processes for asking the essential questions make sense and how they can be

Customizing the Essential Questions

Words matter. They mean different things to different people. Since most words and terms do not cleanly translate the same way for all situations, consider modifying the essential questions to fit your organizational and procedural expectations.

For instance, replace "Who is helped?" with "Who benefits?" Perhaps expand "Who is harmed?" to "Who is negatively affected or impacted?" You may want to rephrase "Who is missing?" in a way that more directly represents a particular planning situation, such as "Who is underrepresented in this proposal?" or "Who is absent from this conversation?"

This *PAS Memo* provides an essential question framework you can adjust as you see fit; you can choose how to craft the base questions depending on planning circumstances and preferences for one word or term over another.

integrated more formally into established planning work. The following sections show how asking the essential questions can add value to our planning duties and offer suggestions about when and how we might regularly ask the questions when leading comprehensive and other plan-making processes; developing or reviewing policies, programs, or projects; and having formal or informal discussions about our communities.

Plan Making

Involving detailed process design and covering all topics, ranges, and scales, making plans presents many opportunities for asking and answering the essential questions. Plans create guiding visions and provide specific recommendations for achieving those visions to communities. Therefore, we must strive for our plan-making processes to bring everyone to the table, gather feedback from as many people as possible, and produce well-thought-out recommendations that benefit the entire community.

Generally, for any planning process design, we must do the following:

- Ask and answer the essential questions before we begin.
- Employ the essential questions throughout when creating and confirming the "why" for goals, objectives, policies, and actions.
- Scan for people who are underrepresented or missing from the conversation and invite and include them in our process.

The essential questions should be integrated into all steps of the plan-making process, as described below. As part of our published plans, we should document asking and answering the questions and any subsequent actions taken for all plan-making stages.

Preparing to launch the plan-making process. Planning processes offer value only if they accurately represent people. One of the critical times for asking the essential questions happens well before the visioning and other public input sessions begin. Answering the questions is performing "fairness due diligence" in helping ensure we have carefully considered people whose voices enhance visioning and goal setting and who should be encouraged to participate.

To reach the most people in creating great communities for all, "Who is helped?" becomes a fundamental question to set the plan-making process's vision and mission. Answers to who is harmed and missing can help us understand people left out of the plan's benefits, without resources or access to education and representation. We can find, invite, and welcome them well before the date of the first public meeting.

Visioning and values. Visioning sessions are meetings setting long-range visions and goals. Charettes (high-intensity, in-depth sessions centered around a longer-range vision or goal-setting topic or problem) often launch plan-making processes by establishing a community vision and goals to guide subsequent plan development. Creating a vision for specific (and sometimes existential) planning issues requires community members to define their agreed-upon values from which a plan's visions and missions take root and grow. Asking and answering the essential questions can improve representation.

We can also ensure a more representative vision throughout the plan-making process by continuously asking "Who is missing?" Identifying and including community members whose ideas and concerns have been missing from previous conversations about community visions and goals will strengthen the process and result in the creation of more inclusive and representative community values.

Public engagement data strategy. Once we find answers for who should be invited to a plan-making process, we can also ask and answer the essential questions to discover how different approaches to collecting data might help, harm, and leave people out, helping us strategize better public engagement and input processes. Doing so can positively impact our plan-making process' visions, goals, and recommendations.

We can closely look at our data-gathering methods and sources in focus groups, surveys, and public engagement technology. For instance, who is helped by posting a survey online might be people on a particular social media platform, potentially skewing results. Who is harmed or missed by posting a survey online might be people without access to technology, so choose data collection methods that help increase participation.

Also, think about who may be helped, harmed, and missing when selecting data and tools from external sources. Make sure those providers collect their data from fact-based, relevant, unbiased, and reputable methods and sources. Integrating the essential questions into data-driven processes can increase the chances for high-quality, relevant, and reputable data that leaves no one out and avoids building bias into an analysis.

Public meetings. Encouraging planning decision makers (such as board members and commissioners) to ask the essential questions can help us continuously monitor our plan-making process' level of success. Making sure to ask the questions out loud during the many public meetings required in plan making supports the following outcomes:

- Gaining clarity on a plan's impacts
- Providing answers to make well-informed, justifiable decisions
- Bringing human impacts of decisions to light
- Keeping the conversation focused on what is important
- Improving outcomes for all involved
- Providing depth to deliberations
- Generating viable alternatives
- Exposing potentially unethical motives
- Increasing comprehensiveness in decision-making
- Uncovering or identifying unintended outcomes of decision-making
- Providing opportunities for greater consensus

We can use the essential questions to accomplish the following elements of successful public meeting outcomes:

Lifting missing voices in public meetings during plan making. When organizing and facilitating meetings, we can ask who is harmed and missing to interpret whether people feel comfortable speaking. In the context of an active meeting, this can look like making sure no one person or group is dominating the conversation (scanning for missing voices and those harmed by neglect).

Reducing adverse effects by considering accessibility. If our data collection strategies in a public meeting involve movement, we can ask who may be harmed and missing. Planning process activities such as "gallery walks" or poster pin-ups and reviews, sticky dot voting, post-it note commenting, stretching over base maps, and other movement-related activities offer excellent ways to gather input. Still, they will likely hinder some participants with ambulatory issues, eliminating critical voices—and therefore harming by neglect or leaving people out. Consider people with vision, hearing, sensory, social anxiety, and technology access issues. We know how hard it is to provide fully accessible meetings, but asking the essential questions and making necessary changes can support our aspirations.

Decreasing the number of people who may be harmed or missing through diversity assessment. Facilitating meetings offers assessment opportunities for inclusiveness. Take time to determine if the diversity in the room generally represents the community's representative census data. Also, we can account for underrepresented people and groups that were identified when preparing to launch the plan-making process. After each public meeting, we should ask and answer the questions again to evaluate the success of our attempt in attracting people we hoped would attend. Did those who showed up represent one group more than others? Did we notice people and groups who weren't there? If so, consider how the resulting lack of diverse ideas from public input might harm the plan.

Readjusting between public meetings. We can ask and answer the essential questions to guide adjustments between public meetings to potentially increase chances for people to participate and build a sense of ownership in the plan, which is crucial for implementation.

Drafting plan policies, objectives, and actions. As noted above, we can keep the essential questions in mind and ask them throughout the plan-making process, actively seeking to achieve continuous improvement.

Public review and feedback. When seeking public input on the draft plan, we can focus on who is harmed (by neglect) and missing. When preparing for widespread publication across all media platforms, we must consider the accessibility and inclusion checks provided above for public engagement strategy development and public meetings. Is the draft plan conspicuous and accessible for everyone? Did we consider people with different abilities and needs who will want to see the draft? Did we ensure media outlets reach people in the community and did we consider how people find, read, and provide feedback on draft plans? We can check on the beneficiaries, the negatively affected, and people who may be underrepresented throughout the review and feedback period and shift outreach strategies accordingly.

Finalizing the plan document. We can make sure to publish documented steps in asking and answering the essential questions. Published steps become a record of monitoring answers and actions taken to improve the community's process over the plan's lifespan. When launching new plans and updating old ones, we can examine the success of employing the questions by scrutinizing current conditions, making adjustments, and improving as we advance.

Implementation. Using the essential questions to gauge and manage shared, equitable implementation, we can select those accountable for plans' implementation as we continue improving wider stakeholder participation.

Policies

Plans are collections of policies and recommendations, but local governments may develop and adopt standalone policies independent of their plans. Policy development also offers opportunities for planners to ask and answer the essential questions.

The essential questions are critical in policy making because policies are widespread community directives that typically apply to many people and form the basis for creating and implementing rules. Answering the questions "Who is helped?" and "Who is harmed?" can mitigate unintended negative consequences.

Problem identification. Asking the essential questions helps us establish the "why" for our policy-making processes, providing a more thoughtful justification for why and how we should solve an identified problem.

Policy making. The essential questions and their answers can help policies take positive directions as they make their way through decision-making bodies and bureaucracies to be adopted and implemented.

Policy adoption and implementation. If we answer the essential questions and take appropriate actions in developing a policy and finalizing it for adoption, it will help establish confidence in a policy's worth. Still, we should take the time to check through the questions again. Has anything changed since the problem identification that might impact the answers? Hopefully not, but last-minute adjustments could be warranted. We can also use the answers to prioritize policies; if a policy helps many people and harms few or none, this justifies funding and implementation.

Evaluation. A fundamental application of answering the essential questions is taking a detailed look at how an implemented policy helped people, harmed people, or missed people. With this knowledge, we can put forward more informed recommendations and make necessary adjustments.

Programs

When we develop programs to solve an issue or meet targeted needs, "Who is helped?" becomes the crucial question. Answers support our confidence in developing and administering programs that are truly helping who they intend to help. And though the goal of creating a new program is never to harm people, we can ask "Who is harmed?" to make sure. Finally, ask-

ing "Who is missing?" could reveal additional people who may be helped by a program or suggest different implementation strategies to maximize program benefits and make the most of program investments.

Program justification and goal setting. Limited resources mean that planners and others require good reasons for proposing and developing programs. How many people will the proposed program help, and are we sure it will not harm anyone? We may not know who is missing when validating why a proposed program should exist, but asking the question will keep this idea on the radar later.

Once the "why" of the program is established, answers to the essential questions can help form proposed program goals: we can target goals to improve the lives of people who are harmed and increase the number of people who are helped. Answering "Who is missing?" at this stage is essential. We may discover opportunities to expand a proposed program's reach.

Budgeting and implementation. If a proposed program helps many people and keeps them from harm, we can make a stronger argument for allocating funds for its implementation. Building out a program requires action steps (often including physical logistics) and working out the details needed for a program to be successful offers additional opportunities for asking the essential questions.

Evaluation. Asking the essential questions during each annual review can help us identify who a program may have helped beyond the intended participants, understand any unintended negative consequences or impacts to people, and offer opportunities to uncover more people who might be helped by the program. Enhancing formal audits with answers to the essential questions allows us to more clearly identify ways to improve.

Projects

Projects can benefit from the essential questions, as asking them refocuses the conversation from what the project is to who the project's users are. Often designed and implemented by private entities, projects include residential, commercial, or mixed-use developments. Public agencies may also lead or participate in project design and implementation; examples include a development authority constructing an affordable housing project or managing a brownfields redevelopment, a transit agency leading infrastructure improvements, or a local government forming a public-private partnership for a revitalization project.

Near-term implementation involves current planning actions, such as project conception and design, technical reviews, planner recommendations, public hearings, applicant revisions, approvals, budgeting and scheduling, construction, and project evaluation. Answers to the essential questions can benefit projects throughout all such efforts.

Conception and design. During a project's conception and design phases, planners will hear from people asking questions or complaining about the project. The essential questions can become part of the dialogue between staff and project applicants, which can help applicants better understand the potential impacts of—and potential community opposition to—their projects. This can inform adjustments to projects that result in better community benefits, smoother public comment processes, and better development outcomes. Project commentors can use the questions to assess projects that will impact them, potentially resulting in constructive suggestions rather than outright condemnation.

Planners and designers in both the public and private sectors also bring forth project proposals and designs. Public-sector planners working for and with people will be familiar with their communities and how the people they serve could be helped, harmed, or missed by a proposed project. They will immediately or quickly be able to answer the essential questions and can encourage project applicants to concurrently ask and answer the questions themselves.

Private-sector planners and designers contracted by municipalities, land developers, and other entities usually do not directly report to people they plan for and with. Since they may not immediately know the answers to the essential questions when working in nonlocal or otherwise unfamiliar communities, they may need more time to seek answers and ensure they are correct. Private-sector planners can integrate the essential questions and answers as part of requisite due diligence in project proposals and designs to show they care enough to consider the needs of all community members.

Technical reviews. Current planning reviews of design, transportation, and construction projects require specialized expertise and meticulousness. They can also de-emphasize people. Answering the essential questions remind reviewers that people are the end users of a proposed project.

Answers to the questions support our decisions when we analyze engineered drawings or site plans, review the technical data found in digital or blueprint layers, or navigate land-use tables. Technical project reviews pair well with the questions because visuals allow us to point to details we can see and encourage imagination when answering. ("See this curb cut for the parking lot entrance? Who is helped and harmed by the decision to locate it there?")

When we work as technical reviewers, we cannot realistically (and should not) ask these three questions out loud every time we see something on a site plan. But general awareness of the essential questions reminds us to remember who is helped, harmed, and missing and to take appropriate action as we dig deep into the details.

Recommendations. Since our recommendations as planners influence projects, answering the essential questions when writing reports provides an additional layer of care and thoughtfulness, potentially improving projects under consideration. We can achieve higher levels of trust with our communities when we demonstrate our awareness of the specific ways projects help, harm, or leave people out, and we can create fairer recommendations with that information.

Public hearings. Generally held during an existing meeting such as a planning commission or city council meeting, public hearings offer people a chance to express their opinions on project proposals. The essential questions can help us guide

public dialogue around a proposed project, providing focus, clarity, and community around its impacts on real people.

Applicant revisions and approvals. We and other reviewers can verify that any revisions applicants make to project proposals help more, harm less, and bring more people to the table. And asking the questions one last time before project approval can increase confidence for decision makers.

Implementation schedules and budgeting. We can employ questions and answers in prioritizing which projects should be implemented and when. For instance, when determining the implementation schedule for a community's parks and recreation plan, we can ask, "Who is helped and harmed if we implement Park A's improvements before Park B's?" This can help us guide more informed budget decisions and more transparent public communication about those decisions.

Construction. Project implementation is high profile, and projects under construction directly impact people. The essential questions can improve people's experiences during times of change. Asking and answering the questions across the range of activities required for a project's implementation can potentially create a more tolerable, humane experience. Examples include land clearing, foundation pouring, utility work, framing, installing, operating construction equipment, transportation detours, parking and storing the construction equipment, and many other situations. Who will be helped and harmed by construction during the workday and over the nighttime hours? Who should be part of the conversation on leaving heavy construction equipment on the school parking lot? Construction managers can choose to reduce negative real-time impacts that project implementation often brings.

Evaluation. Were decision makers correct? Did the project help more people than it harmed? Were missing people found? Answering the essential questions as part of an evaluation process can provide clear directions for improving an implemented project and enhancing similar projects through lessons learned.

Planning Deliberations

As planners, we can ask the essential questions any time decision makers and the public consider a planning topic, including in any meeting for any planning proposal at all ranges and scales. Whether in public meetings, professional conversations, or in an individual planner's mind, asking and answering the questions can enhance the value of planning-related discussions and decision-making outcomes.

Regular meetings. For meetings scheduled during specific, expected times (e.g., a monthly planning commission meeting) in which some form of Robert's Rules of Order (or modified Parliamentary procedural meeting rules) is employed, decision makers can ask and begin answering the questions at appropriate times during proceedings.

Staff reports. The essential questions can support us as planners in writing better staff reports and adding more value to our recommendations, providing increased clarity and confidence for decision makers and the trust granted by people we serve.

Visualizing the Essential Questions

New concepts—even three simple questions—can be difficult to visualize when considering how they fit into your planning duties. Imagine yourself in various planning roles and what you might say to gain a better understanding of potential opportunities:

Plan making:

- The planning manager evaluating past plans' impacts before beginning a new plan-making process: *"Let's take a look at the current and prior plans and ask who these plans helped and harmed—and who was missing from the process—to guide our new initiative and help us avoid past mistakes."*
- The lead planner holding internal pre-plan-making meetings with colleagues as a pre-scanning exercise: *"We're here today to define the 'why' for our plan by determining who will enjoy planning's impacts, who may be negatively impacted, and who doesn't know but would want to know about our work. This way, we can get a handle on current conditions before we officially begin the plan-making process."*
- A planner in charge of online content adding an interactive and updatable webpage for the plan's informational website: *"Welcome to this page, where you can offer input to help make our plan as fair as possible by offering your thoughts on who the plan helps, who it potentially harms, and who is currently absent from the conversation."*
- The planning director bringing the plan to official adoption: *"We feel confident that knowing who benefits, may be negatively affected, or left out of the conversation increased our goal of being as fair, transparent, and democratic as possible. I urge you to adopt this plan."*

Policy making and implementation:

- A planning consultant beginning an environmental scan for a proposed policy: *"We have begun identifying and tracking current and future trends associated with your proposed policy. We want to find who is currently helped, harmed, and missing in the assessment of our current condition, then predict how their situations might change if the proposed policy is implemented."*
- The planning policy initiators investigating political will: *"Who in local politics might win, lose, or be absent as a result of our policy idea? Let's consider how what we are proposing might create political winners and losers. Our developed policy will require political buy-in, so let's strive to design our policy for more winners."*
- A planner writing an annual policy review: *"Following is information on the people we serve and how we ask who is helped, harmed, and missing to monitor the reach of our work."*

Program development:

- The planners exploring a need for a program: "*Today we launch a needs assessment to identify who our program will serve, but to also explore possible unintended consequences and human impacts of our proposed program by asking who is helped, who is harmed, and who is missing from the dialogue around our program idea.*"
- A private planning consultant holding a focus group: *"Today, we want your thoughts on how to make our program work for everyone possible. Who will likely benefit? Who probably won't? Have we done a good enough job of inviting everyone who needs to be here?"*
- The core planning team developing goals and objectives for a program: *"We've gathered a lot of input from the public and stakeholders about what our policy's goals and objectives should be. Do they help? Do they harm? Do they leave anyone out?"*

Project proposal development and review:

- A current planner with a project applicant: "*We ask that you as the project proposer take time to answer the following three questions as accurately and completely as possible: Who is served by your project? Who is negatively impacted by your project? Who is missing from the table in evaluating your project?*"
- A private-sector planner facilitating a neighborhood input session to discuss a land-development project proposal: *"We know this is where your heart lives, and we hope you can help us figure out how we can be good neighbors today by thinking about how this project will help the neighborhood, whether it might somehow have a negative impact on you or others, and who may be missing from the discussion today."*
- A site planner reviewing a project's site plan: *"How does this location for a new manufacturing plant help or harm residents in both this neighborhood and the greater community, and who might not but should know about this proposal?"*

Planning deliberations:

- A current planner presenting staff recommendations to the board of zoning appeals: *"Based on our assessment of who will benefit, who will be negatively affected, and who we believe is underrepresented, staff recommends not approving the request. We have determined this proposal could possibly harm a significant number of residents, and we believe many people to be unaware of the proposal and its impacts."*
- A city councilor in an emergency budget meeting: *"Who does this budget cut proposal advantage? Who does it disadvantage? And who doesn't know it's coming?"*
- A planner in an internal meeting with colleagues choosing neighborhoods for their next neighborhood planning effort: *"How does spending our time and resources updating an existing plan for a neighborhood not currently in need help or harm the rest of town? There are a lot of people not yet involved in our community's planning process."*
- A planner thinking alone, watching a moving van carry out a family's furniture, wondering about unintentional displacement in a fast-changing neighborhood: "*Did our property tax abatement policy decisions for this neighborhood harm this family, who might be moving because they have to, not because they want to? I sure hope we didn't inadvertently help only those people who needed it the least, and I don't know where to begin to understand who's missing here. I'll bring this up with the other planners as I work on the department's annual plan implementation evaluation report.*"

Does one or more of the above opportunities to implement the essential questions apply to your planning practice? These are only a few of the many possibilities.

Public forums and special meetings. Often lengthy and focused on one topic (such as the need for a comprehensive plan or the details and outcomes of a community visioning session), these meetings invite the public to learn about, discuss, and debate an idea in more depth than is typically possible in a regular meeting. Essential questions can bring depth and breadth to these deliberations. We planners, decision makers, and participants can explicitly ask and answer who is helped, harmed, and missing.

Emergency meetings. Answers to the questions can help decision makers think more deeply about the human impacts of their decisions before they take action. Essential questions can also steer emergency meetings deliberating on topics requiring immediate attention.

Conversations with planning colleagues and decision makers. Much of our work involves behind-the-scenes interactions with colleagues, including professional conversations, data preparation, and recommendation development. We can employ the questions in various situations, such as discussing a topic with applicants, researching in the field, brainstorming with colleagues, and conducting internal meetings with decision makers.

Alone. Though this *PAS Memo* stresses purposeful implementation of the essential questions in everyday work, asking and answering the questions never requires a formal process. As individual planners, we should be asking and answering the questions in our minds as we fulfill our planning duties.

Conclusion

This *PAS Memo* demonstrates how using three essential questions—Who is helped? Who is harmed? Who is missing?—when planning for and with people across planning practice can make communities fairer and better.

Asking and answering these three straightforward questions enhances our ability to cut to the chase to what is real, because our work involves real people. And though we often work in highly complex ambiguity within our multidisciplinary field, starting with these simple questions allows us to more effec-

tively explain the very real human impacts of planning ideas in our visual, verbal, and written communications. The breadth of our developed skills and knowledge exemplifies the qualities of successful leaders: answering the essential questions and taking action provides opportunities for us to have an even more valuable professional role as planners.

But be flexible and realistic. We must understand when and where to take advantage of opportunities to ask the essential questions in our everyday work and expand their use across work ranges and scales—facilitating meetings, writing reports, making recommendations, crafting and implementing plans, in one-on-one conversations or in large group discussions—but we must realize nothing is perfect. Some people will always be helped too much. Others will be unavoidably harmed. And unfortunately, many people will never make it to the table. Life is not fair; being realistic about this can stave off burnout. Though implementing a planning culture that regularly asks and answers these three essential questions doesn't guarantee easy and straightforward decisions, it does allow planners and decision makers to make the most informed, transparent, and therefore best decisions possible in each context and situation.

Everywhere possible in our planning practice we should ask who is helped, harmed, and missing. We must always keep these three questions front of mind to help us encourage fairer outcomes in everything we do. When we answer the questions, we can decide the best ways to take action. Because when planning for and with people, knowing "who is" and taking action represents our "why."

About the Author

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