What is Planning?

by Cynthia A. Bowen, President, American Planning Association

Take a moment to wonder about your community. Why are homes located in a specific area? Why are businesses or factories located in another? How did someone decide where the roads would go—and how many lanes each road would have? How much park or open space is available to play in? Can you easily walk to a bus or train to get to your destination? These questions are what planners think about and are at the heart of planning as a profession.

The goal of planning is to maximize the health, safety, and economic well-being of residents in ways that reflect the unique needs, desires, and culture of those who live and work within the community. While architects often focus on a single building, a planner’s job is to work with residents and elected officials to guide the layout of an entire community or region. Planners take a broad viewpoint and look at how the pieces of a community—buildings, roads, and parks—fit together like pieces of a puzzle. And, like Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett did with the 1909 Plan of Chicago, planners also work to imagine what can and should happen to a community: how it should grow and change, and what it should offer residents 10, 15, or even 20 years into the future.

Each community is divided into parcels, or pieces, of land. The use of each parcel of land is guided by the community’s zoning code. The zoning code is a set of rules that defines what each land parcel could or should be used for (such as housing, manufacturing or open space). Zoning codes try to keep different uses from being in conflict with one another.

For example, imagine a company wants to buy the apartment building next door to you and convert the building into a factory, but the rest of the street is residential housing. A factory can have significantly different characteristics from a residential apartment: a large number of workers coming and going; freight deliveries; noise; and even the risk of hazards such as fires or chemical spills. Such a drastic change of land use would impact the character, quality, and feel of your street and your home. By zoning your street as a “residential” area, factories can be kept separate from housing.

Beyond trying to prevent land use conflicts, planning also entails providing community members with choices. Consider your home. Is it an apartment? Condo? Single-family house? How do you get around your community? Walk? Ride your bike? Take public transit? Is there any green space nearby? Are there any stores? Planning helps to ensure that you have choices when it comes to what type of home you want to live in, how you move around the community and what is available nearby.

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1 The American Planning Association (APA) advocates for communities of lasting value by supporting and empowering planners. By providing training, best practices, and certification, APA ensures planners are well equipped to address the opportunities and challenges that may arise.
Planning includes considering ways to make communities safe and healthy for all ages. Safety includes factors such as ensuring you have areas to walk, ride your bike, or play. Can you safely cross the street to reach your grocery store? Can your grandparents? Beyond everyday risks, planners also look at larger hazards that could impact the safety of a community. Disasters such as floods and wildfires can devastate a community. Planners look at the potential risk a community might face if a river rises beyond its banks. How close are buildings that could be flooded? What can be done today, before a disaster happens, to minimize the risk and damage if the river overflows in the future? Planners are always thinking about today, but also what tomorrow might bring. A community plan must meet the needs of its residents today, but also keep in mind what the future might bring. A community plan, often called a comprehensive plan, is a kind of map or blueprint for what a community aims to achieve in the future. Perhaps your ancestors moved around their communities by walking, or by horse and carriage. Trains and automobiles came along and changed how people traveled—and the landscape itself by requiring roads and tracks. What’s next that could potentially impact your community and how you live, work, and socialize? Next time you walk around your community consider some basic questions: Who planned that? How was that decision made? What will happen to this neighborhood in the future? If these questions seem interesting to you, you might want to be a planner! •
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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Cynthia is a graduate of Ball State University and the Director of Planning for Rundell Ernstberger Associates (REA), with over 20 years of experience. Cynthia manages complex, multi-discipline planning and urban design projects both in the U.S. and abroad. Most of Cynthia’s work focuses on economic development, revitalization, aesthetics and regulations. Cynthia works with clients, stakeholders, and community leaders to create plans that transform neighborhoods physically, socially and economically. Cynthia is a certified planner and has expertise in comprehensive and land use planning, transportation and corridor planning, neighborhood planning, zoning/subdivision regulations, and the development of implementation strategies. Cynthia's strength is building consensus, creating understandable linkages between policy, design, and regulations and other implementation mechanisms. Besides her US based work, Cynthia has led projects in the Middle East focused on creating cities and neighborhoods that were integrated, secure, and contained a mix of jobs, residential, retail, parks, schools, mosques, and gathering areas. Cynthia is the President of the American Planning Association.