

# PLANNING

**EV CHARGE  
ANXIETY**

**FRAUD ALERT!**

**6 GENERATIONS,  
1 WORKPLACE**

**GREENER DATA  
CENTERS?**

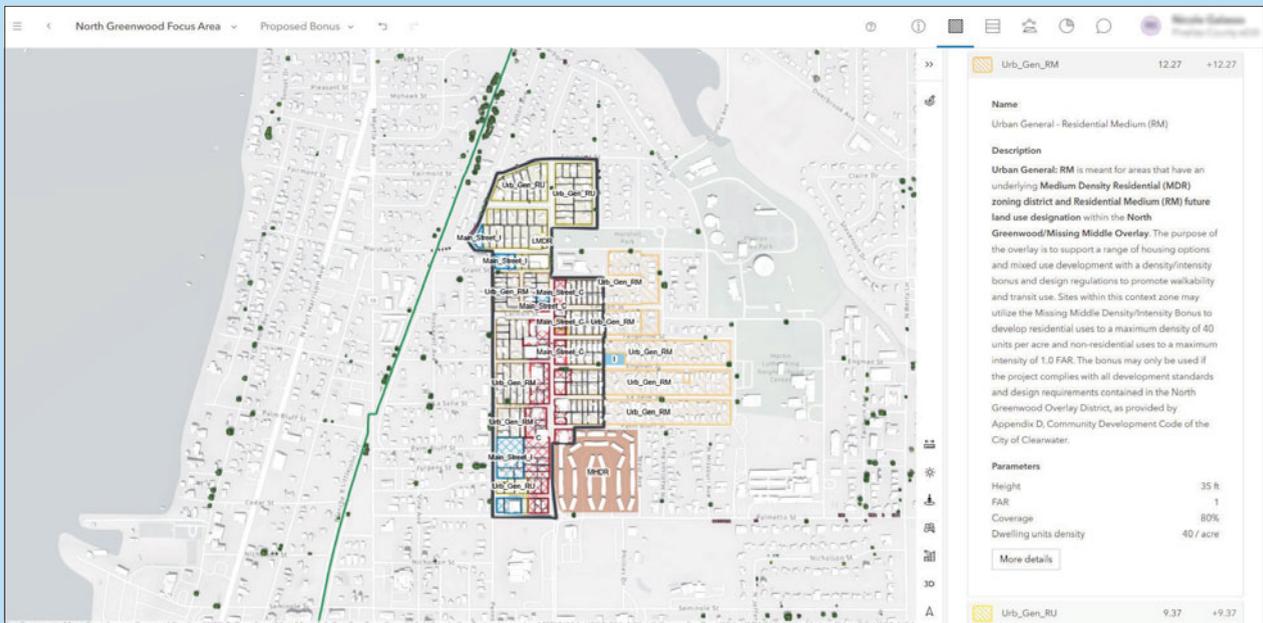




# How to Reinvigorate a Neighborhood

Learn how Forward Pinellas revitalizes communities with ArcGIS® software

Pinellas County, Florida, is one of the state's smallest counties by land area yet home to nearly a million residents. With little undeveloped space left, nearly every discussion about growth is now a discussion about redevelopment. The choices local governments make today will influence economic opportunity, neighborhood character, and long-term resilience across the region.



Using ArcGIS Urban, Forward Pinellas planners identified sites with the greatest potential for reinvestment.

## Revitalizing a Neighborhood While Maintaining Its Community

North Greenwood is a historically Black neighborhood in Clearwater with a strong sense of identity, pride, and community. As part of their Community Redevelopment Area planning efforts, residents prioritized revitalizing North Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue—the neighborhood's historic heart—while supporting Black-owned businesses, improving housing options, and strengthening community spaces.

Forward Pinellas needed to identify which zoning codes should change in order to support the community's priorities.

### 3D Models Present a Path Forward

Planners evaluated where missing middle housing could realistically fit within North Greenwood and identified zoning standards that unintentionally limited redevelopment. Using 3D modeling in ArcGIS Urban, the team tested proposed zoning changes and compared real development scenarios against draft code—examining height, setbacks, parking, and mixed-use incentives before decisions were finalized.

By visualizing how different options would look and perform in the neighborhood context, ArcGIS helped shift conversations away from abstract regulations and toward shared understanding.

### ArcGIS revitalized the community through

- Clearer communication with residents through 3D visualization.
- More confident zoning decisions informed by real-world testing.
- Stronger alignment between community goals and redevelopment policy.
- Earlier insights into what would—and would not—work on the ground.



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As automakers hit the brakes on electric vehicle manufacturing and the federal government dismantles many of its EV policies, communities aren't slowing down as residents clamor for charging options.

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On the cover: Rob Savage, AICP CANDIDATE, helped boost EV infrastructure in Rolling Meadows, Illinois, amidst federal policy turmoil. From top: noisy pickleball courts in a residential area; a multi-generational planning workforce.

## Contributors



### Tim Klein

*Charge Anxiety, cover and page 22*

Covering this story was inspiring for the photographer, highlighting how a community can keep moving forward on electric vehicle planning despite federal policy and funding uncertainties. Klein, a Chicago-based commercial and editorial photographer, has worked behind the camera for nearly two decades.



### Charles Leahy

*A Solution for the Pop, Pop, Pop of Pickleball, page 16*

A retired mechanical engineer and patent attorney, Leahy finds himself reinvented at the intersection of noise science and local politics. Serving on a homeowners association, he saw how a pickleball noise lawsuit divided the town. "The issue isn't whether people should play," he says. "It's whether we site and regulate courts thoughtfully."



### Mary Hammon

*Navigating a New Kind of Planning Workforce, page 21*

This millennial freelance writer and former *Planning* editor has worked with five of the six generations in today's workforce. She thinks curiosity and communication can bridge differences and build trust. "The most exciting thing in this unprecedented moment, to me, is the opportunity for knowledge sharing," she says. "Just think how much we can learn from one another."

# PLANNING

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FROM THE DESK OF THE CHIEF FORESIGHT AND KNOWLEDGE OFFICER

# Why Imagination Matters More Than Ever

**I** F I HAD TO identify 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.

It is certainly a thread that runs through the *2026 Trend Report for Planners*, which explores accelerating policy shifts, emerging technological innovations, impacts on the economy and the environment, and society's attempts to adapt to it all. Whether we look globally, nationally, or locally, the future feels more uncertain than ever.

This reality makes it increasingly important for us to strengthen our imagination muscles and prepare for multiple plausible futures. Imagination is a 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 the late German psychologist, sociologist, and philosopher Erich Fromm put it, "Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties."

Creativity allows us to embrace uncertainty, which means we have 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 being uncomfortable and break out of expected habits, narratives, and ways of thinking.

## Staying resilient amid disruption

For a long time, one of planners' greatest challenges has been aligning 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 comes into play: technological innovation cycles, which are becoming ever shorter.



**'Creativity allows us to embrace uncertainty, which means we have to let go of current beliefs and expectations, accept the unknown, and acknowledge that nothing is fully predictable.'**

—PETRA HURTADO, PHD

A major concern among planners is the fear of getting displaced by technology, specifically artificial intelligence (AI). These advancements won't eliminate the 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.

We also will need to redefine what human connection means. We will increasingly collaborate not only with other people but also with AI agents. Finding the right balance will matter.

A related challenge ahead concerns the value of knowledge in a world where everyone can be an expert—or thinks they can—with the help of AI. Planning is a knowledge-based profession, and 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 the *2026 Trend Report for Planners* exists: It serves as your tool to inspire curiosity, encourage thinking beyond our usual planning narratives, and help you imagine what's possible based on evidence and insight.

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 this."

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*Petra Hurtado, PhD, is APA's chief foresight and knowledge officer and the lead author of the 2026 Trend Report for Planners, from which this essay is excerpted.*

Modest design changes can invite more women into public spaces, supporting social activities and making them feel safer.  
COURTESY TRANSPORT FOR NEW SOUTH WALES



# INTERSECTIONS

WHERE PLANNING AND THE WORLD MEET

Tech | Housing | People Behind the Plans | Et cetera

TECH

## What Happens When Women Design For Women?

*A team in Sydney, Australia, turned a green space into a data-backed case study of how inclusive design reshapes public spaces. By Natalie Missakian*

WHEN A DOZEN playful pink-and-white benches suddenly appeared on an empty strip of grass at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, something interesting—if not entirely unexpected—happened.

The once-ignored green space, wedged between a busy walkway and a campus café, turned into a mini social hub. Students, particularly women, stopped and lingered; pulled the movable, LED-lit benches into sunny spots during class breaks; and rearranged them to chat with friends.

“The space became quite popular, and it became quite active,” says Gonzalo Portas, a lecturer at the university who co-designed the benches with female industrial design students.

The transformation was for a project called Benchmark that aimed to answer a practical question: Can modest design changes measurably improve how women experience public spaces?

Transport for New South Wales commissioned the project as part of its Safer Cities Program, created

to improve women’s, girls’, and gender-diverse people’s sense of security in public. Benchmark paired the benches with smart technology developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT’s) Civic Data Design Lab to capture data about use, comfort, and social interaction, says Sarah Williams, director of the lab and the MIT Norman B. Leventhal Center for Advanced Urbanism.

Using a GoPro camera and artificial intelligence-driven computer vision sensors, the technology tracked users’ locations every five seconds for three weeks in 2024 and mapped them onto coordinates. For privacy protection, the software converted the people pictured into anonymized stick figures and used pose-detection algorithms to determine whether they sat or stood and how long they lingered and socialized.

Because the software doesn’t distinguish among genders, student researchers also visited the site several times a day to count the number of women present and interview them about how they felt about the space, Williams says.



## INTERSECTIONS

### Tech Housing

People Behind the Plans  
Et cetera

The study found even small interventions can bring big results. Five times as many people—and eight times as many women—used the space after the benches were introduced, while six times as many people used it at night. Socializing, which the researchers defined as remaining within one meter of another person for more than two minutes, jumped from zero to nine people per day.

Based on the interviews, nearly 75 percent of women felt more comfortable in the space, and 85 percent said the benches made social activities easier.

“I think what’s super important in thinking about designing spaces for women and girls is to make sure that they feel safe and are seen,” Williams says. While Benchmark confirmed what she knew intuitively as a woman, “it helps to prove it through the data.”

### Reimagining spaces

According to Inés Sánchez de Madariaga, PhD, a visiting scholar at MIT who has led efforts to embed gender in land-use legislation and urban planning in Spain, the findings echo prior research showing that “women and girls like to create places where they can sit and talk.” But public parks, she says, often are built around sports, which tend to be preferred by men and boys.

Like many professions, planning and urban design are historically male-dominated, so public spaces are often designed with men in mind, says Caroline Dwyer, AICB, interim assistant

### DESIGN MEETS DATA

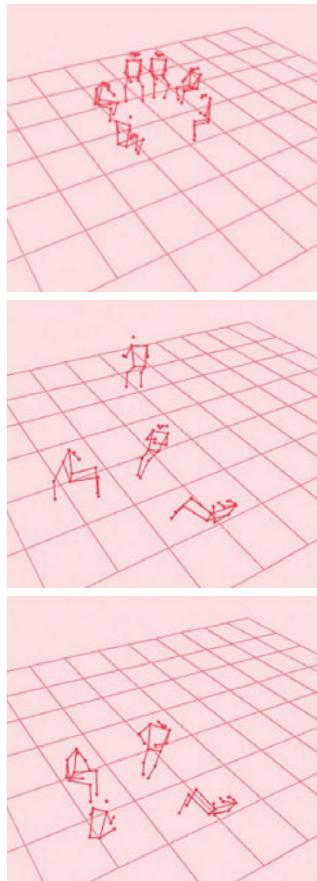
Detection models reimaged bench users as stick figures to protect their identities. The data found:

**357%**  
increase  
of average  
dwell time  
per person

**360%**  
increase  
in the average  
number of  
people who  
stayed on-site  
every day

**568%**  
increase  
in total daily  
dwell time

SOURCE:  
BENCHMARK  
NSW FINAL  
REPORT



director and planning manager for Chapel Hill Transit in North Carolina and executive committee chair for APA’s Women and Planning Division.

For example, public transit’s orientation around peak commute times doesn’t align with how most women travel, Dwyer says. Women are more likely to be caregivers and typically make multiple stops a day, whether that’s dropping children off at school before work or stopping for groceries, a concept known as trip chaining.

“Just in my own anecdotal experience, I find that men do not always think about spaces in the same way,” Dwyer says. “They

don’t observe their surroundings in the same way that women do.”

Portas agrees, which is why he felt strongly about letting his female students lead the design process. “It was really wonderful to see how the women did things differently than the way I may have started the project,” he says.

After testing different materials, the team chose recycled plastic that was light enough to move easily. They embedded motion-activated lighting and added whimsical touches, including handles resembling a pig’s tail, to make the benches—now nicknamed “the little piggies”—fun and inviting.

### Tool for planners

The team has since moved the benches to a park in downtown Sydney and has applied for grants to bring the work to Boston this summer. Project partners created a do-it-yourself guidebook for the open-source sensor kit, so others can create their own projects.

For Portas, the project underscores his belief that public spaces must be designed with input from diverse groups. “If you don’t design with them,” he says, “then perhaps you’re not actually designing for them.”

Williams takes it further, saying the project suggests that everyone benefits when spaces are welcoming for women and such efforts don’t have to be costly. “By including even just small improvements, like these benches,” she says, “you can transform a place.”

*Natalie Missakian is a Connecticut-based writer who covers state and federal policy.*

### DO IT YOURSELF

A DIY guidebook leads users through the process of setting up the open-source sensor kit. Download at [plnn.org/benchmark](http://plnn.org/benchmark).



## HOUSING

# How Single Stairways Can Take Affordable Housing to a New Level

*Cities are rethinking their codes to take a step toward increasing housing options and reducing construction costs. By Joe Tedino*

**COLORADO MADE** a bold housing move in May 2025: To encourage higher-density development, it enacted a law allowing multifamily buildings of up to five stories to be built with a single staircase instead of the two previously required for municipalities with populations exceeding 100,000.

Requiring fewer staircases—also called “smart stair” reform—can lower construction costs by hundreds of thousands of dollars per building, says Stephen Smith, executive director of the Center for Building in North America. Updating building codes to permit just one staircase also can allow apartments to have windows on more than one side for better ventilation, more daylight, and greater comfort,

according to Colorado legislators, citing a 2024 George Mason University study.

However, building and zoning codes can sometimes be at odds because they are developed separately. “These codes need to work together,” Smith says. “As planners seek to increase densities in cities, they are looking at single-family sized lots, and a single stair is a tool in the toolkit.”

### Extinguishing concerns

It took pro-single staircase advocates in Colorado years to get municipal building officials, fire marshals, developers, and architects on board with the change, with many conversations about public safety concerns. After an attempt to pass single-stair legislation failed in early 2024,

Single-staircase buildings, like the 101 John Street apartments, have been legal in Seattle since the 1970s, serving as a nationwide example for “smart stair” reform.

state legislators—including Rep. Andrew Boesecker of Fort Collins—began building support for another try. “We knew that we would need a long runway,” Boesecker says, “based on the conversations that had transpired with the previous bill that did not pass.”

Outreach efforts included a listening tour with city officials, builders, and other stakeholders, such as the Fire Marshals Association of Colorado, the state chapter of the International Code Council, and the Associated Builders and Contractors Rocky Mountain Chapter. The feedback resulted in nearly two dozen amendments to the 2025 legislation, including requirements for a staircase to be at least 48 inches wide, a maximum of four apartments per floor, and mandatory smoke detectors and alarms that meet National Fire Protection Association standards. Developers also must comply with International Building Code standards for sprinkler systems and construction materials.

The listening tour was something Kate Conley, a principal at Architects FORA in Fort Collins, appreciated. “There was still a little bit of nervousness, especially from fire departments, about the change,” Conley says, “but how successful and relatively safe it has been in the jurisdictions where it has been used gives me a lot of comfort. There is already data to back up the claims that these buildings are equally safe.”

### A wave of single-stair reform

In 1860, a fatal tenement fire led to a two-staircase mandate in New York—and made the

external metal fire escape a fixture nationwide for more than a century. Seattle challenged this norm in the 1970s when it legalized single-staircase buildings of up to six stories with modern fire-safety requirements.

Now, reform has grown in response to the housing crisis. New York and Honolulu added single-stair provisions decades ago. Austin, Texas, passed an ordinance in April 2025 to permit single-staircase construction for buildings of up to five stories. Meanwhile, officials in Memphis, Tennessee, hope a new state law enabling single stairways in multifamily buildings of up to six stories will reduce construction costs and enable development on smaller lots.

Having data to support reform is key. A February 2025 study by the Center for Building in North America and the

Pew Charitable Trusts found that single-staircase buildings equipped with sprinklers do not present higher fire safety risks than two-staircase construction. “Allowing the construction of such buildings could provide much-needed housing, including homes for people with modest incomes,” wrote the authors, who included Smith. The report also found it costs roughly \$200,000 to build a second staircase for a mid-rise apartment building.

#### Ahead of schedule in Denver

In Colorado, the 2025 state law requires cities with populations of 100,000 or more to update their building codes by December 2027. Eric Browning, Denver’s chief building official, outlined the code updates in a public meeting that summer, saying the city plans to ensure new buildings are constructed with non-combustible materials, such as concrete block and masonry.

Denver planners expect the city will comply with the new law a year or more “ahead of time, but it’s still very much a work in progress,” says Sarah Showalter, AICP, Denver’s deputy executive director of community planning and development. She says it’s a bit early to estimate the specific effects on the housing supply and affordability, but the city has identified nearly 6,000 parcels already zoned to allow for single-stair multifamily buildings.

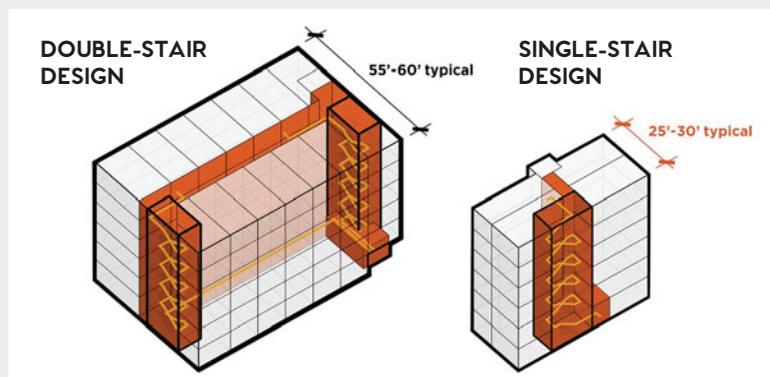
While the new state law doesn’t have a specific affordable housing component, officials see the code revisions as part of “a number of steps Denver is taking to provide a greater diversity of housing options, which our city-wide plans call for, based on community input,” Showalter says.

A proposed five-story single-staircase development comprising 15 units in Denver’s Globeville neighborhood has received preliminary planning department approval. The project includes 13 market-rate apartments and two units designated for residents earning no more than 60 percent of the area median income.

While missing middle housing has been largely left out of the picture, Conley says community development corporations and land trusts have expressed interest in the new law as a pathway to affordable home ownership. “I could see a smart-stair building being just as attractive for an affordable homeownership project as for an affordable rental project,” she says.

### INSIDE SINGLE-STAIR APARTMENT BUILDINGS

A new six-story apartment building in most of the U.S. requires two stairways and a corridor connecting them. Single-stair design allows for more light, more windows, and smaller lot sizes.



SOURCE: SAR+ ARCHITECTS/THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

*Joe Tedino is a Chicago-based writer and activist focusing on climate, sustainability, and technology.*

# Planning Right Now Is ‘Emotionally Exhausting’

**R**IGHT NOW, PLANNERS are trying to understand how shifts to federal policies, programs, and funding affect their planning work. That’s certainly true for Marcus Hendricks, PhD, an associate professor at the University of Maryland and director of the Stormwater Infrastructure Resilience and Justice Lab. Amid uncertainty, he reminds planners, “there’s always opportunity for change, growth, disruption, and renewal.”

We recently spoke on the APA podcast, *People Behind the Plans*. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



## Q&A

grocery stores, libraries, educational facilities—their placement and distribution are critical to quality of life and are drivers for short- and long-term outcomes. Planners have a critical role here. Even though we don’t have “health” in our titles, we hold a responsibility to the health and safety of communities through the planning that we do.

**STROMBERG: Are there places that encapsulate some of these ideas?**

**HENDRICKS:** In my dissertation, my quantitative models showed the inventory, condi-

tion, and distribution of stormwater and transportation systems in Houston. They also showed that communities of color, predominantly Black and Brown communities, didn’t have the same type of infrastructure or levels of maintenance.

That dynamic also exists in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. The work reinforces the need for more research in planning, public health, and engineering related to what I’m calling infrastructural justice.

**STROMBERG: Have you seen instances of community distrust of planners or planning?**

**HENDRICKS:** Meaningful changes are critical, and planners should think of themselves as brokers toward transformation through the vision of community. Sometimes, there is a reluctance to trust and engage with folks who, in the community’s eyes, represent the government. The community speaks, they demonstrate, they attend meetings, they disrupt, and they do absolutely everything that they can to bring attention to the issues that they know to be important. And yet, still, rarely do things change for the better and for their benefit.

**MEGHAN STROMBERG: How did you find your way to planning?**

**MARCCUS HENDRICKS:** I’m a first-generation college student, and I started out training to be an emergency medical technician.

Then, and later as I pursued a master’s in public health at Texas A&M, I came to recognize that a lot of the calls we went on were not true emergencies; they were for primary care because people didn’t have access to routine medical care. I was motivated by this idea of root causes and finding an opportunity to address public health issues sooner. As I finished my public health master’s, I discovered the renowned Hazard Reduction and Recovery Research Center across campus, and the rest is history.

**STROMBERG: What is the connection between public health and planning?**

**HENDRICKS:** Zip code is a much stronger predictor of health outcomes than any physiological indicator. Who holds the power to shape that built environment? It’s planners at the local level.

When we think about basic infrastructure—

### HEAR THE FULL STORY

Scan the QR code below or go to [planning.org/podcast](https://planning.org/podcast) to listen to the full conversation on *People Behind the Plans*.



## INTERSECTIONS

Tech  
Housing

People Behind the Plans

Et cetera

**STROMBERG:** Talk about managing uncertainty around planning at the federal level.

**HENDRICKS:** I think, in real time, many of us are trying to make sense of it all. I think we have been forced into this choice of either capitulation and shifting to topics that are politically sanitized or to remain steadfast in truth and exploration. I've had to suppress the dissemination of some of my work that's related to climate change and environmental justice.

This era is daunting and emotionally exhausting, but I feel prepared for this moment, quite frankly, as a Black American. We often deal with this feeling of living between our real, lived experiences—things we know to be true—but having to mask that truth.

**STROMBERG:** What advice and guidance do you give to students and emerging planners?

**HENDRICKS:** The most salient thing that still resonates with me is to trust the process while

**'Trust the process while also questioning it. There's always opportunity for change, growth, disruption, and renewal.'**

—MARCCUS  
HENDRICKS, PHD

also questioning it. Trust the planning steps and requirements that we know are appropriate and successful, but recognize that change doesn't come along by doing what has always been done. There's always an opportunity for change, growth, disruption, and renewal.

Also, be a community liaison, a broker between local government and elected leadership and communities. Allow your expertise to enhance, not erode, and create space for communities to guide and lead actively.

**STROMBERG:** What about local planners?

**HENDRICKS:** The most transformative work happens at the local level.

At the end of the day, communities and people have the power, and planners can help to support, organize, and mobilize them. Position them to be the voice of change and transformation.

*Meghan Stromberg is APA's editor in chief.*



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Planners may find parallels—and hope—in this make-believe world where once-segregated species learn to live together.

#### PLAN TO WATCH

## Lessons on Gentrification from a Rabbit and a Fox

*Zootopia 2 gives viewers young and old an animated look at critical urban planning issues. By Ezra Haber Glenn, AICP*

**I**F YOU CAN tolerate the fast-paced frenzy, Disney’s new *Zootopia 2* offers lessons rooted in societal issues all too familiar for urban planners.

The long-awaited sequel released this past fall follows the ongoing exploits of Zootopia Police Department rookies Judy Hopps (a plucky rabbit voiced by Ginnifer Goodwin) and Nick Wilde (a wily fox with a rap sheet voiced by Jason Bateman). But between the movie’s twists, turns, and jokes, it also explores mainstream representations of cities and planning.

Zootopia is a bustling, diverse city, home to animals (well actually, mammals) from every climate and ecozone on Earth, all

living in harmony. The secret is the ingenious technology behind the city’s “weather walls,” which allow for the creation of different neighborhoods and districts featuring suitable environments for the different species: polar bears and reindeer in “Tundratown,” turtles and crocs in the swampy “Marsh Market” area, lions and gazelles in the “Savannah Central” downtown, and so on.

Planners who know the history of zoning and segregation may immediately suspect a problematic parallel, with different groups restricted to living in different neighborhoods. Is it really a good idea to structure your city along such rigid lines? Is it fair? Will it lead to division

and inequality, lawsuits, or violence? Likewise, those familiar with the profession’s early and often unreflective attempts to control the environment through technology and engineering may cry foul. Should we be manipulating the weather so cavalierly, rather than learning to adapt our own behavior?

As we look at all these issues critically, we can encourage younger viewers to use *Zootopia* as a thought-experiment on how we can really live together.

These shortcomings and omissions aside, the film finds its courage in the third act. As Judy and Nick unravel the mystery at the heart of the plot, we learn that the weather wall technology was originally used not for the good of all, but rather to displace and disenfranchise entire animal communities, destroying their habitats and clearing their valuable land for new development benefiting others. As with projects from the urban renewal and highway construction eras (and even more recent ones), land use planning and infrastructure development are not necessarily neutral acts—and what may be an “improvement” to one group may be a threat to another.

The message hits hard, but it is fair criticism, and the film does a great job revealing this ugly past without dashing all hope. Past injustices can be acknowledged, and, with honesty, we can continue to work together to build a truer utopia.

---

*Ezra Haber Glenn, AICP, teaches at MIT’s Department of Urban Studies & Planning and writes about cities and film. Follow him at [thecityinfilmmag.com](http://thecityinfilmmag.com).*



*Zootopia 2* is available for streaming through Amazon, Apple, Google, YouTube, and other major streaming platforms.

Escalating noise from pickleball can be mitigated by a toolbox of options, from barrier panels to establishing minimum setbacks from homes.

PICS721/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS



# TOOLS

KNOWLEDGE YOU CAN PUT TO WORK  
Zoning | Climate | Career

# FOR THE TRADE



## ZONING

### A SOLUTION FOR THE POP, POP, POP OF PICKLEBALL

As the nation's fastest-growing sport transforms the sound of parks and neighborhoods, planners have a chance to lead—before the conflicts land in court. *By Charles Leahy*

**I**N JUST A DECADE, pickleball has become not only the fastest-growing sport in the U.S. but also the source of a fast-spreading land use conflict. Thousands of cities have converted tennis courts or built new ones to meet demand, often in residential areas and with little thought to acoustics or compatibility. The result: noise complaints, lawsuits, and court closures that pit neighbors against players, with all involved looking to city hall for help.

#### A new kind of noise

The noise from pickleball might seem harmless. How loud could a plastic ball being hit by a wooden paddle be? But that friendly “pop” carries. A single strike can be 20 decibels louder than tennis, and it happens up to 900 times per hour per court. Convert one tennis court into four pickleball courts and you get 3,600 sharp, high-frequency impulses every hour.

Compounding the problem,

these sounds fall squarely in the range where human hearing is most sensitive. They are brief, irregular, and impossible to tune out. Physiologically, they trigger the body's fight-or-flight response. Over time, fatigue, irritability, and disrupted sleep can lead to health impacts. Factoring in laughter, chatter, and day-long play, one can start to understand why nearby homeowners might take exception.

In response, cities often first turn to local noise ordinances, only to find they were never designed for this kind of sound. A-weighted decibel limits measure steady noises well, but they miss the piercing quality of short, high-frequency pops. But even when readings fall below legal thresholds, residents still suffer.

Meanwhile, code enforcement staff rarely have instruments or training for managing this type of noise, and citations can be awkward when the offender is the city's own recreation department.

But planners are well-equipped to handle this challenge, with

tools—such as setbacks, conditional use permits, and public hearings—to separate incompatible uses before construction begins. Pioneering communities have shown the way with a three-tier permitting framework based on distance from homes and other noise-sensitive sites:

**PROHIBITED ZONE:** Within the closest setback zone, pickleball is simply not compatible because it cannot be adequately mitigated.

**CONDITIONAL USE ZONE:** In this middle zone, courts may be approved with a conditional use permit (CUP) if mitigation is demonstrated and neighbors are notified. CUPs are important because they allow planning departments to revisit issues when conditions—or complaints—change.

**BY-RIGHT ZONE:** Although the popping noise can travel 1,000 feet, depending on weather and reflections, serious conflict is unlikely beyond about 800 feet. In this far zone, courts can be permitted as of right.

**Making mitigation work**

Experience from across the country suggests a toolbox of mitigation fixes might work—but each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Using quieter equipment, such as “whisper

paddles” and foam balls, substantially reduces the sound volume. But players don’t like using these substitutes, and this approach requires on-site management to ensure no one is using loud paddles. Alternatively, requiring courts to be in enclosed buildings would also solve the noise issue, but it might deter those who are looking for outdoor activities.

There are other options, however, that planners can select to mitigate noise.

Going long with your setback distance requires no expense and no supervision and is easy to measure. By increasing the distance between the sound source and the listener, it reduces sound energy and gives the other tools a chance to work.

Sometimes, it is OK to put up barriers. Ten-foot vinyl “AcoustiFence” panels and similar products are a possible solution. But because sound radiates in all directions rather than in a straight line, noise will go over the top—potentially impacting two-story homes or nearby housing units that are higher than the panels. Also, barriers are widely disliked because they add expense, require maintenance, and block visibility for

police, players, and neighbors.

Another option is to limit hours and days of play. Ambient noise drops in evenings and on weekends, making the pickleball pops extra burdensome. Setting limits—such as no games after

6 p.m. or on Sundays or holidays—can send the signal that the city values neighborhood well-being as much as recreation.

**How to make sure setbacks don’t set the game back**

The most consequential challenge for planners is choosing the minimum setback from residential property lines. Smaller setbacks of less than 250 feet have low success rates even with a combination of aggressive barriers, quiet equipment, and limited hours. Larger minimum setbacks of 250,

350, or 500 feet will still need help from one or more of these mitigation strategies.

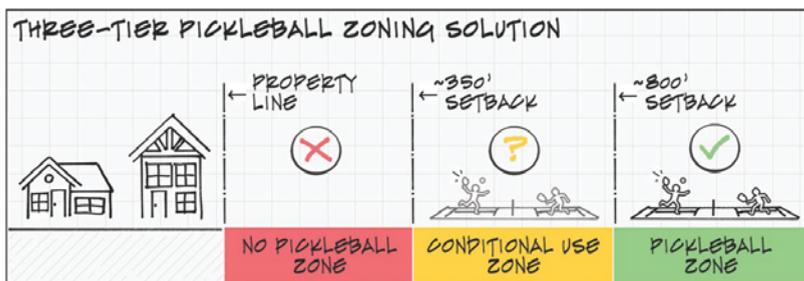
Another challenge is ensuring that these same zoning standards apply to city-owned and park-district courts, as well as courts within housing developments, country clubs, and the backyards of private residences.

Zoning codes require frequent updates to keep up with novel land uses. More than 20,000 zoning authorities nationwide now face the same question—how to manage a popular but noisy activity that crosses departmental boundaries.

By integrating acoustics, public health, and fairness into zoning practice, planners can prevent conflict, reduce litigation risk, and model transparent governance.

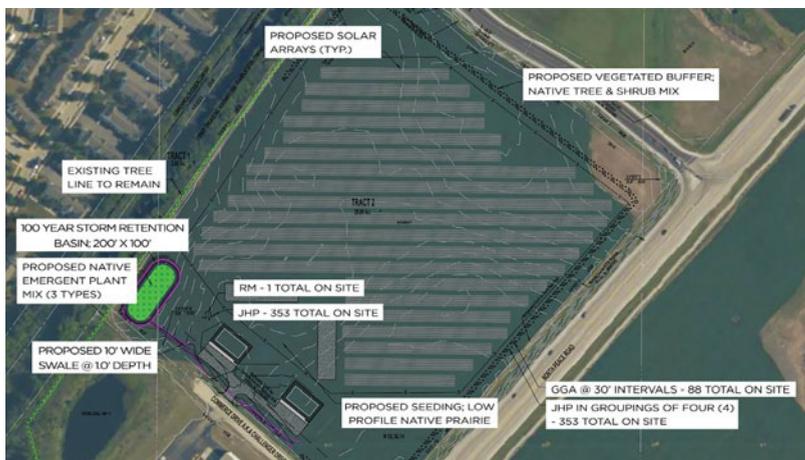
**MANAGING PICKLEBALL NOISE THROUGH ZONING**

Zoning Practice offers a framework that balances demand for pickleball courts, neighborhood compatibility concerns, and legal risks.

One pickleball court can deliver 900 sharp, high-frequency impulses every hour, each strike 20 times louder than in tennis. Tools such as setbacks and conditional use permits can separate incompatible uses before court construction begins.

*Charles Leahy is a retired mechanical engineer and attorney.*



The proposal from Gail Technology and Donato Solar for a ground-mounted solar field included buffers to address potential noise and sight concerns from residents.

CLIMATE

## WILL GREENER DATA CENTERS SOLVE COMMUNITY CONCERNS?

As the push to create electricity-hogging data centers intensifies, renewables offer options to meet the demand. *By Joe Tedino*

**A**S THE TECH industry builds more data centers for cloud computing and artificial intelligence (AI), communities across the country face greater demand on their local power grids, creating growing concerns about electricity rates and system reliability.

In 2023, data centers gobbled up about 4.4 percent of the country’s total electricity and could account for up to 12 percent by 2028, according to a report from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. The surge in usage has raised questions about who pays for these grid upgrades.

But what if a data center operator generated its own power from renewable energy like wind, solar, or other non-carbon sources?

Officials in DeKalb, Illinois, thought renewable-energy powered data centers could be a win-win. In late 2024,

Donato Solar and its affiliate, Gail Technology, proposed a solar farm and two data center buildings on 30 acres adjacent to a subdivision of townhouses and condominiums. The companies promised a self-sufficient operation with limited water use and the ability to channel excess electricity to the local utility company.

The project anticipated creating 60 to 70 construction jobs and up to eight permanent tech positions, and the city projected the business would generate about \$85 million in annual tax revenue. Because excess power would go back to the utility grid, city officials also saw the prospect of reduced fossil fuel use and lower energy costs, according to the planning department’s analysis.

The city provided details of the concept plan to residents who lived near the proposed site in January 2025, and some attended a commission meeting

later that month to ask questions of a representative from Gail Technology.

The proposed project gained the support of the city’s planning and zoning commission, says Dan Olson, AICP, DeKalb’s planning director, as well as from Mayor Cohen Barnes. Barnes said the project was preferable to other potential uses, like a trucking operation or industrial facility. After months of discussion, staff recommended approving the Donato solar farm and Gail data center.

Fast forward to September 2025, when city officials rejected the proposal after dozens of residents spoke out against it at planning and zoning and city council meetings.

The public outcry led to an obvious question: What went wrong?

### A renewable energy hub

For a college town mostly known for producing corn and soybeans, DeKalb and the surrounding county have become something of a renewable energy hub. In 2024, the city annexed, rezoned, and approved a concept plan for PureSky Energy to develop a 42-acre ground-mounted solar farm to support the city’s goal of providing locally produced renewable energy. Larger solar projects that will deliver power to the utility grid are planned outside the city over the next two to four years.

DeKalb also is home to a 500-acre Meta data center, opened in 2023 and later expanded, that uses 100 percent renewable energy. In November 2025, DeKalb officials received a proposal for a 560-acre data center to be located just south of the Meta facility.

Olson believes combining zero-carbon solar energy with a data center can “result in a reduction of both operational expenses and the environmental impact of the data center’s energy consumption,” and the Donato Solar-Gail Technology project was viewed as

supporting DeKalb’s 2024 sustainability plan. Although short on specifics, the plan urges local leaders to embrace renewable energy, when possible, to reduce its carbon footprint and foster local economic development, including green businesses.

Despite pockets of success, there are “surprisingly few” examples of big data center developments powered by clean energy, says Wilson Ricks, an energy systems researcher at Princeton University. But that could change. “Data center demand seems to keep

growing, natural gas supply chains are strained, and there is a huge existing pipeline for renewable energy and battery development in the U.S.,” Ricks says. “Our research has shown that a huge amount of load growth can be supported [with] hardly any increase in fossil-generating capacity.”

**Data center disconnect**

As it turns out, the Dekalb planning department faced headwinds as residents organized after the January 2025 commission meeting. After the

city scheduled the public hearing in September and included more details about its size and scope, homeowners turned out in force to voice concerns about noise, energy, water usage, the safety of battery energy storage systems, and the project’s proximity to their homes. They also feared a drop in property values and that the data center would put an unfair financial burden on the community.

Despite developers’ assertions that solar fields and data centers can make good neighbors, the commission members unanimously rejected the proposal based on the strong resident opposition, setting the stage for the contentious city council meeting days later when the motion to approve the project failed 5-2.

After the vote, Dekalb’s Mayor Barnes was critical of the planning and zoning commission’s rejection of the data center plan, saying it was “out of scope” and based on subjective decisions, rather than an objective review against the comprehensive plan.

Olson says the city has not wavered from its commitment to data centers and solar energy. “This was a site-specific issue that came up.” He takes a pragmatic view of public opposition and advises developers to engage proactively with adjacent property owners before submitting applications.

Olson also says it would be helpful to keep planning and zoning commission officials updated about their roles and responsibilities, including reinforcing findings of fact reports and supporting documentation before meetings where they expect larger than normal resident turnout.

“With cases like this, you have to refocus and make sure they understand what they are supposed to do,” he says.

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*Joe Tedino is a Chicago-based writer and activist focusing on climate, sustainability, and technology.*

**DEMYSTIFYING THE DATA CENTER DEBATE**

How can planners prepare for debates over data centers before project proposals come in?

Mike Auerbach, AICP, a senior associate at Carlisle | Wortman Associates, was part of a panel discussion aimed at demystifying data centers for planners at the Michigan Chapter of APA’s 2025 annual conference. Recently, he spoke with *Planning* about ways to communicate with elected officials and the public to dispel misinformation and zero in on what’s important.

**ADOPT ZONING LANGUAGE FOR DATA CENTERS NOW.** Many zoning codes make no reference to data centers. Auerbach says adopting zoning language—as well as requiring decommissioning guarantees for future unused or abandoned facilities as part of the approval process—is critical.

**GET THE PROPOSAL SPECIFICS IN WRITING.** This could mean requiring the developer’s initial application include a list of the specific equipment they plan to use, projections for water consumption, and a sound study to determine site-appropriate mitigation strategies. “By understanding the specific characteristics you’re dealing with, you can focus on telling people what the primary considerations are, what the potential negative impacts will be, and also what won’t be an issue,” Auerbach says.

**TALK TO THE COMMUNITY PROACTIVELY.** This includes explaining what data centers are and how they support the software and devices that people and the local government use daily. It also helps to explain that all data centers aren’t the same. “Some consume a lot of water because they use specific kinds of cooling equipment,” Auerbach says, “but there’s other common types of cooling equipment.” Depending on the area’s climate, different technologies—like electrical systems to cool data centers and closed-loop water systems—might be viable alternatives.

CAREER

# NAVIGATING A NEW KIND OF PLANNING WORKFORCE

Six generations working side by side bring both challenges and opportunities in a post-COVID, tech-driven world. *By Mary Hammon*



**F**OR THE FIRST time in history, six generations—from Gen Alpha to the Silent Generation—are working together. Included in the mix are Gen Z, millennials, Gen X, and baby boomers. Each has their own communication styles and expectations that can bring challenges and opportunities to the workplace.

The rapid pace of societal and technological change only heightens these complexities. And, as boomers near retirement age, nearly 76 million workers may leave the workforce, altering career pipelines and institutional knowledge.

Recently, APA brought together a multigenerational group to share their thoughts about what it means for the profession's future.

## Different paths, shared purpose

Baby boomer Don Roe, executive director of the St. Louis Planning and Urban Design Agency, says he got into

planning because he was “attracted to community and trying to make things better for people.” Gen Zer Adalee Wasikonis, a recent recipient of a master's degree in urban planning and policy from the University of Illinois Chicago, also entered the field for similar reasons of wanting to “be that bridge between decision-makers and community members, so we can make decisions together—planning with the community instead of for them.”

Shared values can unify planners among age groups and remind teams that they are working toward the same goal, despite differing experiences or expectations. “It's important for all of us to learn from one another,” says millennial Nader Afzalan, PhD, program director for sustainable environmental design at the University of California, Berkeley, and founder and CEO of The Triangle. “Talking about that ‘why’ we are doing all of this creates that shared narrative for all of us to be on the same page.”

## Building trust across ages

Open communication is the backbone of successful multigenerational teams, and you can't have that without trust. Emerging planners often encounter doubts about their work ethic or readiness—a dynamic that can close the door on meaningful collaboration. Trust also can become complicated when roles shift and younger planners assume leadership positions. Helping emerging planners ease into the workforce and recognizing “there will be a learning curve” creates rapport, Wasikonis says.

Ultimately, cultivating trust requires openness to challenging assumptions and the willingness to see colleagues of all ages, experiences, and backgrounds as collaborators. “The best way to bridge those gaps is by staying curious, asking questions, listening, and generally wanting to understand where others are coming from,” says millennial Dayea Shim, aicp, senior planner at HHF Planners.

## Multigenerational collaboration

While generational differences can create friction, they can also lead to dynamic teamwork if organizations are willing to rethink traditional hierarchies—instead of relying on rank to strengthen their work. Destiny Brown, a Gen Zer and PhD student in urban planning and development at the University of Southern California, considers this process “cross-collaboration,” rather than mentorship.

“It's really important to know, ‘What does it look like to break the ice?’” Brown says. “How can you be a little bit more open with yourselves as people, outside of being a worker, in the workplace?”

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*Mary Hammon, a former editor of Planning, is a freelance writer and editor in Chicago.*

# CHARGE ANXIETY



**While the state  
of national EV  
infrastructure goals  
remains in flux,  
communities are  
moving forward with  
their own plans.**

*By* DANIEL C. VOCK

*Photographs by* TIM KLEIN

# J U S T

months after President Donald Trump began his second term and started dismantling many federal policies from his predecessor to get people to buy and use electric vehicles, the city of Rolling Meadows, Illinois, installed six new EV chargers at city hall.

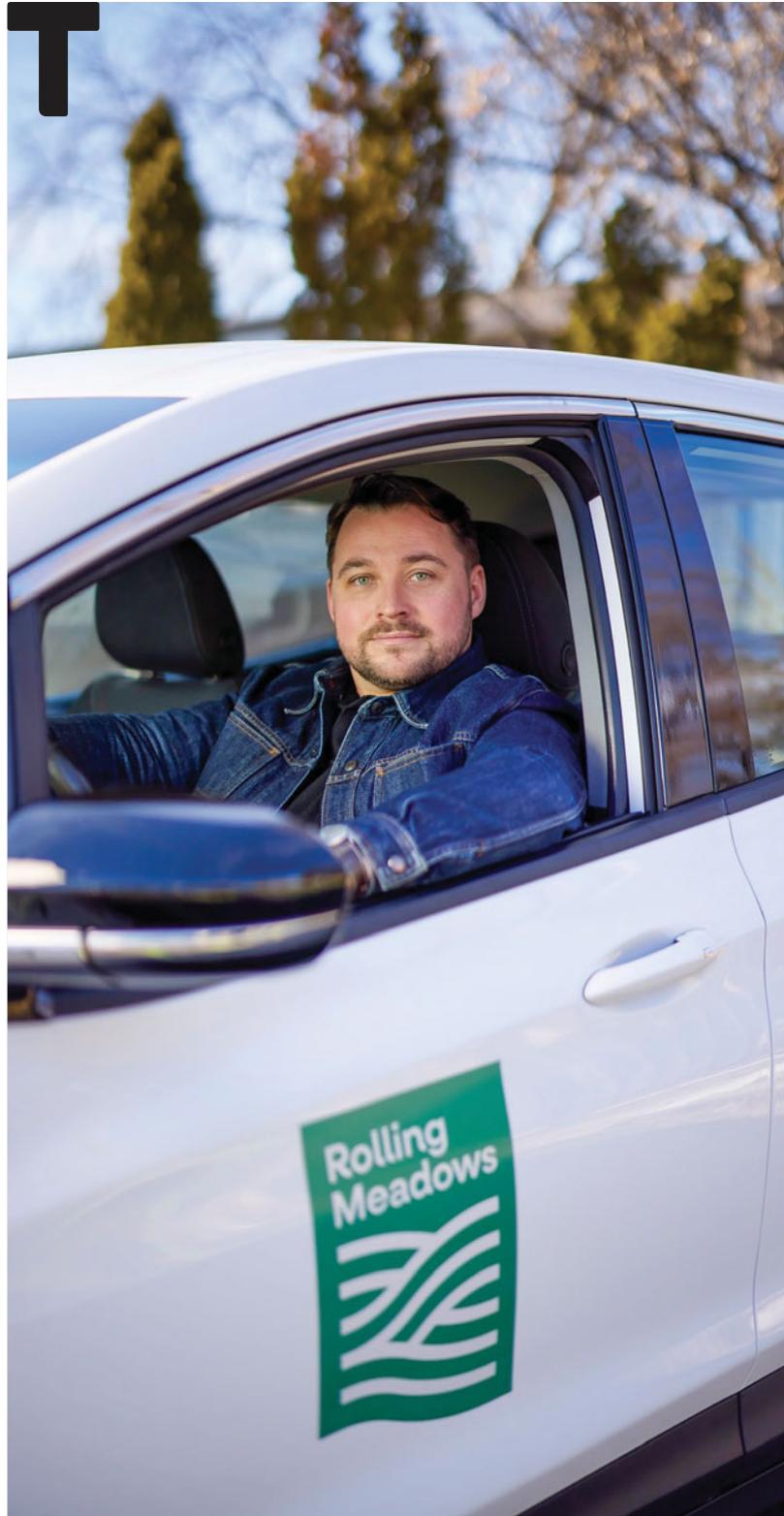
The chargers are free to members of the public, regardless of whether they live in the Northwest Chicago suburb, for up to four hours at a time. Rolling Meadows, home to about 25,000 people, also installed a seventh charger to power up its own EV—a Chevy Bolt used by the city’s building inspector. That charger would also support additional vehicles the city plans to buy in the coming years.

Meanwhile, the city updated its zoning code with ambitious requirements mandating new apartment and condo buildings be “EV ready” with conduit and electric infrastructure installed in their parking lots that would make it easier to add charging stations. Large commercial parking lots also must include EV chargers, and new gas stations must include one charger for every four gas pumps. Rolling Meadows has streamlined the application process for residential properties, too. Electric permits to install chargers in home garages are usually approved within three days.

It seems the turmoil at the federal level over EV policies and the auto industry’s increased wariness toward a switch to electric power have not slowed things down in Rolling Meadows. In 2025, the number of EVs registered in the city went from 265 to more than 450.

“There was some pretty healthy and robust discussion about how much we can rely on private development to install this kind of public infrastructure,” says Robert Savage, AICP CANDIDATE, a planner and management analyst for Rolling Meadows.

Council members also were concerned about the cost the new rules would impose on developers but ultimately opted to go forward anyway. “What it came down to is that we think the technology is here to stay,” Savage says. “Where you build chargers is where people buy EVs—and the more we can help that out, the more we’ll see those clean technologies on the road.”





Robert Savage, AICP CANDIDATE, is leading the charge for EV adoption in Rolling Meadows, Illinois. The city has installed free chargers for residents (and the city's Chevy Bolt) and has added new rules to require chargers in future developments.

## A CRITICAL JUNCTURE

The past year has seen massive changes in the EV landscape. Many of those have come from the federal government, as Trump and the Republican majorities in Congress have knocked the legs out from under critical programs.

Many of the earlier provisions enjoyed at least some bipartisan support, but the current administration has stopped doling out several grants that supported EV infrastructure, including the annual distributions to states under the \$5 billion National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (NEVI) Formula Program. Passed in 2021, it focused on building high-powered chargers along key interstate corridors. After litigation, the administration eventually flipped the switch back on for those grants but removed requirements written by former President Joe Biden's administration that it characterized as "red tape."

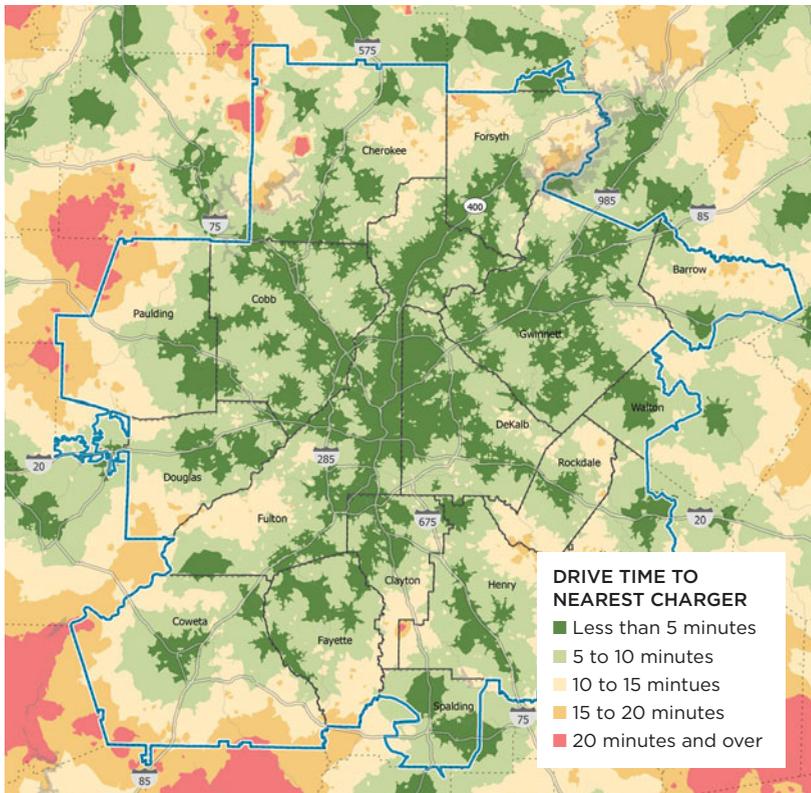
The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) also halted payments of the Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Grant Program, a companion to NEVI to help local communities and organizations—not just states—install chargers in public spaces, particularly in rural or low-income neighborhoods. In the final weeks of Biden's term, the agency awarded \$636 million to 49 recipients through the program, but it appears none of that money ever materialized. In December, 16 states and Washington, D.C., sued the Trump administration over the delay.

The GOP-led Congress also has made EV purchases less attractive. As part of its One, Big, Beautiful Bill, lawmakers ended a \$7,500 tax credit for buying certain new EVs and tax breaks for EV chargers installed after June 2026. It also ended penalties for automakers that didn't comply with fuel-efficiency standards and eased back mileage rules for new vehicles.

Meanwhile, automakers have curbed many of their most ambitious goals for transitioning to electric power. While EV sales have grown in recent years, they have fallen short of industry expectations. Ford is halting production of its all-electric F-150 Lightning trucks and replacing them with hybrids, and other automakers are scaling back their plans for heavy-duty EVs. Toyota and Honda also are focusing on developing hybrids instead of full EVs. This comes

## BUILDING A 21ST CENTURY TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

The Atlanta Regional Commission released the federally funded 2024 *Regional Transportation Electrification Plan* that supports the area's transition to EVs, and projects a 50 percent EV adoption rate of nearly 500,000 cars by 2030. The region intends to build on existing EV infrastructure (below).



SOURCE: 2050 METROPOLITAN TRANSPORTATION PLAN



as tariffs imposed by the Trump administration have made producing electric vehicles more expensive.

Preliminary data suggests that EV sales might have declined in 2025, the first annual drop since 2019, but EVs are still gaining ground overall. Customers bought EV models to get federal tax credits before those expired, and the number of available public chargers continues to grow. There were 233,000 chargers installed nationwide by the end of November 2025, an increase of 40,000 chargers from the previous year.

The private sector is responsible for much of that growth, including networks run by Tesla and other automakers. Chargers also have

become more reliable and powerful.

“People didn’t get the memo that they’re supposed to stop buying EVs and deploying charging stations,” says Matt Stephens-Rich, director of programs for the Electrification Coalition, a nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization.

Stephens-Rich says the spirit behind the NEVI program has been met, “if not by the states directing funds, then with the private investments that have been coming in.”

However, J.D. Power reported in August that EV consumers are growing less satisfied with their charging options, even as chargers—particularly the DC fast chargers like the ones



deployed by Tesla and at gas stations along interstates—become more widely available.

## SHIFTING GEARS

All the changes taking place have left many local communities trying to adjust to shifting circumstances while rolling out long-term plans to ease the transition to EVs. Federal incentives and automaker ambitions, for example, spurred so much investment into EV infrastructure in Southern states that the region is sometimes called the “Battery Belt.”

Georgia has been at the center of the recent boom. In July, electric truck maker Rivian announced it would open a 500-person “East Coast headquarters” in Atlanta to go along with a \$5 billion, 7,500-employee manufacturing plant in the region. In addition, Hyundai opened a new factory near Savannah to produce both electric and hybrid vehicles.

In 2024, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), an intergovernmental agency that serves as the area’s metropolitan planning organization, released a federally funded plan to support the transition. “EVs are among the many tools utilized in our regional planning work to reduce vehicle emissions in the Atlanta region and meet federal air quality standards,” says Paul Donsky, an ARC spokesperson.

Colorado is another state that went all-in to encourage EV adoption. Since 2024, the percentage of EVs sold out of all new cars is even higher there than in California, long the top state in the country.

State incentives helped. Colorado offered \$5,000 credits on top of the federal incentives in 2024—but state budget constraints dropped that to \$3,500 at the start of 2025, then to \$750 beginning in 2026. After the federal incentives expired last October, though, state officials announced they would increase incentives for low-income residents to trade in gas-powered cars for EVs, from \$6,000 to \$9,000.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration canceled several environmental grants for Colorado communities, including \$11.7 million to help Fort Collins install new chargers and electrify its municipal fleet.

Transportation planner Dashiell Bubar-Hall, AICB, says the canceled grants added to an already challenging environment. “Charging projects get very expensive very fast, and federal money helps cover the cost of the charger,” Bubar-Hall says. “But all of the extra work, including maintenance—which is actually the

expensive part—still needs to get covered with local dollars.”

Still, Bubar-Hall says the city is moving forward with fleet electrification. “We’re not going to abandon those efforts by any means, but we’re going to have to be creative about funding,” Bubar-Hall says, noting that Fort Collins already has eight electric buses.

The city also has tried to spur adoption of EVs through its building code by requiring most parking spaces in multifamily developments to either have chargers deployed or infrastructure installed to make it easy to put in chargers later.

## TROUBLE IN TRANSIT

For communities hoping to electrify their transit fleets, many significant obstacles remain. The Trump administration is de-emphasizing the transition to EVs, which was a major part of the Low- or No-Emission Grant Program.

When the DOT announced \$2 billion in awards through the program in November 2025, almost none of it went to zero-emission buses. Low-emission buses, such as diesel-electric hybrids or those that run on compressed natural gas, secured 97 percent of all the funds, according to Transportation for America.

“Now a program created nearly 10 years ago specifically to prioritize the deployment of zero-emission buses is going to buy almost none of them,” according to a Transportation for America press release.

That comes at a time when transit agencies’ procurement efforts are constrained by tight budgets. Lance MacNiven, vice president and transportation decarbonization planning lead for AECOM and former chair of APA’s Transportation Planning Division, says there are limited options for acquiring electric buses and other equipment because of longstanding rules requiring agencies using federal funds to buy products made in the U.S. With several bus manufacturers going under in recent years, “the limited supply makes buses more expensive,” MacNiven says.

Ongoing issues with battery range and reduced federal support are causing many agencies to stick with buses powered by compressed natural gas or other technologies for now. However, MacNiven believes these issues are temporary. “Each administration is a blip on a long trend line,” he says. “There may be years that you don’t get as much funding or





Although it's challenging for cities to now build out their EV network, Fort Collins, Colorado (above), is still committed to adding to its current fleet of eight electric buses.

ridership goes down, but you have to keep your eye on the prize. You can't just completely halt your goals because of one president. You have to keep your agency going and stick to your values.”

## PAVING THE WAY

Several years ago, the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus started a program in the Chicago region for local officials to prepare for the anticipated wave of new federal funding and demands from residents and businesses to use EVs.

This included creating a checklist of everything a municipality could do to prepare for electrification—from rewriting zoning codes to exploring vehicle-to-grid systems and electrifying government fleets. It also launched a 20-month course to help local leaders decide what options best fit their communities, says Edith Makra, the group's director of environmental initiatives.

So far, 38 municipalities have completed the program, but not all of them have seen the upward swing in EV interest that Rolling Meadows did. Carol Stream, for example, has seen residential permit applications for EV chargers drop from one to two every month to just three in all of 2025, says Tom Farace, AICP, Carol Stream's planning and economic development manager.

That's partially because of the nature of the community—it has no space that would be a logical spot for public chargers. Still, the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus training program helped, Farace says. “It was almost like a train-the-trainer scenario.”

Communities in the area also can take advantage of incentives offered by the power company, Commonwealth Edison (ComEd), which has paid out \$140 million since the program launched in 2024. That money has helped buyers purchase or lease 3,000 vehicles, including 130 heavy-duty vehicles and buses. “What we are most proud of is that 80 percent of that has been for low-income and equity customers,” says Cristina Botero, ComEd's senior manager for beneficial electrification.

Meanwhile, Makra says the preparation is already paying off across the region. “The rate of increase for EV registrations is higher in the EV-ready communities than the state or county average,” she says. “We're seeing a bounce in constituent demand and a bounce in the idea of having a progressive, adaptable community that's resilient, ready for the next thing, and taking advantage of the resources that we do have.”

*Daniel C. Vock is a freelance reporter who primarily covers state and local government.*

COURTESY CITY OF FORT COLLINS (ABOVE)

Phishing emails have become more polished, with names, seals, and dummy signatures of real officials.



Amount (USD)

\$600.00



Attach File

I trust this message finds you well.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

Settle the attached invoice via wire transfer.

Zoning Check Fee	\$1,250.00
Site Plan Review	\$900.00
Public Notice Publication & Mailing Costs	\$400.00
Staff Review Time & Coordination	\$650.00
Planning & Zoning Commission Agenda Inclusion	\$450.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$3,850.00</b>

Amount (USD)

\$2,800.00

\$700.00

\$600.00

\$700.00

\$4,800.00



# FRAUD

# ALERT!

Planning departments are rethinking digital security as a swarm of imposters scrape public records to send city clients fake invoices.

By PATRICK SISSON Illustration by CATHERINE BIXLER



his past September, contractor Rochon Corporation received good news about its bid to install a digital sign at a Minneapolis middle school. An email apparently from city planner Ben Carrier said the company's sign variance was recommended for approval, and if Rochon paid an attached invoice for \$4,800, it could avoid

administrative delays on the way to final authorization.

The email noted that instructions for wiring payment would be sent separately because "all correspondence associated with this case must be conducted via email" for "accountability, transparency, and ease of auditing"

Rochon Corporation's staff quickly clocked the message as a fake. Although Carrier was a real person, his email address wasn't `Planning-Dept.CityOffMinneapolisMN@usa.com`. While the other details of the request were spot on, a fee of that amount—paid through a wire transfer, of all things—was not standard operating procedure. Instead, the city relies on in-person or over-the-phone credit card payments.

Since May 2025, a growing number of phishing emails have hit inboxes throughout Minneapolis, says city planning director Meg McMahan, AICP. "It just stuck out to us because the amount of detail that they had was alarming," she says.

### Phishing attempts on the rise

This new form of attack—using public planning data to compose counterfeit emails requesting money—has gone nationwide. In many cases, the phishing emails come within hours or days of public meetings or website postings.

According to news reports and interviews with planning officials, dozens

of departments have reported such attempts, from small cities like Martinsburg, West Virginia, to Miami, Houston, and Las Vegas.

Several planners say these emails are increasingly sophisticated, with seemingly official seals, references to municipal and state statutes, and phony signatures. However, there are tells—like odd payment requests, subpar graphic design, and fake email addresses. Several cities also have reported the use of the `@usa.com` domain.

In Montclair, New Jersey, the local detective bureau is investigating phishing attempts that used the `@usa.com` domain, according to *Montclair Local*. David Genova, principal of Greenwood Development, a local real estate development firm, was confused when a fake email requesting a wire transfer appeared in his inbox late last year.

"I've done 30-plus projects in town, and I've never seen an email like this, and I've already paid my application fees and escrow fees, so I went, 'What is going on here?'" Genova told the news outlet.

One planner in Oskaloosa, Iowa, however, reports that a local business fell for the scam, wiring payment to a fake organization

supposedly based in Colorado. The applicant paid an alleged planning department invoice for a rezoning application, but soon after received a second invoice. Confused, they called the department to sort it out and learned the first one was a scam.

“It’s like punishment for these applicants for doing the right thing,” says Shawn Christ, AICP, the city’s development services director. He was especially frustrated that his name was used in the fake email. “It just looks bad on everybody,” Christ says.

### What does this mean for the future?

In response, many planning departments have altered their operations to warn developers and residents about these phishing attempts. Many suspect—but can’t definitively prove—artificial intelligence (AI) is being used.

They also question whether this tactic may erode the public’s trust. “Balancing that tension is something that’s worrisome to me, especially when I think about the potential for the sophistication of this sort of thing to escalate,” says McMahan of Minneapolis.

Cybersecurity training has become standard for municipal workers as the prevalence of these cons increases. FBI data estimated phishing scams cost public and private victims at least \$70 million in damage—but many incidents go unreported, so the amount could be even more.

In Miami, the police department is investigating a series of phishing emails to see if internal databases were breached or email accounts were hacked, says Erica Lee, assistant to the director of the city’s planning department. In 2025, the planning department was made aware of about a dozen poorly composed phishing emails requesting thousands of dollars in payment. As the year progressed, similar scam emails became more polished, with details apparently scrubbed from the city’s website and the names and dummy signatures of real officials.

### Is AI an accomplice?

Suvidha Bandi, AICP, planner manager for Houston, has seen similar scam emails on and off since May 2025. Like the emails flagged in Minneapolis and Miami, they urge recipients

## 3 WAYS PLANNING DEPARTMENTS CAN FIGHT SCAMMERS

### REMOVE CONTACT INFORMATION

Removing email addresses before land variance or zoning requests are publicly available makes it more challenging for scammers to collect that data. Oskaloosa, Iowa, has started redacting contact information, including phone numbers, before applications are posted online, says Shawn Christ, AICP. This process also has made a difference in Houston, says Suvidha Bandi, AICP. That city’s planning department staff noticed that every time they didn’t take out email addresses from a batch of applications, they’d hear about scam emails over the following weeks.

### BE TRANSPARENT AND CONSISTENT

Clearly outline the steps for submitting applications to the planning department in relevant communications. This way, applicants understand what is—and is not—involved with the process. Consistent messaging among departments about how residents should interact with the city and how city staff will interact with them also is essential, says Paul Cameron, chief information officer for Minneapolis.

### PRIORITIZE EDUCATION

Notify residents of these scams, how to avoid them, and how to report them. Oskaloosa even shared a copy of a phishing email on its Facebook page, which caught the attention of local media and radio. “I think using both social media and traditional media was important to help the message spread more quickly to a wider audience,” Christ says.



Houston and Oskaloosa, Iowa, posted on Facebook and X to warn residents about scams.



to respond for wire payment instructions.

“It’s no coincidence that an uptick in this sort of thing, and phishing in general, coincides with an uptick in the adoption of generative AI,” says Joseph Avanzato, a security operations and forensics team leader for the Varonis cybersecurity firm. Varonis has tracked a roughly 700 percent increase in phishing attacks throughout 2025, and a 200 percent increase in phishing attempts using generative AI.

Municipalities are targeted because of their significantly large workforces and because they oversee a lot of payments, says Phillip Harmon, a cybersecurity and data privacy associate at Woods Rogers.

While it’s hard to get commercial AI programs and large-language models to do something illegal, Avanzato says, scammers can simply set up their own local AI models, train them on thousands of invoices and local planning and building codes, and set them loose.

Most cities don’t report such attempts, Harmon says, and the amounts requested—sometimes amounting to a few thousand dollars—don’t necessarily capture the attention of law enforcement.

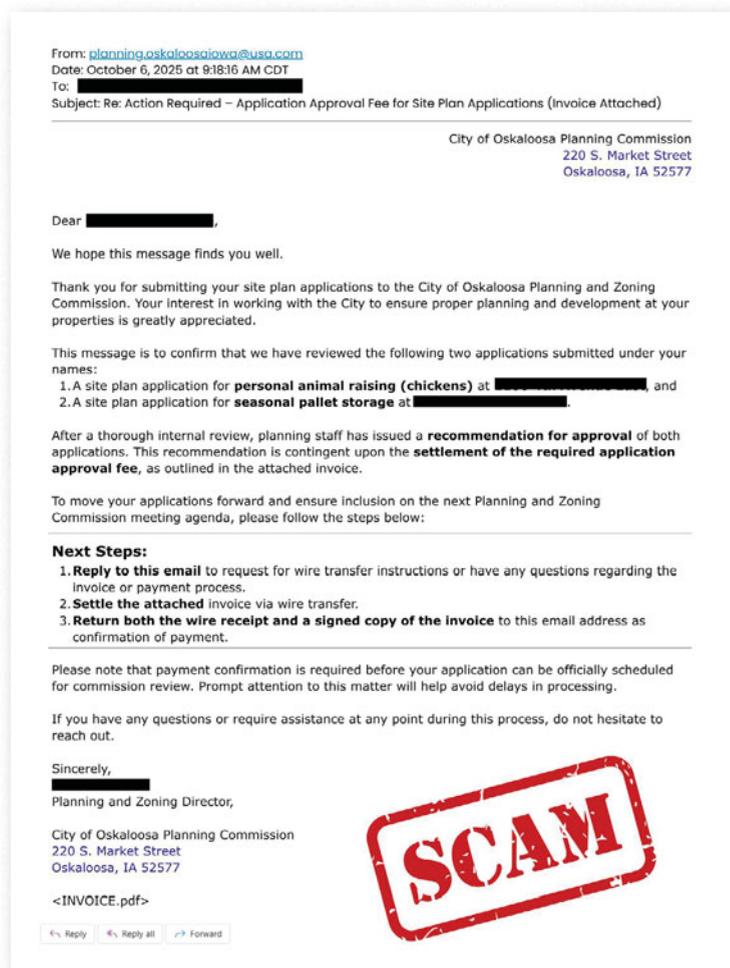
### Fighting back with information

Many of the affected cities have deployed or are creating information campaigns to deter further phishing scams. In Minneapolis, the planning department quickly added warnings to its pre-application process, so applicants are aware of who would contact them and the right way to pay.

Planners also teamed up with the city’s IT department for a campaign warning residents about these scams. In Miami and Houston, officials have reviewed their application processes to inform applicants preemptively of the right channels for communication and payment.

These scams show the potential downside to increased transparency that may allow others to use information for sinister purposes. As technology allows bad actors to create even more personalized, detailed cons at scale, the issue of transparency will only become more crucial.

“This isn’t the answer people want to hear, but for these criminals, it’s a business,” Harmon



In Oskaloosa, Iowa, a scammer emailed an applicant seeking the “required application fee,” after scraping the details of a real form.

says. “They’re money-motivated. If there is an increase in any of these types of attacks, it’s because they’ve worked, right?”

While technology to spot and deter scams continues to improve, focusing on the human element—training users in official channels of communications and how to avoid such scams—remains the better deterrent, Harmon says.

“This might be the unfortunate case where you just don’t have a technological fix,” he says. “The fix is not to make the data available, but that’s not an option if departments are required to be publicly transparent.”

*Patrick Sisson, a Los Angeles-based writer and reporter focused on the tech, trends, and policies that shape cities, is a Planning contributing writer.*



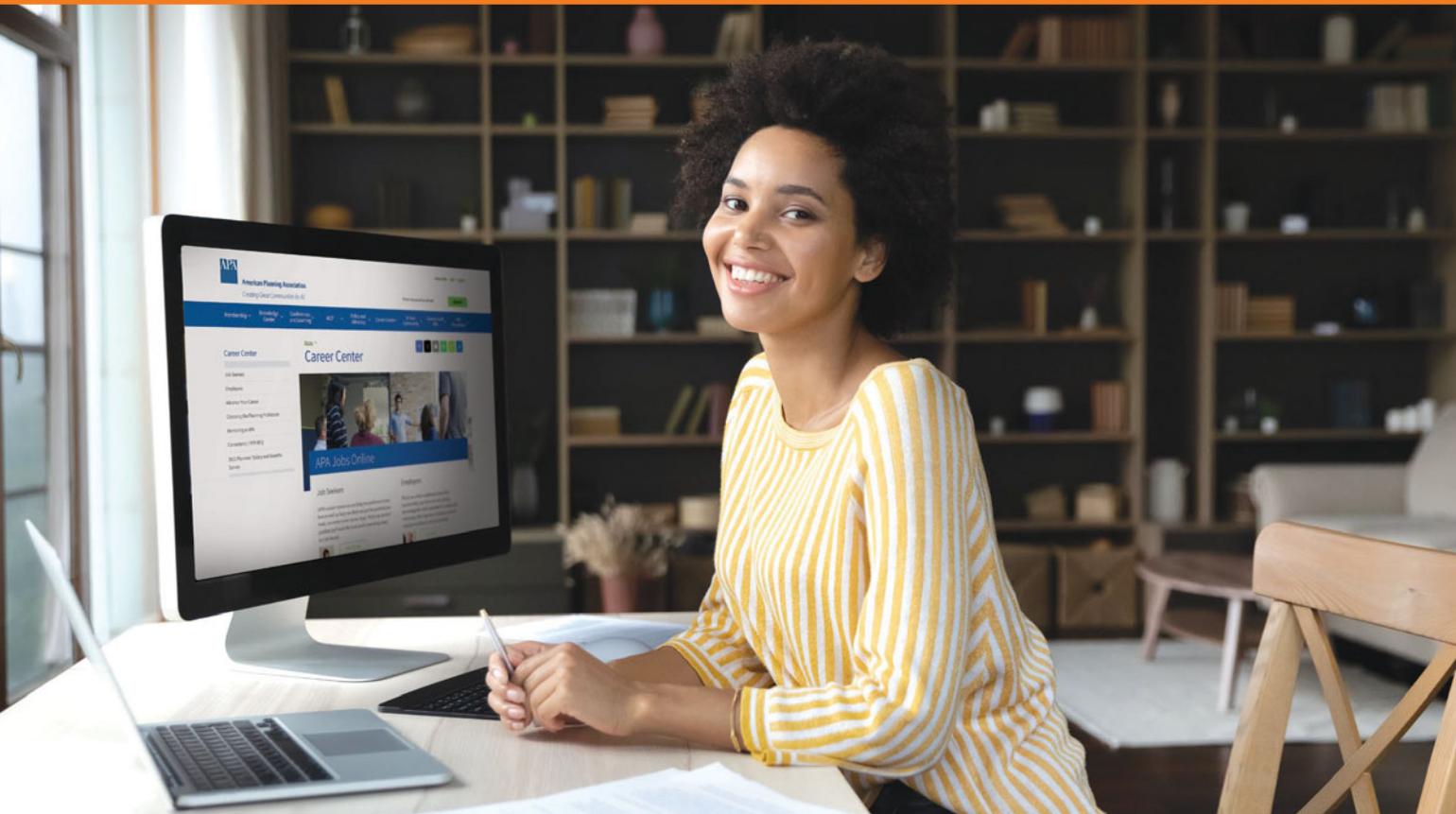
## PITTSBURGH INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

**WITH A ROOFLINE BORROWING FROM** the Steel City's iconic rolling hills and supported by strong beams that call to mind the tree-lined terrain of Western Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh International Airport's new \$1.7 billion, 811,000-square-foot terminal gleams. But its focus on sustainability might be its greatest strength, with a rainwater capture system that irrigates the four terraces and natural landscapes. Designed by Gensler + HDR, in association with luis vidal + architects, the airport, which serves 10 million travelers annually, is also independently powered by a first-of-its-kind 20-megawatt microgrid boasting more than 9,300 solar panels and on-site natural gas wells. Another 11,000 solar panels are planned to be added by 2027, creating an extra 4.7 megawatts in clean energy.

About 120,000 tons of concrete for the new airport was repurposed from an old airfield. (Got a climate win-win that makes your Community Green? Tell us about it: email [mstromberg@planning.org](mailto:mstromberg@planning.org).)

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