

PLANNING



A YEAR WITHOUT
DOTS

MONTANA'S MIRACLE

SPACEX LAUNCHES
A CITY

SCHOOL'S OUT,
REUSE IS IN

How One Suburb Redefined Their Growth Through GIS

Sandy Springs, Georgia, is one of the fastest-growing cities in the Atlanta metro area. Half the city's housing stock is apartments, making it an attractive alternative for young people who can't afford Atlanta's rising home prices. Only a few cities in the US have gained more millennial residents.

The city's leadership embraces this growth and strives to build a Sandy Springs that appeals to new residents without jeopardizing existing communities. This commitment to inclusivity and balance requires constant dialogue with city leaders and the residents they serve. Managing this pace of change means weighing competing priorities—from affordability and infrastructure to equity and neighborhood character. A geographic approach, utilizing smart maps generated with geographic information system (GIS) technology, is instrumental in helping city planners visualize, communicate, and moderate this discussion.

A Neighborhood at the Center of Change

Few places reflect these citywide challenges more clearly than the Crossroads neighborhood. This neighborhood is a microcosm of the city's diversity and the challenges it faces in managing growth while preserving unique character.

The Crossroads reveals how social and environmental challenges intersect geographically. The neighborhood is home to a Hispanic community with deep roots in Sandy Springs, which exists alongside The Prado, a large shopping area that includes offerings such as Life Time Work, an integrated coworking space and health club facility. Across the street from the mall is El Taco Veloz 2, an outpost of Atlanta's oldest taqueria. That geographic juxtaposition—an established local institution and a work/wellness facility for remote office workers—hints at the growth-related challenges Crossroads residents and the City of Sandy Springs must navigate.

Visualizing What Change Looks Like

In early 2023, local officials began holding community meetings to discuss the future of the Crossroads. To promote transparency and build consensus, the city made 3D maps available, allowing residents to visualize proposed changes. These community discussions culminated in the adoption of the Crossroads Small Area Plan. It detailed how the city plans to protect and rehabilitate neighborhood housing stock, increase open space, improve walkability, and promote mixed-use zoning.





Creating a 3D view helps Sandy Springs planners communicate the proposed changes to the public and the opportunity to developers and businesses.

Within the plan, some recommendations are uncontroversial. Few would object to improving pedestrian safety around Roswell Road, especially for kids who walk under an overpass to reach their school.

However, residents are concerned about rezoning. Community members want to know what the city means when it encourages mixed-use development. A potential 10-story apartment development brought concerns about affecting the existing viewshed. Planners were able to facilitate these discussions using color-coded 3D GIS maps that helped residents understand proposed changes by displaying how the neighborhood looks now and how it will look in the future.

After this initial discussion, planners modified a 3D geospatial digital twin of the Crossroads in ArcGIS® CityEngine®, Esri's leading 3D tool, with added facades and foliage to more accurately represent existing conditions and the surrounding neighborhood context.

To address concerns of blocked views, planners utilized a 100-foot topography difference to their advantage so that the 10-story building at the lower elevation was the same height as single-story buildings at the higher elevation. This helped the community and elected officials realize the impact would not be a towering skyscraper seen from the main thoroughfares.



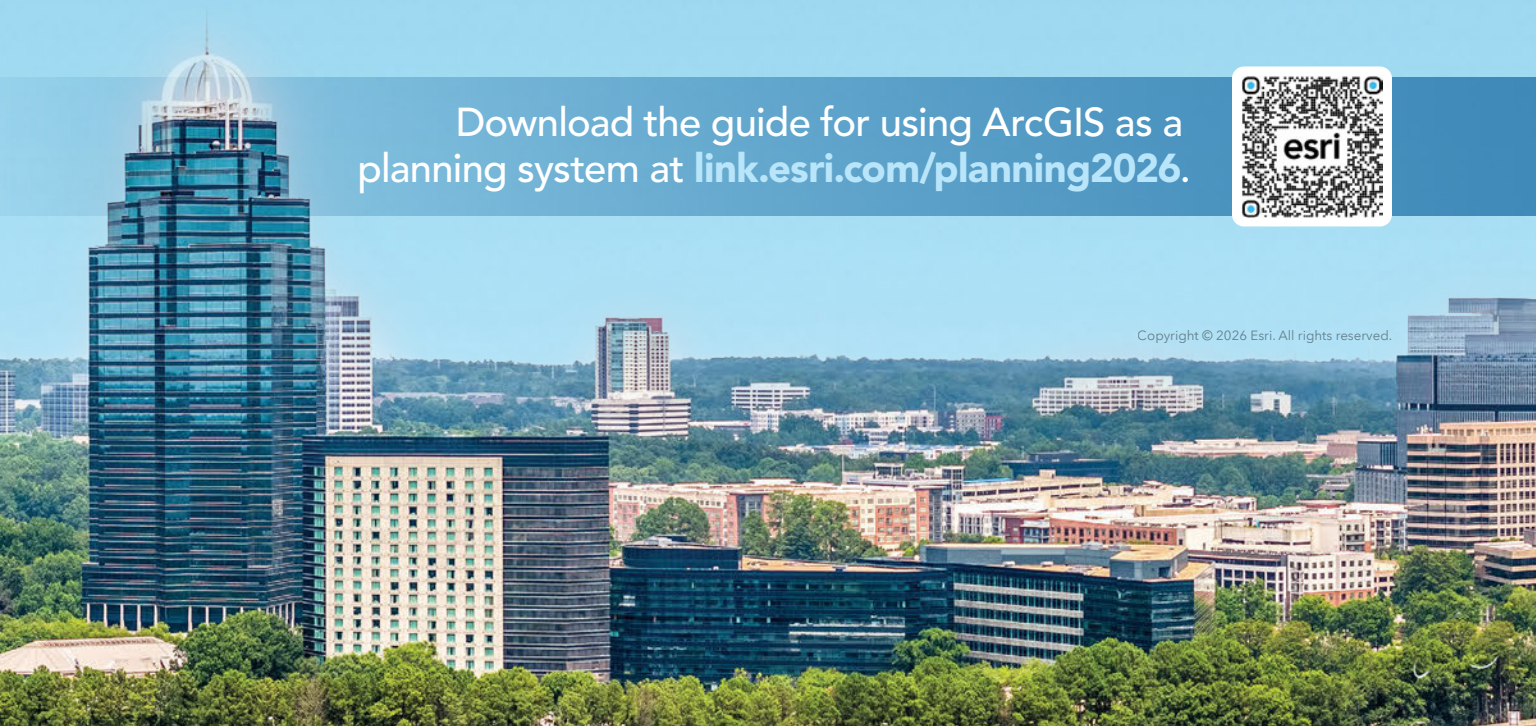
The rendering shows a 10-story apartment building within the context of the surrounding development.

These efforts show how data-driven planning can turn complex growth decisions into shared understanding. As Sandy Springs continues to evolve, city leaders are proving that growth doesn't have to come at the expense of community character. With GIS as a planning foundation, they are turning complex data into clear, shared understanding—helping residents, planners, and decision-makers move forward together.

Download the guide for using ArcGIS as a planning system at link.esri.com/planning2026.



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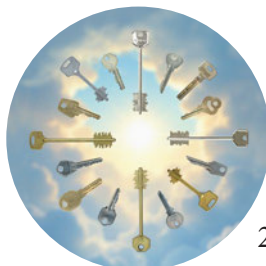


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On the cover: Allison Sinyard, AICP, (left) and Denise Brookins, AICP, show there's more to community engagement than dot exercises. From top: small towns; Montana's miracle.

Contributors



Matt Odom

Dipping Out of Dots, cover and page 22

Matt Odom is a Georgia-based photojournalist dedicated to capturing the unsung heroes and transformative initiatives shaping local communities—the people and projects that quietly make a big difference.



Gregory "Scott" Winton, AICP

The Big Advantages of Small Town USA, page 16

Scott Winton, AICP, is a planner and former mayor of El Paso, Texas. While researching this article, Winton was surprised how many people are already working on food resiliency and local self-reliance. "It gave me hope," he says.



Ievgeniia Dulko Maisie Westerfield

AI Is Updating the Planner's Toolkit, page 19

A planner with experience in both Europe and the U.S., Ievgeniia Dulko explores the future of planning through her role as a foresight manager at APA. She focuses on researching a world mediated by artificial intelligence (AI) and helping planners understand emerging trends. When Maisie Westerfield started her internship at APA, she was skeptical of AI and how it might fit into planning. Through her work with Dulko, she says, "I feel much better equipped to meet the moment."



PLANNING

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

The American Planning Association will lead the way to equitable, thriving communities by creating unique insights, as well as innovative and practical approaches that enable the planning community to anticipate and successfully adapt to the needs of a rapidly changing world.

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FROM THE DESK OF APA'S LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY COMMITTEE CHAIR

Advocacy Works When It Comes from the Heart

FOR PLANNERS, ADVOCACY can sometimes feel abstract—something that happens through policy statements, issue briefs, or written testimony. The first time I testified at the Massachusetts State House in Boston, I immediately realized how important it was to tell lawmakers not just what I believed, but why. I understood then, as I do now, that policy decisions are shaped by people willing to connect lived experience to legislative action.

Since then, some of the most meaningful advocacy I have witnessed has happened not in hearing rooms but in hallways, cafes, and homes. One prominent instance came during a Planners' Day on Capitol Hill event, when I watched a planner light up as they recounted an impromptu conversation with a member of Congress outside the crowded cafeteria in the Dirksen Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C.

The planner arrived prepared with talking points and handouts, but the setting shifted quickly and they had to speak from their heart. They talked about the realities facing their community: municipal budget constraints, the difficulty of modernizing zoning, and the years-long effort to support more housing production. They answered questions candidly and connected their community's experience to the policies we were there to support—including what would later become the Department of Housing and Urban Development's PRO Housing program and elements now folded into the bipartisan 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act.

What struck me most was the way the planner connected federal legislation to the day-to-day realities of people and places. They made planning tangible for that legislator.

I remember encouraging them afterward not to underestimate the impact of that interaction.



'I understood then, as I do now, that policy decisions are shaped by people willing to connect lived experience to legislative action.'

—JENNIFER M. RAITT

Many planners discount the value of their own stories, but planners are uniquely positioned to explain how federal decisions shape neighborhoods, the health of downtowns, transportation options, infrastructure systems, and housing opportunities because we operate at the intersection of policy and implementation every day.

Show up, speak up

APA's three legislative priorities are fundamentally about equipping communities with the tools they need to navigate increasingly complex challenges. Housing sup-

ply and affordability remain urgent concerns—and our top legislative priority. Transportation investments continue to shape economic opportunity, mobility, and resilience. Federal support for hazard mitigation, infrastructure, and sustainability planning is also increasingly critical.

APA's advocacy efforts help ensure planners have a voice in national conversations, and I've learned that advocacy does not belong only to national organizations or professional lobbyists. Some of the most effective advocacy comes from planners willing to speak honestly about what they are seeing on the ground.

At a time when public trust in institutions can feel fragile—and sometimes hostile—planners can demonstrate the value of thoughtful, collaborative problem-solving rooted in community experience.

That hallway conversation lasted only a few minutes. But it reminded me why planners need to keep showing up, speaking up, and telling the stories of the communities they serve.

Jennifer M. Raitt is executive director of the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments in Lowell, Massachusetts, and serves on the APA Board of Directors. She chairs the APA Legislative and Policy Committee.

Patrons can raise a glass to the past as they party in a rooftop bar atop the former Bok High School in Philadelphia.

STEPHEN RECCHIA



INTERSECTIONS

WHERE PLANNING AND THE WORLD MEET

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HOUSING

When Classrooms Close, New Opportunities Open

As demographics shift and more schools close, planners are critical to finding innovative ways to reimagine those spaces. By Daniel C. Vock

A SHUTTERED SCHOOL in Kansas City, Missouri, got a new life as a campus for science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) activities. A former Catholic school in Waterbury, Connecticut, may soon be transformed into housing for medical staff at a nearby hospital. And a suburban community near Milwaukee is repurposing a recently closed college campus into much-needed apartments and single-family homes.

Innovative uses for former school buildings are becoming more common, and planners increasingly are being called on to steer conversations about the vacant properties. “As planners, we know that schools are the center of their neighborhoods,” says Shannon Jaax, AICP, officer of bond planning and construction for Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS) and chair of APA’s Public Schools and Communities Division.

Ariel Bierbaum, PhD, an associate professor of urban studies and planning at the

University of Maryland, says school district administrators and other public officials have started to recognize the broader community impact of school closures and repurposing efforts after a wave of closures in the past decade. “They’re more attuned to the fact that these schools have meaning to people—emotionally, but also politically,” she says.

That’s why the inclination of most school districts is to find another use for their vacated buildings, such as housing or space for specialty programs, rather than sell them, says Adam Lubinsky, FAICP, a principal/partner at WXY Studio in New York City.

More closures could be coming. Nationally, public school enrollment is declining, tied in part to demographics: The population is aging, people are having fewer kids, and immigration has decreased. The expansion of school choice policies—such as charter schools, vouchers, and increased support for home schooling—also are major factors.



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But closures aren't the end of the road for these buildings.

Reuse success in Kansas City

In 2009, KCPS closed 30 schools to address budget shortfalls and declining enrollment. Jesse Lange, who now leads the district's repurposing efforts as the manager of planning and real estate, says KCPS opted to find new uses for their buildings in phases rather than flooding the market with new properties.

To build community support, district officials held site tours, allowing residents to express their frustrations or share good memories. Those frequent interactions also helped lead to better projects. "This has never been a money-making endeavor for the school district," Lange says. "Our board and leadership have really been committed to ensuring that we get a good project that the community supports and not have a building that just sits there."

Twenty-two of the buildings have now been sold to other entities, and 15 are up and running. Seven of those have become housing, resulting in 469 total units. Three sites became senior housing, while the other four are market-rate or workforce housing. A 16th property—also housing, with 45 units of two- and three-bedroom townhomes—will open later this year. Other uses include mixed-use development, an adult day care service, a recreation center, a neighborhood park, and private schools. To ensure developers delivered on their promises,

the district used tools like property and deed restrictions and community benefit agreements.

The repurposing effort helped KCPS emerge in a stronger position. Enrollment has grown in the past four years, and voters approved a \$474 million bond in 2025—the first in nearly 60 years—to improve existing schools and build two new elementary school campuses.

Going beyond housing

The planning profession needs to have a better understanding of the impact that school closures can have on neighborhoods. "The harms of closure don't end when school buildings are closed," says Bierbaum, the

The first Catholic school in Waterbury, Connecticut, will soon fill a need for workforce housing to support the nearby hospital.



Maryland professor and author of *Schools for Sale: Disinvestment, Dispossession, and School Building Reuse in Philadelphia*. "These buildings are public assets. They have public value."

One common fear, she points out, is that school districts will sell the school buildings to developers for housing that could trigger gentrification. That was the fear after Philadelphia closed 30 schools in 2012 and 2013. But

there are alternatives. The old Bok High School, for instance, now features workspaces for makers, artists, and nonprofits, as well as restaurants and a preschool.

Meanwhile, the Philadelphia Housing Authority bought a high school in North Philadelphia and reopened it as Vaux Big Picture High School in partnership with the school district and the teacher's union, with an emphasis on offering student internships and regular off-campus experiences to further their careers. The housing authority also runs a workforce development center there.

School districts, Bierbaum says, could learn from the unconventional partnership at Vaux. "If you only think about utilization of a building as having kids in seats at desks, that's not a great use of the building," she says, "but you can think creatively."

Finding community solutions

In the Milwaukee suburbs, county officials had to find a new use for a college campus that the University of Wisconsin (UW) system closed in spring 2025. They concluded that more housing would help the area the most.

University officials announced the closure of the 71-acre UW Milwaukee-Waukesha site more than a year before it occurred, giving local officials time to prepare. Waukesha County was at the center of those discussions because it owned the land. An open house focused discussions on styles of multi- and single-family housing, asking community members for feedback. They looked at

examples of real projects in the county, using sticky dots to vote for their preferences.

“It allowed us to change the paradigm,” says Dale Shaver, director of parks and land use for the county. “Now, I think the community is generally understanding and is moving down this path.”

Housing—particularly missing middle housing—is in short supply in Waukesha County, Shaver adds. This project is expected to add 700 single-family and multifamily units that will have a built-out value of \$150 million.

Meanwhile, in Connecticut, the city of Waterbury bought a closed downtown Catholic elementary school just so it could have a say about the fate of that important parcel in the heart of its community. The resulting plan will convert St. Mary Catholic Grammar School into workforce housing for a nearby hospital. “It illustrates what can be done with properties that had been viewed as low value,” says Bob Nerney, AICP, Waterbury’s city planner.

Because it is a teaching hospital, many doctors, nurses, and even administrators come from all over to train there, but housing in the area is hard to find.

“If the city had not gotten involved, you would have seen a radically different outcome,” Nerney says. “That outcome may have been positive or may have been very detrimental to the city, and I think the city did not want to take that risk.”

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



LAND USE

SpaceX Gets a Crash Course in Launching a Company Town

Elon Musk is navigating the ins and outs of setting up a newly incorporated community while facing land use and environmental criticisms. By Francine S. Romero, PhD

In the fledgling city of Starbase, Texas, houses and other properties have been bought up by SpaceX and its employees.

IN MAY 2025, the Space Exploration Technologies Corporation (SpaceX), owned by Elon Musk, launched a different sort of endeavor: a company town in Texas called Starbase.

Sitting at the confluence of the Rio Grande River and the Gulf of Mexico, the 1.6-square-mile town of 600 people is home to the private spaceport for the Starship spacecraft and Super Heavy rocket that have been designed to eventually reach the moon, Mars, and beyond.

Musk has pursued this ambition since at least 2021, when he posted on X: “Creating the city of Starbase, Texas. From thence to Mars, and hence the Stars.” But the new town is generating significant concerns on Earth.

Ready for takeoff

After arriving in then-unincorporated Boca Chica Village in 2014, SpaceX and its employees began purchasing residential properties and other land. Now, they make up most of the population.

Starbase was incorporated in 2025. While lacking the broader powers of a home-rule city, it’s governed by a mayor (a current SpaceX vice president) and two commissioners (a current and a former company employee), who have land use, taxing, spending, and other powers. Its chief administrative officer is City Administrator Kent Myers, PhD, a seasoned city management veteran.

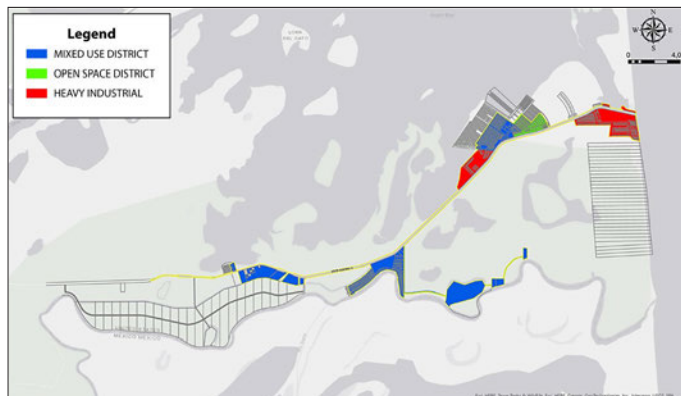
The fledgling city is now working on approving its public

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safety and welfare responsibilities, including setting the official boundaries, adopting a nuisance ordinance, extending hours for alcohol sales, and defining procedures for requesting gated street access. After the adoption of comprehensive planning and zoning, three categories were established: mixed-use for most parcels, open space, and heavy industrial. Although several landowners expressed opposition, the ordinance passed unanimously. Meanwhile, services like law enforcement and mosquito control are provided through agreements with Cameron County.

In June 2025, Starbase's city commission approved zoning districts for mixed use, open space, and heavy industrial, which are SpaceX sites (in red).



The company's recent analysis reports a gross economic output of \$13 billion and estimates 70 percent of its 4,000-person workforce is local, including from nearby Brownsville. However, the incorporation also underscores the demanding interconnections of land, people, and governments, as some non-residents and a few remaining original residents have expressed concerns.

Keeping plans in the air

In 2018, when Musk was targeting this site, he declared at a press conference, "We've got a lot of land with no one around, and so if [a rocket] blows up, it's cool."

Rockets *did* blow up, and even when launches went as planned, the impacts were intense. Debris, fire, hazardous fuels, and the deluge cooling system have threatened the entire surrounding ecosystem. While the company must abide by federal and state regulations, "one of the challenges is that people often get confused with the fact that the city is separate from the private company," Myers says.

One example is the annexation of the 1,000-acre

the management of state lands, declares that "public access to Gulf Coast beaches is not just the law, it is a constitutional right." But that authority effectively shifted to the city when the Texas legislature assigned closure power to the state's Space Commission last year, which then issued a standing order granting Starbase virtually unilateral authority. This is under review by the Texas Supreme Court.

Because the Federal Aviation Administration is likely to allow up to 25 annual launches, those could lead to significant closures—a concern of the Esto'k Gna (or Carrizo/Comacruz) Tribal Nation. The beach, flora, and fauna sustain its spiritual traditions, and SpaceX activities have precluded ceremonies on specific dates. Myers says the city is "attempting to minimize any inconvenience by providing advanced notices for any beach closures."

Will Starbase take flight?

Starbase's founding has been unusually charged for a small city incorporation. While the city describes itself as "a symbol of human ambition ... that will inspire future generations on this planet and others," opponents believe it is laying claim to land without fully recognizing or respecting its culture, traditions, and ecosystem.

In between lies the prosaic demands of establishing a new municipal government.

Rockhands Mitigation Bank, approved in January by the Army Corps of Engineers. The city is collaborating with Cameron County on an erosion response plan, but environmentalists criticized the intent to use this land to mitigate SpaceX's future destruction of other similar areas elsewhere.

Beach access is another volatile issue. The Texas General Land Office, which oversees

Francine S. Romero, PhD, is a professor and the chair of the Department of Public Administration in the College for Health, Community, and Policy at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

What's the Future of Hazard Mitigation?

AS HAZARD MITIGATION responsibilities shift away from the federal government, and the role of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) seems to be in doubt, planners are navigating ways to respond and adapt. But the future isn't all doom and gloom, says Chrissy Caggiano, AICP, chair of APA's Hazard Mitigation and Disaster Recovery Division.

Caggiano, technical manager for planning at Michael Baker International, shares why there's still room for optimism.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Q&A

is worth the investment. And three is that I have the

ability and the capability to get it done.

If you're going to have that thoughtful shift, you need to have the upfront investment in the capability and capacity of state, local, tribal, and territorial governments. My analogy is that if we are asking the states to cater dinner for us, we can't expect them to do it without either paying for it or dropping off the ingredients in the recipe.

JOSEPH DEANGELIS: What is a planner's role in hazard mitigation today?

CHRISSY CAGGIANO: Early in my career, mitigation planning was dominated by emergency managers. Over my 15 years of writing and reviewing mitigation plans nationwide, one of the trends that we've seen is that the plans are stronger, more comprehensive, and more actionable when you've got a planner in the driver's seat or navigating the process.

Sustained risk reduction, in a long-term sense, often comes down to where and how we build. Those are central tenets and values of planners. Beyond that, the role of the planner is often tied to building buy-in, partnerships, and championing risk reduction. Community engagement and community-oriented solutioning are central to the planner's wheelhouse.

DEANGELIS: What are some strategies to transition mitigation responsibilities from federal to local and state officials?

CAGGIANO: In a behavioral model, we typically talk about three interim steps. One is the belief that my risk is real. Two is that mitigation

HEAR THE FULL STORY

Scan the QR code below or go to planning.org/podcast to listen to the full conversation on the APA Podcast series *Trend Talk*.



DEANGELIS: What does that look like for planners engaged in this work?

CAGGIANO: I would love to see the trend go in the direction of fewer mitigation plans and more mitigation planning, more of that consistent act towards planning for a resilient and climate-adaptable future and less meeting a set of requirements. And that is going to mean more of that consensus building, really understanding what are my community's values? What is our capacity? And when will we need help?

DEANGELIS: How can states take ownership of hazard mitigation?

CAGGIANO: There are states that have really been excelling in this space for decades. Yes, it is California, but it's also Iowa, Florida, and Massachusetts. What it comes down to is government efficiency. State turnover impacts mitigation projects. They take a lot of political will. But there are avenues for states to take more ownership. The big one FEMA offers is Program Administration by States (PAS), where you can be a PAS in two areas. One is around the delegation of plan approval, and the second is around the delegation of grants management.

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DEANGELIS: How are planners coping with this environment of uncertainty?

CAGGIANO: I was walking around Philadelphia, and a vendor had a shirt that said, “It is what it is, and it ain’t great.” I think that is where a lot of us are right now, because the change has been so rapid. The central question we often get is: Where’s the money going to come from? When you have competing priorities, mitigation tends to fall lower on that list of priorities, which is why the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) was so important for so many years. There hasn’t been any HMGP authorized, I believe, since February—that’s a pretty big change.

I think we’re moving from the shocked period to “we still know this is important. This is key to who we are.” Now, it’s moving into a phase with a bit of hope, of “Alright, we’ve got this. How can we do it again in the future?”

‘Mitigation projects take a lot of political will. But there are avenues, even now, for states to take more ownership.’

—CHRISSY
CAGGIANO, AICP

DEANGELIS: What are some potentially optimistic trends?

CAGGIANO: My dream scenario is that we aren’t talking about hazard mitigation planning; we’re just talking about how we have safe and sustainable communities.

I’m optimistic about more community-oriented and micro-level planning that’s aligned to a specific problem or pain point. We’re probably not going to fix everything at the same time, but how can we chunk the mitigation or resilience puzzle?

There are some interesting reform bills on the table that could harness what planners’ role looks like. The big one is the FEMA Act of 2025, which looks at how we can stack federal resources to more efficiently deliver. Then, the inherent nature of planners is that we want to help. As an industry, we’re sitting here saying, “Put us in, coach.”

Joseph DeAngelis, AICP, is a planner and research manager at APA. He is a coauthor of the 2026 Trend Report for Planners.



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PLAN TO WATCH

Can a Whole City Be ‘Too Big to Fail’?

A new documentary examines how the Empire City reached its breaking point and its return to stability. By Ezra Haber Glenn, AICP

ON OCTOBER 30, 1975, the *New York Daily News* made history with a shockingly blunt headline: “FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD.”

New York City was teetering on the brink of financial disaster, and without a federal bailout, most experts feared bankruptcy was days away. And while the curt headline misquoted President Ford’s actual words, the statement succinctly captured the administration’s position.

How the Empire City arrived at this breaking point—and how city and state officials charted a difficult course back to fiscal stability—is the subject of *Drop Dead City*, a new documentary by directors Michael Rohatyn and Peter Yost. Using a

combination of archival footage and current interviews, the film immerses viewers in how the city struggled to meet its financial obligations.

The structures that support our central cities and their essential public services are complex, politically sensitive, and often confusing, enshrouded in Byzantine fiscal instruments, obscure terms, acronyms, and—gasp!—actual math. All too often, the important details of vital funding mechanisms and tax policies are ignored by the public—and for good reasons: They just seem *so darn boring*. But they are extremely important to the work we do as planners. Even small changes in tax policies or bond rates can have big consequences.

As the film explores, there is a

The film unearths how New York City lost its grip on the budget, with gritty archival footage of strikes and public protests.



Drop Dead City is available to purchase on Fandango at Home, Apple TV, and Amazon Prime Video.

basic formula required for good financial health: Revenues need to cover expenses. Revenue can come in everything from local taxes and special assessments to state and federal transfer payments, user fees, or property sales. Expenses, though, can be hard to predict or control and are often connected to other fluid dynamics.

After realizing future revenues would not meet current debt obligations, auditors uncovered a \$6 billion hole in New York City’s budget. Soon, bills were due without funds to cover them, leading to cycles of cuts, layoffs, tuition increases, hospital closings, public protests, and other dramas, which played out in the streets and in the news.

Given the complexity of the crisis, it would be difficult for a film to fully explore every aspect, but Rohatyn and Yost do an admirable job laying out the debate in an engaging way. In short, there was more than enough blame to go around.

It’s also refreshing to see a movie where the heroes are the people wearing white shirts, pocket protectors, and green visors—in short, the planners—who came together to analyze the data, negotiate with stakeholders, build trust, and think creatively. And, despite the president’s harsh words, New York lived to see another day. But the city’s salvation did not come easily or cheaply, and there were difficult compromises all around.

Ezra Haber Glenn, AICP, teaches at MIT’s Department of Urban Studies & Planning and writes about cities and film. Follow him at thecityinfilm.substack.com.

Bastrop, Texas, used its Main Street Program to revitalize its downtown through commitments to economic vitality and community events like the Bastrop Homecoming Parade. CCR STUDIOS



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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

THE BIG ADVANTAGES OF SMALL TOWN USA

Why identity and infrastructure strategy matter more than ever. *By Gregory “Scott” Winton, AICP*

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, a quiet crisis is etched into the landscape of rural America. Towns built around railroads that once held thousands of residents now have half as many. Shrinking graduating classes, half-filled pews in historic churches, and Main Streets lined with vacant storefronts tell the story: Communities are operating far below their built capacity while carrying the costs of infrastructure designed for a different era.

This decline was not born from a lack of grit—it is the byproduct of structural change. Today, many small towns are at a crossroads. One path leads to continued decline or gradual absorption by a nearby metro area. The other is a deliberate road to reinvention.

4 pillars of revitalization

While cities provide intensity and scale, small towns can provide calm, connection, lower living costs, and proximity to daily destinations. To unlock the potential of existing infrastructure and

land, communities can focus on four practical areas.

1 CULTIVATE LOCAL ENTERPRISE. Agriculture remains central to many of these communities, and food production is foundational resiliency. Greenhouses and small-scale food production can supply high-quality products to nearby urban markets. Shared commercial kitchens can convert raw produce into value-added goods. Community supported agriculture programs in places like San Marcos, Texas (population 90,000), connect multiple local growers directly with consumers through subscription-based distribution.

The Central Texas Farmers Co-op strengthens this model by allowing producers to aggregate, market, and distribute their products collectively—an alternative to conventional food supply chains.

Meanwhile, events like maker fairs and skill-share festivals—common in towns like Ithaca, New York (pop. 34,600)—bring resident talent into public



view and often lead to co-ops and micro-businesses. In Washington, Iowa, a city of about 7,300 residents, a 15,000-square-foot former department store was converted into The Village, with six shops of a few hundred square feet each.

Towns also can mentor youth in the trades and professions that help sustain and improve the community they inherit. In Taylor, Texas (pop. 18,500), small fabrication and specialty manufacturing firms, including precision machining and metalworking shops, serve regional industries such as semiconductor manufacturing, electronics, and advanced industrial production.

2 DIVERSIFY THE HOUSING STOCK. To thrive, a town needs more than large-lot single-family homes, so small towns are reintroducing missing middle housing—duplexes, cottage courts, accessory units, boarding houses, and apartments above shops.

Bloomington, Indiana, a university town with a population of around 85,000, has amended local codes to permit cottages and other missing middle housing, which creates attainable options and increases housing choice.

Housing diversity also broadens the tax base, supports local employers, and allows residents to remain in the community through different stages of life. Claremore, Oklahoma, home to about 19,500 people, implemented a pilot program using pre-approved building plans that helped streamline permitting and contributed to increased applications, approvals, and new construction activity.

3 PRIORITIZE STEWARDSHIP. Small towns can lead in sustainability while reducing strain on aging infrastructure. Shade trees lower cooling costs. Visible solar and water-harvesting projects demonstrate fiscal and

environmental responsibility. Low-impact development practices, preservation of creeks, and native vegetation bring nature in.

Hillsborough, North Carolina (pop. 10,000), has adopted a strategy focused on clean energy, resilience, and environmental stewardship. It is transitioning municipal operations to 100 percent clean and renewable energy by 2050 and focusing on maintaining greenways, promoting energy efficiency, and supporting habitat restoration.

Preserving and restoring existing buildings conserves the energy in materials and construction, reduces demolition waste, and reinforces small-town identities. In tiny Spring City, Utah (pop. 1,000), the restoration of limestone homes and buildings helped establish the town as a National Historic District and a destination for visitors, supporting a small but meaningful tourism and arts-based economy.

Planners also are integrating natural features into transportation. In the 1980s, Pflugerville, Texas, focused on preserving tree corridors, agricultural fencerows, and creek corridors with the town's associated floodplain areas. As the population expanded to more than 65,000, this system is now a 50-plus-mile hike-and-bike trail linking neighborhoods, schools, employment, and shopping.

4 RECLAIM THE WALKABLE GRID. Most historic towns were built at a human scale in a traditional grid pattern—and for people, not cars. Walkability supports local commerce, improves public health, strengthens social connections, and increases safety and independence for all residents.

In Bastrop, Texas (pop. 14,800), downtown street improvements include narrower lane widths, safer pedestrian crossings, and subdivision standards that reinforce connected, grid-style street patterns. These efforts increased transportation options while reducing

long-term infrastructure redundancy and ongoing maintenance.

Self-determination, even when growing

When a small town is in commuting distance of a growing city, it may experience a surge in population that feels like renewal.

Without intentional planning, though, development patterns often mirror metropolitan edges: disconnected subdivisions, widened arterials, and highway-oriented retail. Main Street struggles to compete with regional access, and initial tax gains may be offset over time by the cost of maintaining low-density growth.

In this pattern, a town becomes primarily a bedroom community, dependent on regional forces beyond its control and burdened with a fiscally unsustainable infrastructure. However, decline is not inevitable, and a small town can grow while preserving its distinct character. These places can prioritize existing infrastructure over outward expansion and ensure that growth is a source of fiscal strength. Such towns were built for thousands of people and can support vitality again—not by recreating the past, but by shaping a future rooted in resilience, human connection, and strategic growth.

HOUSING SUPPLY ACCELERATOR PLAYBOOK

To learn about more actionable strategies to increase housing availability, scan the QR code below or go to plnn.org/hsaplbnk.



Gregory "Scott" Winton, AICP, is a community planner, real estate broker, developer, and former mayor with more than four decades of experience in urban design, land development, and municipal governance.

TECH

AI IS UPDATING THE PLANNER'S TOOLKIT

5 projects that drive meaningful change. *By Ievgeniia Dulko and Maisie Westerfield*

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) technologies are rapidly becoming embedded in the systems that shape our communities and the everyday work of planners. Pilot projects, experiments, and protocols offer creative and

promising examples of how AI can expand planning capacity, while also raising important ethical questions, potential risks, and implementation challenges. Check out APA Foresight for these and others at planning.org/foresight/ai.



WALKABILITY, BUT WHERE?

Researchers in Hong Kong used visual AI to determine ease of mobility for older residents along city streets. The study, conducted by Perkins Eastman, used object detection and image segmentation to identify elements of a street, then paired the frequency of those elements with survey data about where elderly people choose to walk. A higher frequency of benches and trees was found to have the closest positive relationship to a high percentage of walkers. This Hong Kong study can be modeled in other cities to determine what street elements walkers want most and where they are lacking.

PROJECT STATUS:
Complete 2025



AI TRANSIT SWARM

In Denmark, where only 8 percent of residents regularly ride trains, delays were something Danske Statsbaner officials knew they needed to solve. They partnered with multiple AI companies to create a delay model in which a “swarm” of smaller AI models separately analyzed different stations, delay factors, and more to create the most accurate picture of what causes delays. The swarm model can now predict a delay within three minutes at 95 percent accuracy, and the agency is addressing delays with more precision and improved on-time service for riders.

PROJECT STATUS:
Complete 2025



WILDFIRE WATCH

The Orange County Fire Authority in California has implemented a preventive monitoring system using multiple AI systems that spot new wildfires and alert authorities before they can spread. In January 2025, one detection system spotted its first fire overnight in a remote area, where a 911 call would have been unlikely. The system has the potential for widespread application across other disasters in many locales. Projects like these could help address the impacts of hazards in environmental and infrastructure planning and potentially save lives.

PROJECT STATUS:
Launched 2022, ongoing



PERMITTING, STREAMLINED

After Hurricane Milton damaged homes and infrastructure in 2024, causing an influx in new building applications, Hernando County, Florida, employed an AI tool that can read permit applications and compare them to zoning requirements to determine code compliance. This process, which used to take the county 45 to 60 days, now can be completed in two to three minutes. As natural disasters increase in climate-vulnerable places, streamlining the permitting process will be a necessity for planners.

PROJECT STATUS:
Launched 2025, ongoing



TICKET CAM

Cameras, which use machine-learning AI to identify cars parked illegally in bus lanes, were mounted on bus windshields on two Los Angeles Metro lines in November 2024, with ticketing beginning the following February. The cameras produce an “evidence package” that includes photos and information such as vehicle license plate number and the incident date and time for a human to review. By April 2025, Metro had issued nearly 10,000 tickets and expanded the program to two more lines. This program further incentivizes drivers to stay out of bus lanes, improving travel time and experience for transit riders.

PROJECT STATUS:
Complete 2025

Ievgeniia Dulko is APA's foresight manager. Maisie Westerfield is a former foresight intern. This article is adapted from the 2026 Trend Report for Planners.

THE PROFESSION

PLAN FOR SUCCESSION NOW TO AVOID MAJOR DRAMA LATER

Effective leadership transitions require investing in people and systems.

By Amanda Acevedo



Without a clear plan in place, you could wind up with a Logan Roy-level power struggle right out of an episode of HBO's *Succession*.

SUCCESION PLANNING is not just about filling roles, but also about sustaining people, knowledge, and relationships. This clear theme emerged from Elizabeth Dickson, AICP; Emily Liu, FAICP; Jill Lawhorne, AICP; and Robert McHaney, AICP, who shared candid insights on navigating leadership transitions in an recent APA Career Catalyst webinar.

Build resilience early

Succession planning must be proactive, especially as a major wave of baby boomers, who make up 76 million workers, could leave the workforce in the next decade. “There’s a large leadership transition that’s currently underway, and if there isn’t a successful transition, there’s a lot of risk and pressure involved,” said Dickson, a principal planner at Dudek.

And it’s not just executive roles.

Mid-level planners often hold critical operational knowledge and manage day-to-day work. Documenting processes, creating shared templates, and building habits of reflection, such as post-project debriefs, can ensure that knowledge remains.

“When we lose people, it’s not just that staffer that we’re losing,” said Lawhorne, former community development director for Juneau, Alaska. “We’re losing the context they have learned about the community, and we can lose public trust.”

If you find yourself stepping into leadership without a clear succession plan, start by listening and collaborating. Engage staff to understand what matters most and where immediate attention is needed.

Develop people

The strongest organizations are those

that invest in developing their staff over time. Mentorship is a cornerstone of that, and it should not be a one-way transfer of knowledge, but a reciprocal relationship that evolves over a career. “Fostering future leaders is essential,” said Liu, the director of planning and development in Dallas. “My own career has been shaped by the generosity of people who invested in me.”

Organizations also need to rethink their approach to career growth. Creating flexible, transparent pathways allows staff to build a range of skills and experiences that prepare them for leadership in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Unexpected insights that matter

Critical thinking is important in an increasingly technology-driven field. Tools cannot replace the judgment required to navigate complex community dynamics, political landscapes, and human relationships. Investing in these skills remains essential.

Finally, succession planning is not the responsibility of a single leader. It is an ongoing shared effort that requires intention at every level of an organization, honest conversations, and a willingness to invest in people and systems that prioritize continuity and growth. “Planners are the backbone of our society,” said McHaney, chief of integrated planning at The Goodman Corporation, “and now they get to become someone who can give back.”

As the profession continues to evolve, so too must the way it prepares its future leaders. With thoughtful planning, strong mentorship, and a commitment to knowledge sharing, organizations can navigate leadership transitions not with uncertainty but with confidence.

Amanda Acevedo is APA's Career Services and professional development manager.



The 1940s-era Parkway Village garden apartments in Queens, New York, housed nearly 500 United Nations employees, delegates, and families from more than 50 countries.

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MORE THAN JUST GARDEN VARIETY HOUSING

New reviews of books on the ‘rare success story’ of garden apartments, LA’s smog journey, and reframing poverty in the suburbs.



Garden Apartments: The History of a Low-Rent Utopia

Joshua B. Freeman, 2025, University of Chicago Press, 288 pp, \$35

DESPITE THE MILLIONS of units built during the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s, garden apartments have not been respected by scholars or policymakers. This book argues, however, that garden apartments have generally served their residents well and have been “a rare success story” in America’s efforts to provide affordable housing.

The high point for garden apartments occurred immediately after World War II. The massive wave of apartment construction resulted directly from government action with the passage of Section 608 legislation that promoted rental housing by offering mortgage insurance lending that was essentially risk free.

Planners should be interested in this book because the history of garden apartments highlights three dilemmas slowing expansion of multifamily housing today: how government can stimulate private financing without the fraud and corruption of the Section 608 program, how to foster housing quality while minimizing cost, and how to nurture socially vibrant communities that are also socioeconomically diverse.

—David P. Varady, *University of Cincinnati*

APA members can read the full reviews, originally published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, at planning.org/japa.

Smog and Sunshine: The Surprising Story of How Los Angeles Cleaned Up Its Air

Ann Carlson, 2026, University of California Press, 312 pp, \$26.95



LOS ANGELES HAS made significant progress in air quality, but still gets a bad rap. The issues are complex, and solutions require the sustained confluence of public demand and activism, determined policy entrepreneurship, government coordination, and some impressive scientific and engineering breakthroughs. Several chapters consider applying air pollution lessons to abating greenhouse gas emissions. The book does not purport to advance policy innovation theory or provide an activist’s campaign manual, but it will resonate with environmental policy practitioners.

—Daniel Press, *University of California, Santa Cruz*

In Levittown’s Shadow: Poverty in America’s Wealthiest Postwar Suburb

Tim Keogh, 2023, University of Chicago Press, 328 pp, \$26



THIS BOOK REFRAMES suburbia not as a space defined by exclusion alone but as one structured by exploitation. It shows how policymakers repeatedly misdiagnosed the problem of poverty by focusing on spatial redistribution rather than confronting the labor and housing regimes that structured inequality within the suburbs. Efforts such as fair-share housing proposals or suburban dispersal programs often reproduced inequities. This critique is especially valuable because it highlights the limits of place-based solutions that are not accompanied by broader reforms.

—Thomas J. Vicino, *Georgia State University*

How a pledge to eliminate stickers led to curiosity, creativity, and better community engagement.

By JON DEPAOLIS

Dipping Out of Dots



Allison Stewart-Harris, AICP, can pinpoint the exact moment she was done with dots.

Several years ago, while brainstorming with a colleague about community engagement ideas for a client's meeting, she was told to just use a standard dot exercise—having residents put a sticker next to their preferred choice. The reason? It was easiest.

"It was a disaster," recalls Stewart-Harris, then-associate principal and planning studio manager at TSW, an Atlanta-based firm. "The meeting went poorly. The client was unhappy, and I was personally really annoyed. We spent all this time brainstorming cool stuff, and we wound up doing the dots."

That's when Stewart-Harris made up her mind: She wasn't using dots again. "I think the way planners have done engagement has gotten very stale," she says. "As a design firm, we're supposed to be creative. It is not creative to bring a bunch of dots."

In summer 2023, Stewart-Harris got a chance to try something fresh. TSW was hired by Gwinnett County—a growing, diverse area northeast of Atlanta of more than a million people—to help with a comprehensive plan project. The consultant was tasked with getting feedback from about 80 communities representing some 180 different nationalities.

"We needed a menu," Stewart-Harris remembers thinking.

In 2023, Gwinnett County, Georgia, residents ate up an engagement event styled as a cafe scene. Using pens topped with flowers and set in a vase at each table, participants selected from a menu of options related to housing, transportation, and so forth. TSW planners Roxanne Raven, AICP, and Nick Johnson, AICP, acted as waitstaff.

IMAGES AND GRAPHIC COURTESY TSW; PENS AI GENERATED





An idea formed. What if community members could see all the options laid out before them, like you might find on a sushi menu? Land use was a huge focus, but other required elements also had to be addressed, like economic development, housing, and transportation. “Those became different parts of the menu,” says Nick Johnson, AICB, a former TSW planner who worked on the project.

Through this thought process, the Daily Community Café was born. Participants walked into a retail space decorated to look and feel like a restaurant. They were handed a menu and directed to a table with a bouquet of flowers—doubling as pens—and asked to make their way through three “meals” featuring different questions. The wait staff was made up of TSW planners.

“It went really well, it was a lot more fun, and we had these really great conversations,” Stewart-Harris says. “After that, I felt like we put this idea in our back pocket. It started with Gwinnett County and then exploded into a bigger thing.”

The Year Without Dots, as it would later be called, was upon them.

 I pledge I will break my addiction to dots, using alternative means to engage the public.



To better understand why the TSW team broke up with dots, it's important to know that they don't actually hate them. “It can be preferred by clients because you do end up with a visual,” says Johnson, who is now programs director at the Georgia Conservancy.

Dots also can be cost-effective for clients because it doesn't take a lot of the consultant's time or materials. “You're basically asking, ‘What do we want information on?’ Vote yes or no,” says Stewart-Harris, who is now director of long-range planning for Gwinnett County. “I think that's one of the reasons I disliked dots in the first place—the simple yes or no. But you don't know why, right? There's no explanation, so it is hard to actually do anything with it.”

After TSW's success with the Daily Community Café, they had proof of concept that going dot-less could work. They also had team members, like Allison Sinyard, AICB, who were working on similar user experience projects—trying to understand how clients interacted with TSW's services.

So, a year after the café experiment, the planners pledged to stop using dots. Some signed a paper, and others even took videos of themselves reciting the words. “We helped keep each other accountable,” says Jill Ferenc, AICB, a senior associate at TSW.

From August 1, 2024, to August 1, 2025, they agreed to “abstain from using dots”; provide their communities with “better, more fun things to do at meetings”; and provide clients with “more creative input ideas for advancing their projects and the community's

vision.” They vowed not to use squares, stars, or other shapes “under the false pretense that they are not actually dots,” and they even alerted their subconsultants and clients about the pledge, so everyone was on the same page.

One of those clients was Fairburn, Georgia, a city of 18,000 near downtown Atlanta, where the team was hired to help with a comprehensive plan update.

The city wanted to align its policies with a new community vision, “recognizing that



TSW's Allison Sinyard, AICB, (above) worked with Fairburn, Georgia, planning and zoning director Denise Brookins, AICB, (below) to create a “Plant Your Flag” activity for the city's comprehensive plan update. The concept also was used at a library event (right) that drew in teens, among others.

FROM LEFT, MATT ODOM (2); COURTESY TSW; COURTESY GWINNETT COUNTY



Fairburn has grown significantly” since its last update, says Denise Brookins, AICP, the city’s planning and zoning director. Specifically, they hoped community engagement would reach a broader cross-section of residents, create more meaningful conversations rather than transactional feedback, and ensure residents felt informed and optimistic about the future.

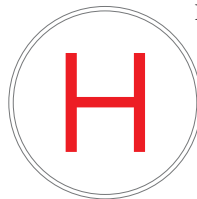
Sinyard, who worked on the project, says the city was well built out, so they needed to focus on redevelopment. “We needed to get

some buy-in on what a potential land use scenario there look like,” she says.

They created the “Plant Your Flag” activity, writing out development types on tiny flags, each representing a priority, use, density, or idea that mattered to community members. Then, they invited participants to place the flags on a map. “This created space for storytelling and context, allowing the planning team to understand the reasoning behind community priorities,” Brookins says. “The activity shifted the focus from tallying votes to facilitating conversation and capturing values-based input.”



I pledge I will provide our communities with better, more fun things to do at meetings.



Hope Pollard clicks through images on her computer of the community engagement events TSW helped with over the past two years, her voice crackling with excitement. As the memories replay in her mind, she comments aloud about the diversity of community members interacting with planners during the Year Without Dots.

There’s the Vietnamese night market, where they organized a photo booth activity on short notice—complete with signs in the participants’ primary language. There’s a Spanish-speaking mother, standing beside her young daughter at an open house, answering questions about placemaking in her community. There’s a group of teenagers at the library, drawn in by the chance to give their “red flags versus green flags” about what is or isn’t working in their town, but staying to share what they’d like to see more of in the future.

As Pollard scrolls through these images, the Gwinnett County senior community planner says it confirms what she already knew. “The beauty of the Year Without Dots is that it’s not something that someone can just come to, read a board, put a sticker on, and walk away,” she says. “They have to talk to you to participate, and that creates more conversations.”

There also were no basic dot activities in Dunwoody, Georgia, a northern Atlanta suburb with a population of 51,000 that brought the firm on to help review its comprehensive plan in spring 2025. The city wanted to know what scale of development community members wanted in certain areas.

Working in their favor was that these conversations didn’t have to happen at city hall because they had access to an empty retail suite at a shopping center in town. When Anna Baggett, AICP, an associate at TSW, learned about the possible site location, she and others on the team leaned into it.

At “Shop Your Vision,” participants browsed stations in the store to shop for up to 10 items they envisioned for the community’s future, including improvements or opportunities for transportation,



economic development, sustainability, housing, land use, or quality of life. Then, they would check out with a member of the planning team, who logged the responses.

“The mayor loved it from the moment she heard about it,” recalls Paul Leonhardt, AICP, Dunwoody’s planning and zoning manager and community development director. The novel approach helped to “push people into a positive mindset,” he adds.

Baggett saw that firsthand. Before the event, she remembers being warned that a particularly vocal community member would probably attend and might bring a literal soapbox to stand on. However, the activity’s set-up and flow meant no one participant could dominate, Baggett says.

“We were able to have a lot of one-on-one conversations with people who normally didn’t speak up because the meeting format made that possible,” Baggett says. And that vocal community member? “She came up to me several times to explain that she was

“Shop Your Vision” participants in Dunwoody, Georgia, browsed various stations to choose up to 10 items they wanted for the community’s future, then checked out with Allison Stewart-Harris, AICP, (right), a member of the planning team.



I WILL NOT USE SQUARES, STARS, OR OTHER SHAPES UNDER THE FALSE PRETENSE THAT THEY ARE NOT ACTUALLY DOTS. THAT’S CHEATING.

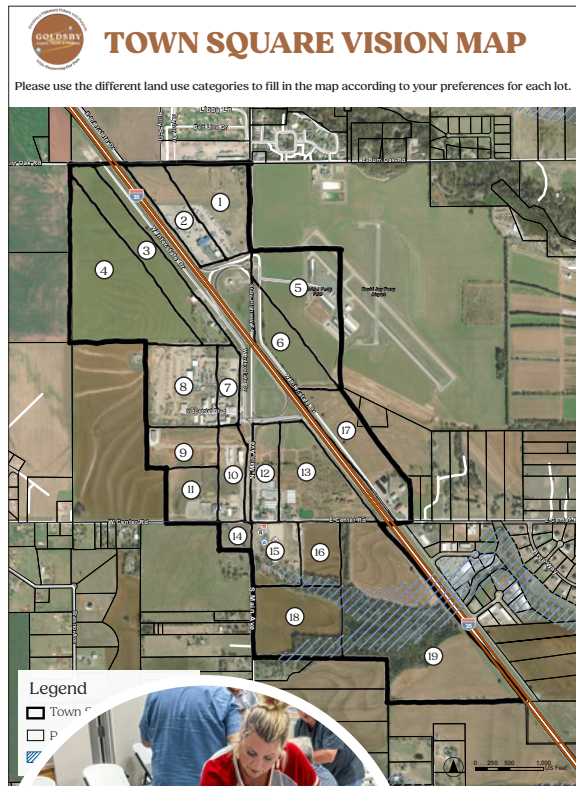
Thinking about throwing out those stickers? Here are some ideas from planners who broke their dot addiction last year.

TAKE INSPIRATION FROM WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE. Seeing what is available in your closet already is a good place to start. “There’s no need to buy more stuff,” says Allison Sinyard, AICP. “I think sometimes some of the best projects came from a sense of scarcity.”

STICK TO JUST ONE AT A TIME. “It’s a lot of prep,” says Allison Stewart-Harris, AICP, and you likely won’t have enough time to get to a planned second activity.

DON’T LET ‘WHAT IF’ STOP YOU. “You can always push yourself as a professional,” says Nick Johnson, AICP. “It doesn’t have to be painstaking or rigorous. You can have fun doing it, and you can also fail, learn from it, and move on.”

REMEMBER THAT INNOVATION ALONE ISN’T THE GOAL. “The most important thing is creating inclusive opportunities for residents to participate in decisions about their community’s future,” says Denise Brookins, AICP. “Engagement should be intentional, accessible, and aligned with the outcomes you’re trying to achieve.”



Participants in Goldsby, Oklahoma, envisioned their community's future by sifting through and selecting puzzle pieces that represented different land use options.

not happy with the activity,” Baggett remembers, “but she participated, and I think she did enjoy it.”

Soon, the Year Without Dots made its way across Georgia. There was a visioning session in Centerville, built around a Mad Libs-style word game; a pin-and-yarn mapping exercise for a transportation plan in Madison; and a Needs and Opportunities Bingo game in a community with a population of mostly older people.

“I think one thing that we really pride ourselves on is that our plans are tailored to the communities we’re serving,” says Roxanne

Raven, AICP, a project manager at TSW. “No two communities are alike, so no two plans are ever alike.”

Raven recalls when Red Bank, Tennessee, was unsure what to do with a 12-acre site. Some people wanted it to remain unoccupied, while others wanted redevelopment.

In late summer 2025, the city set up a tent on the lot and staff showed aerials of the site. Participants were invited to design their own site map by placing custom stickers representing different elements, including fountains or water features, tables and chairs, and playground equipment. More than 100 people showed up at Red Bank’s “Build Your Own Greenspace” event.

Staff also asked participants to list some of their favorite memories of the space, which was once a middle school. Some wanted to see that recognized somewhere on the site. Others said their favorite memory was that day and getting to meet new people.

“Being able to facilitate community through these events is just the coolest thing,” Raven says.



I pledge I will provide our clients with more creative input ideas for advancing their projects and the community’s vision.



Somewhere along the way, Raven says she stopped counting the number of new activities when it hit 30. And even though the year is over, they are still going dot-free when possible.

Still, is there space for dots moving forward? “Dot voting can be useful in certain situations,”

says Brookins, of Fairburn, “but for comprehensive planning and community visioning, more interactive and discussion-based tools often yield richer outcomes.”

Brookins sees the Year Without Dots as an example of planners challenging the norm in community engagement. “It’s recognizing that meaningful participation requires more than quick votes,” she says. “It requires conversation, explanation, and space for people to articulate their hopes for their community.”

Pollard, of Gwinnett County, says it helped bring humanity and relationships back to what can often be a bureaucratic world.

“I think planners sign up for this job because we want to learn about and help communities,” she says. “But, so often, we’re doing development reviews or just trying to get through a project with a limited amount of time, so yeah, we’re like, ‘Just put the dot on the board and tell me what you want.’

“But the Year Without Dots is like a speed bump: ‘Hang on, slow down. What do you actually want?’ It forces us to stop and listen—and have those conversations a little more.”

Jon DePaolis is APA’s senior editor.

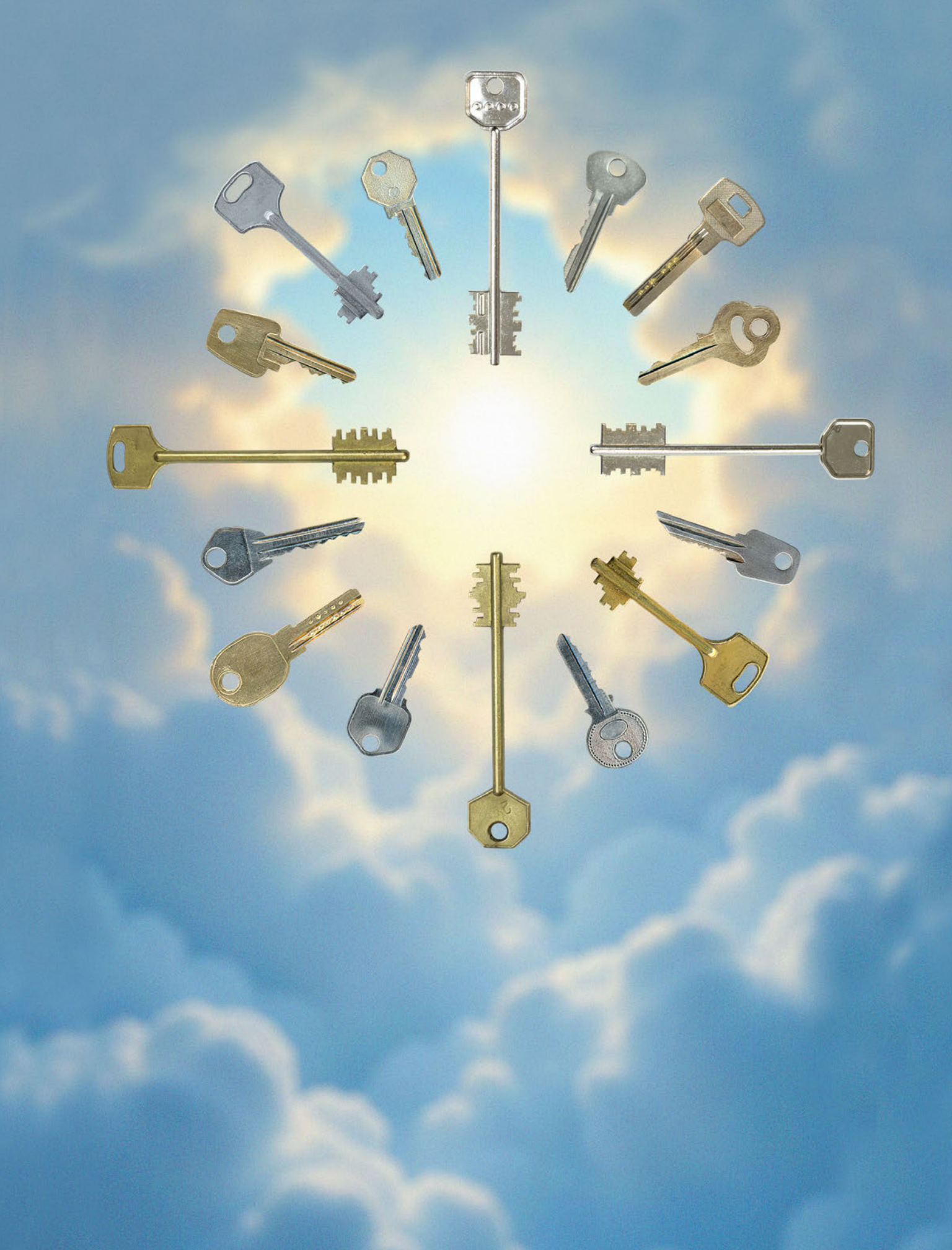
DID THE MONTANA MIRACLE ANSWER THE STATE'S HOUSING PRAYERS?

Two years after making national headlines, bipartisan legislation has faced legal challenges, but zoning reform efforts are moving forward.

By TAYLOR MOORE

Photo illustration by MIGUEL PORLAN





IN 2023, MONTANA pulled off an amazing feat—a sweeping set of legislation aimed at mitigating the housing shortage crisis that has left Montanans with soaring rents. Dubbed the “Montana Miracle” by national media, this package of laws overrode local restrictions that favored single-family housing and became a national example of what bipartisanship can do.

Emily Hamilton, a senior research fellow and director of the Urbanity Project at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, says that similar laws about accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and multi-use development have been passed in other states, but what was especially impressive about Montana was the “widespread agreement on the seriousness of the problem” and “the speed Montana went from not having these YIMBY (Yes In My Back Yard)-era laws to having a lot of them at once.”

These wins, however, have hit roadblocks along the way, including a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the core tenets of the laws. The Montana State Supreme Court rejected those claims in a unanimous decision on March 17 and ruled that the lawsuit failed to establish that the housing reform laws violate the right to equal protection.

Now, two years since being enacted into law, how has the Miracle impacted local housing efforts?

MONTANA HAS ALWAYS prided itself on its natural landscapes and its smaller, close-knit communities. But a study from the Pew Charitable Trusts found that Montana’s population increased 10 percent between 2010 and 2020, while housing units only increased by 7 percent. According to Zillow, the average housing price in Montana rose 36 percent between January 2020 and January 2023.

When Alison Mouch, AICP, a managing partner at Orion Planning + Design in Missoula, moved to the state in 2008, she says it was expensive but manageable. After the effects of the Great Recession and an influx of new-to-the-state homebuyers during the pandemic a decade later, the issues of supply and affordability were exacerbated. “A lot of those people still retained their homes from wherever they moved from,” she says, “so, there was a lot of second and third homeownership, a significant amount of ADU construction, and then an impact on the rental markets.”

Increased demand led to a shortage of housing and an increase in costs. “I blame Kevin Costner for that,” jokes State Sen. Forrest J. Mandeville, AICP, referencing *Yellowstone*, the popular television drama.

The issues were not helped by stagnant wages and a downward trend in

construction since 2008. For example, in Bozeman, the state’s fourth-largest city, vacancy rates were approaching zero, says Chris Saunders, AICP, the city’s community development manager.

However, the issue isn’t all that new—housing in Montana has long been a challenge, with many areas having outdated or nearly

century-old rules, mainly for subdivisions. “Even before the housing affordability issue, we kept seeing legislators try to come in and do minor fixes to either the subdivision statutes or the zoning statutes to deal with a particular issue that had come up for a particular developer, and so they were just getting worse,” says Kelly Lynch, AICP, former executive director of the Montana League of Cities and Towns.

There’s also resistance to multifamily development, with communities fearing that large apartment buildings will change their way of life. “The general vibe around growth is one of skepticism,” says Nathan Dugan, founder of Shelter WF, a housing affordability advocacy group in Whitefish. “People activate and go to meetings and make their councils vote these things down pretty easily.”

It was under these conditions in July 2022 that Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte convened a 26-member housing task force—comprised of Republican and Democratic state lawmakers, officials, developers, real estate agents, researchers, bankers, planners, and activists—to come up with recommendations to tackle affordability, zoning reform, supply-side incentives, and workforce development. “We really homed in on regulations and how restricting density in the cities forces development to sprawl outwards, and that takes over a lot of the surrounding rural areas,” says Kendall Cotton, a task force member and president and CEO of the Frontier Institute.

The Montana Miracle comprises four laws, which—among other things—allows duplexes in areas zoned single-family-only in places with a population of more than 5,000, requires at least

“We really homed in on regulations and how restricting density in the cities forces development to sprawl outwards, and that takes over a lot of the surrounding rural areas.”

—Kendall Cotton,
*Montana housing
task force member*

one ADU in single-family areas as a by-right use, and legalizes multifamily and mixed-use buildings in commercial zones. To Cotton, this was a message that resonated across political divides. The left, for example, was motivated by environmental protection; free-market proponents by property rights; and conservatives by the preservation of agricultural communities.

WHILE THE MIRACLE legislation passed nearly unanimously in the majority-GOP legislature, not all were pleased. In December 2023, a group of about a dozen homeowners, calling themselves Montanans Against Irresponsible Densification, filed a lawsuit against the state. They allege that the laws undermine the state constitution's right to public participation and that some cities and counties were being treated unfairly. "I dread the possibility of waking up one morning and finding that one of my neighbors has sold her property to a developer who is then erecting a multi-unit building or a duplex or an ADU right next to our nice and carefully maintained single-family dwelling," one of the plaintiffs wrote in an affidavit supporting the lawsuit.

A judge then issued a preliminary injunction against the ADU and duplex laws. The Montana Supreme Court overturned the district court ruling eight months later, allowing the two laws to go into effect. Then, in March 2025, a Gallatin District Court judge rejected some of the plaintiffs' arguments while deeming aspects of the public participation provisions in the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA)—which was developed and passed concurrently with the Miracle legislation—as unconstitutional.

While the case was waiting for appeal to the state supreme court, APA issued an amicus brief in support of the legislation. "MLUPA ensures robust, continuous public participation where it is most effective: where community members' knowledge of their neighborhoods and goals and visions for their respective futures can inform planning and policymaking," reads the amicus brief. "It also ensures an appropriate place for technical planning expertise during the implementation of plans and policies, that is, during site-specific application review."

The lawsuit didn't stop housing advocates. In spring 2025, the Montana state legislature, which meets biennially, came back and passed a "Montana Miracle 2.0," as Cotton calls it. These new laws legalized ADUs and single-stair residential buildings statewide, transferred the authority for historical preservation permits from volunteer boards to city staff, overrode local height restrictions to allow up to six stories, and cut parking mandates for most multifamily buildings.

A year later, the Miracle legislation was upheld by the Montana Supreme Court. "[The decision] is a landmark victory for hardworking Montana families and our work to increase the supply of affordable, attainable housing," stated Gov. Gianforte in a press release. "By upholding the constitutionality of our reforms, it will help bring the American dream into greater reach."

MOST PEOPLE *PLANNING* spoke with say it's too early to see a major impact on housing construction and affordability. The Montana Budget and Policy Center estimates a deficit of around 15,000 rental units for low-income households. Cities were not required to follow MLUPA until May 2026.

Some communities might not see a huge change at all. Saunders, Bozeman's development manager, says the city hasn't been affected as much by the Miracle because the city has long practiced many of its tenets, such as allowing ADUs, duplexes, and apartment complexes.

Mouch, the Missoula planner who also serves as an APA board member, says a lot of places in the state had already started zoning reforms before passage of the Miracle and should be commended for having that foresight.

An early success is Whitefish, near Glacier National Park and one of the fastest-growing communities in the state, where new housing projects are cropping up. That's a good thing because between 2020 and 2023 the population of Flathead

County—where the city is located—jumped 8.3 percent and the average home sale price rose 71 percent from 2019 to 2021.

Dugan, of Shelter WF, attributes the construction of two developments to the Miracle. Peregrine Subdivision is a 40-unit apartment complex that includes eight deed-restricted affordable units. Construction began in 2025. Also under construction is the mixed-use

"By upholding the constitutionality of our reforms, it will help bring the American dream into greater reach."

—Montana Gov.
Greg Gianforte

Alpine 93/40 that is expected to have 210 rental units (10 percent of which are deed-restricted affordable housing) and 15,000 square feet of retail space, in addition to a gym, playground, and dog park. When the first units open this summer, the project will be on its way to help Whitefish reach the 930 units it wants to build by 2035.

“What we see a lot of times is a fear of the unknown, but once something is actually built, or being built, people realize it’s not that big of a deal,” Dugan says.

Whitefish is developing a new growth policy, but Dugan, who also is executive director of Livable Flathead, feels that the city’s planning commission has had too much influence by trying to remove references to mixed-use development and limit where housing can be built. “For me, more economic development and diversifying our economy with better-paying jobs would ultimately mean that more homes need to be built in Whitefish,” he says.

PEOPLE ON THE ground in Montana have ideas about ways other places can replicate the Miracle’s successes.

Saunders, of Bozeman, advises planners to write their zoning codes knowing they will have to be changed eventually and to think about “what programmatic portions you have in place to ensure that you’re evaluating the effectiveness of your regulations, making adjustments as needed.”

Kiah Hochstetler, a partner at Goodworks Ventures, an impact fund investing company in Missoula, adds that creative solutions, such as public-private partnerships and tax increment financing, are crucial to supply-side success. “We need to find consistent tools we can utilize and find quality local developers to create housing supply,” he says. “Otherwise, our communities can’t grow, the people who want to live here can’t afford to and they choose to move out, and it creates stagnation.”

For Mandeville, the state senator and planner from Columbus, building a broad coalition is key. “In the Montana Miracle, we had Realtors on the same side as the environmental groups [and] the local government groups,” he says. “There’s going to be some disagreement, so don’t be afraid of [that].

“I don’t think planners should be afraid to get involved in political processes and tell elected officials what issues we’re seeing or what the incoming development pressure is looking like,” he continues. “[We can help] those decision-makers make better decisions.

“We shouldn’t be abdicating our responsibility.”

“What we see a lot of times is a fear of the unknown, but once something is actually built, or being built, people realize it’s not that big of a deal.”

—Nathan Dugan,
founder of Shelter WF

TO BOOST HOUSING

Their State of the State addresses

Across the political spectrum, housing dominated governors’ 2026 State of the State addresses across the U.S., showing that states increasingly see it as their responsibility.

What stood out was not uniformity in policy, but a shared willingness to act. In Utah, for example, Republican Gov. Spencer Cox urged legislators to “pull every lever to increase the supply of housing.”

Three levers, in particular, rise to the top: regulatory reform, state-funded financial tools, and diversifying housing types.

1 REGULATORY REFORM.

A major trend across both parties’ state of the state addresses is a push to reform zoning and permitting processes.

DELAWARE. Gov. Matt Meyer (D) called for making “Delaware the most efficient state in the nation to build affordable housing—without sacrificing farmland or open space.” He outlined a reform-focused effort,

Taylor Moore is a freelance journalist based in Chicago.

SUPPLY, GOVERNORS ARE READY TO ‘PULL EVERY LEVER’

show a willingness to act. BY KILEY CHAPLEY AND BRENNA DONEGAN

which he followed up on with a February executive order establishing a “Permitting Accelerator” to streamline permitting for housing and other priority infrastructure projects.

NEW HAMPSHIRE. Gov. Kelly Ayotte (R) celebrated her state’s successes in recent years, like its new streamlined permitting efforts and the diversification of housing options, including accessory dwelling units (ADUs).

NEW YORK. Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) unveiled the “Let Them Build” initiative, a series of reforms aimed at cutting red tape and accelerating the construction of new homes and infrastructure across the state. As part of that, she proposed exempting qualifying housing projects from review under the State Environmental Quality Review Act, an exemption that remains under negotiation in the state legislature.

2 STATE-FUNDED FINANCIAL TOOLS. With unpredictable federal funding streams, states are increasingly moving toward innovative, large-scale investments.

ARIZONA. Gov. Katie Hobbs’s (D) address noted Arizona’s record-breaking affordable housing production and announced the Housing Acceleration Fund. With an initial investment of \$2.5 million, it is aimed at leveraging public and private dollars to unlock lower-cost financing for affordable housing.

IOWA. Gov. Kim Reynolds (R) proposed FirstHome Iowa, modeled on the 529 college savings program. The program, which allows first-time homebuyers a tax-advantaged way to save for a down payment, was included in a broader property tax relief package enacted in May.

MAINE. Gov. Janet Mills (D) unveiled the \$70 million “American Dream” proposal housing package aimed at creating

affordable homes for middle-class families—part of her broader three-part Affordability Agenda.

RHODE ISLAND. Gov. Dan McKee (D) outlined a \$20 million homeownership program funded through the state’s historic \$120 million housing bond, part of his goal to help create 15,000 new homes by 2030. The state’s AnchorHome initiative has already helped nearly 60 families close on homes.

TENNESSEE. Citing a 42 percent increase in average home costs, Gov. Bill Lee (R) proposed a \$30 million Starter Home Revolving Loan Fund, offering no-interest construction loans. The legislature later passed a bill that reallocated that amount to a Community Workforce Housing Innovation Pilot Program.

3 DIVERSIFYING HOUSING TYPES. Legalizing housing types like ADUs and embracing modular and

manufactured housing gives residents choices.

COLORADO. Gov. Jared Polis (D) proposed—and the state later passed—the HOME Act, allowing certain public and nonprofit entities to build housing on qualifying parcels notwithstanding local zoning restrictions.

HAWAII. “We are building new housing in Hawaii at a scale not seen in decades,” said Gov. Josh Green (D), including new units on state lands. He also pointed to the transformation of public housing and programs to create long-term affordability.

PENNSYLVANIA. Gov. Josh Shapiro (D) unveiled Pennsylvania’s first-ever Housing Action Plan, a 10-year framework for the state. He also championed a \$1 billion Critical Infrastructure Fund, which is currently under consideration in the state’s divided legislature.

Kiley Chapley is APA’s state government affairs manager. Brenna Donegan is APA’s public affairs program manager.



WATERFRONT BOTANICAL GARDENS

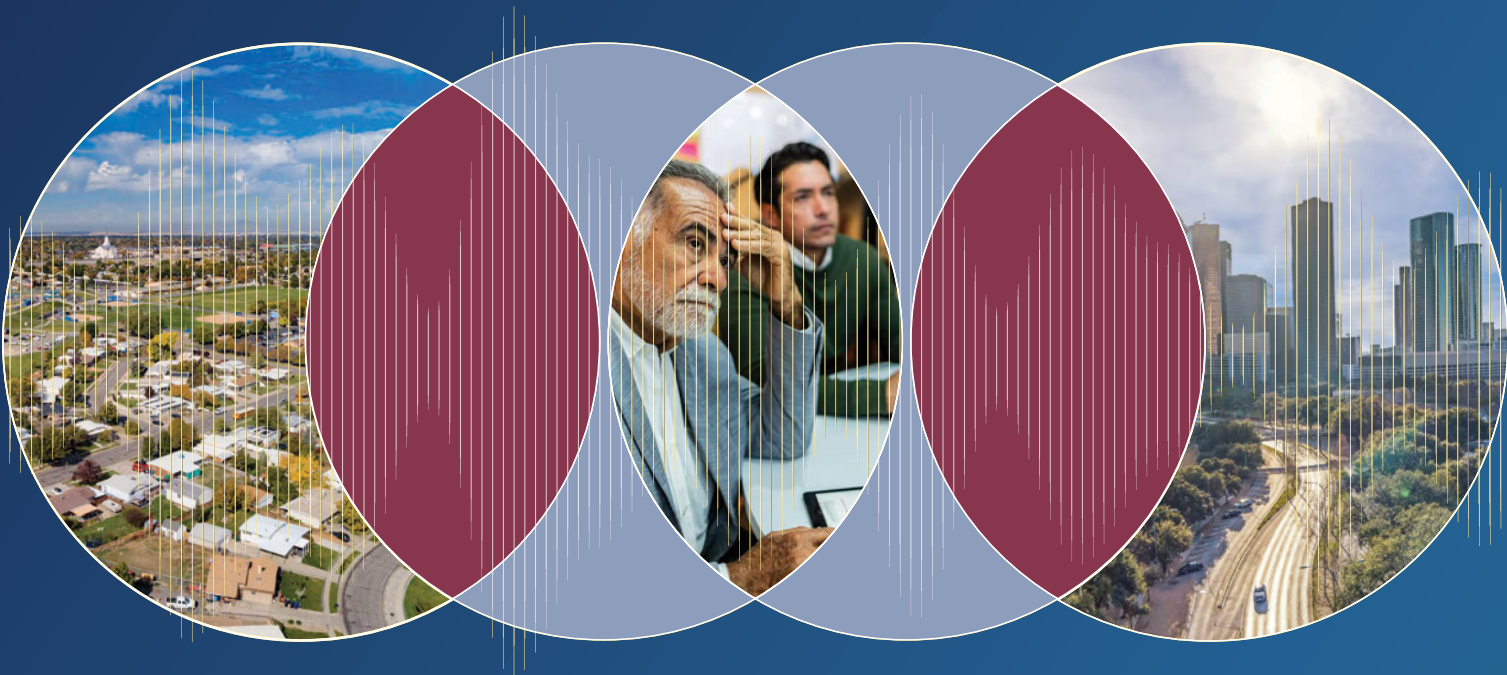
Louisville, Kentucky

IT TOOK YEARS TO TRANSFORM a landfill into a 23.5-acre haven for plants and pollinators, but today about 75,000 people stroll through the black-eyed Susans, prairie grasses, and tree-lined paths at Louisville's Waterfront Botanical Gardens each year. The nonprofit Botanica chose to revive the area by engaging architecture and design firm Perkins&Will to develop a master plan in 2014. These days, visitors can wander through the Graeser Family Bonsai Garden, with dozens of bonsai trees and a 1,100-year-old niwaki tree. Or they can smell rosemary and English thyme from edible garden planters, explore the Beargrass Creek Pathway, or take a birdwatching class at the Ellen T. Leslie Botanical Classrooms. Future plans for the 5,000-square-foot space include a visitors center and conservatory.

The granite water wall at the edge of the Mary Lee Duthie Garden features nearly 240 nozzles. (Got a climate win-win that makes your Community Green? Tell us about it: email mstromberg@planning.org.)



**Exchange ideas.
Expand your perspective.
Embrace your planning community.**

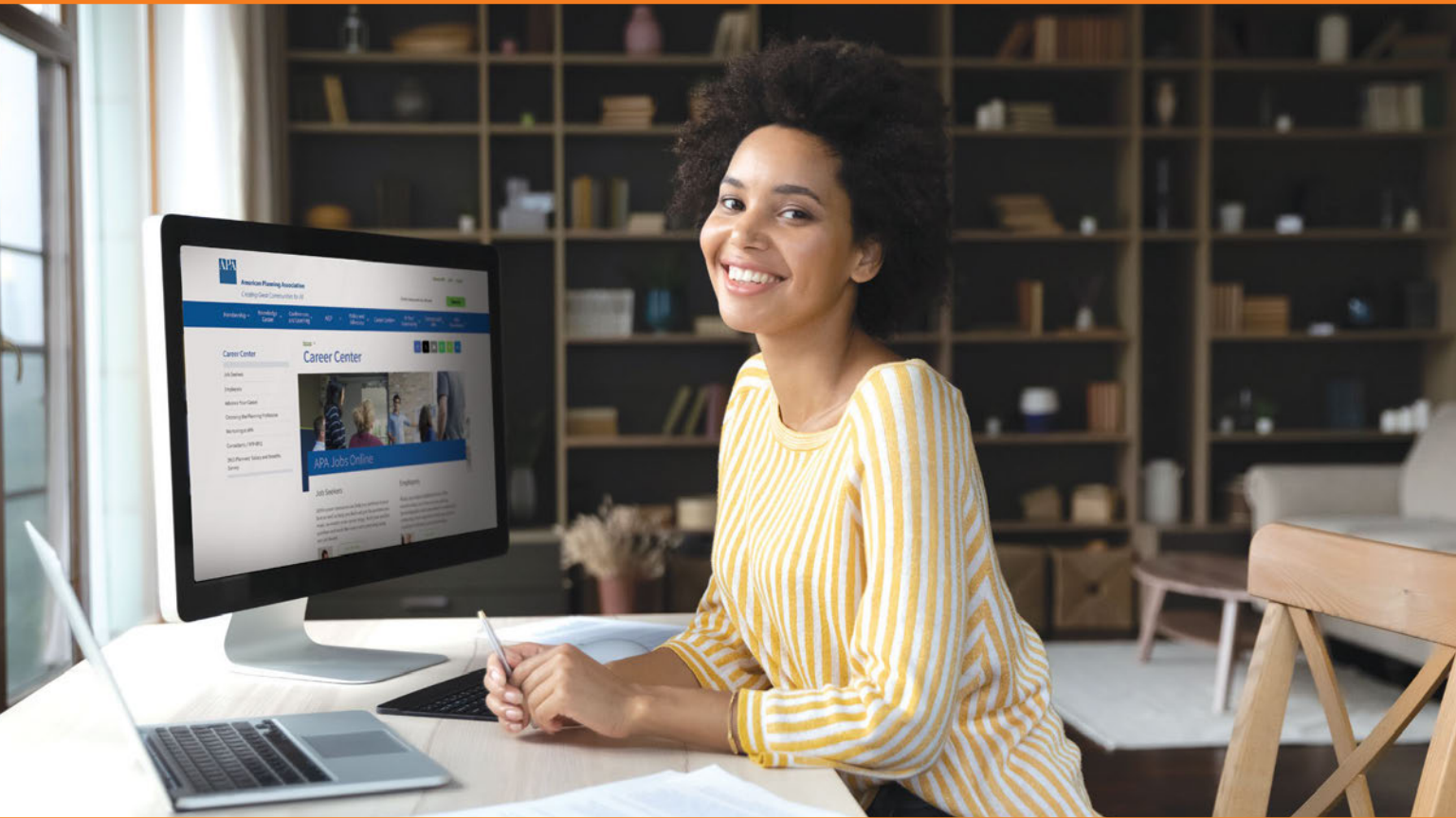


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