



American Planning Association *Making Great Communities Happen*

Planning Practice Feature — Practicing Planner — Spring 2014

## Sustainability Jobs in Urban Planning

by Susette Horspool

Universities across the nation are snatching up graduates with sustainability skills and experience, but does this trend follow with the nation's cities as well? It does seem to, if recent events and news can be believed. And not just cities, but other government entities, as well as the private sector. Sustainability-related jobs are advertised regularly online now, legislation in many states demands sustainability, and private-sector companies are providing services to support cities in their sustainability efforts.

This article comes about in reaction to a job posting by the city of Pasadena, California, for three land planners at differing levels of responsibility. None of the postings mentioned the need for sustainability skills and neither did their job descriptions. Yet, I knew the city had a sustainability plan and considered itself to be a green city. This raised some questions in my mind: Isn't good planning the key to achieving sustainability goals? Why is the city not hiring sustainability skills in their planning department? Could cities be asking only for general planning skills, but expecting sustainability skills to be included? I called Vince Bertoni, Pasadena's planning and community development director, to find out.

Since 2005, Pasadena has been a green leader in Los Angeles County. Although the city once had a sustainability director, the position was eliminated during the recent economic downturn. Sustainability has, however, been woven into the fabric of the city and all of its plans. To carry plans forward, the city relies on LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) skills in its planning department and input from local sustainability experts outside of city government (e.g., environmental nonprofits and research results from the California Institute of Technology). According to Bertoni, Pasadena now assumes candidates hired as planners will automatically bring an understanding of city sustainability with them.

### **Green/Sustainable Cities**

What is a sustainable (or green) city? A sustainable city is one that adopts the lessons of nature, and whose systems function self-sufficiently. It prevents over-dependence (and keeps carbon emissions low) by relying more on local resources than long-distance ones — using them wisely and making sure they can be replenished. It avoids growing too big or too fast, overspending, or neglecting social or environmental needs in favor of economic ones. It makes sure that all of its systems (transportation, construction, food supply, waste management, etc.) work in balance to create an overall, resiliently healthy city. It is organized so that, no matter what might happen, the city can pick up quickly after any disaster. And it exchanges ideas with other cities to perfect the process.

### **National Outlook**

In 2006, the U.S. Conference of Mayors (a forum created in 1932) decided to tackle climate change on the city level, resulting in 1,060 mayors signing their own climate change pact and agreeing to share progress. That is more than 1,000 cities nationwide that started, seven years ago, to officially work toward sustainability in one form or another.

When President Obama was reelected in 2012, he declared sustainability one of his administration's top goals for his second term. That gave the green light for all government entities to go ahead with restructuring, including hiring experts. Between cities and other government bodies, there are thousands of possibilities for sustainability-related jobs, now and in the near future, as the trend continues to escalate.

According to a 2008 article in *Grist Magazine*, "in the United States, there are 3,304 county governments, 19,431 municipal governments, 16,056 township governments, 13,522 school districts, 35,356 'special district' governments, and over 4,100 two-year and four-year colleges. We have dozens

of large military installations. And then there are the 50 state governments with their related agencies, and our U.S. territories." In addition, the U.S. private sector is finding ways to assist cities in their sustainability efforts. Four years ago, in 2009, the Home Depot Foundation started a Sustainable Cities Institute to train and provide a forum for cities to share progress on sustainability projects. The organization's list includes 40 cities that are learning how to develop efficiency and resilience in 10 different categories.

Meanwhile, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) is providing information to cities via its Local Leaders in Sustainability Program, which also urges the hiring of sustainability expertise. According to AIA's handbook (p. 49), "Green building programs are flourishing throughout the country, and this is only possible due to the leadership of local officials on sustainability issues." How does all of this opportunity translate into jobs for sustainability planners?

### **Job Outlook for Sustainability Planners**

As the economy recovers, so do hiring options. As cities take the first steps toward resilience, usually by increasing efficiency and reducing their own expenses for utilities, money is freed up for them to hire sustainability experts.

Las Vegas, Nevada, started working on sustainability in 2006 when the city signed onto the U.S. Conference of Mayors' climate change agreement. The city created a new Office of Sustainability and put together a Sustainability Initiative. By 2013, the city had built a new Gold LEED-accredited city hall, installed 5 megawatts of solar energy, replaced street lights with LED lights, and adopted new zoning laws to support walkable communities. Marco Velotta of the city's Office of Sustainability said that Las Vegas has saved \$9 million in energy costs since 2010. All of the money the city saves is reinvested into green projects. By 2020, the city plans to be a "net-zero user of resources," according to the city's recent annual report, Building Community Green to Make Life Better.

Not only are cities looking for sustainability skills, but so are other government bodies, nonprofit entities, and private businesses. Whereas 10 years ago sustainability job advertisements were scarce, now new jobs for officers, directors, managers, and related staff are advertised every day online. There are even websites that advertise only sustainability and green jobs, such as the Sustainability Job Board (<http://jobsinsustainability.jobamatic.com/a/jobs/find-jobs>).

Most cities advertise job openings on their own websites. However, for job seekers who are mobile and don't mind moving, or those who have already looked in their areas and cannot find what they want, online job search sites are a good option.

### **City Job Search Tips**

For planners who are determined to work locally, here are tips for advertising availability and skills. Many (though not all) of these suggestions come from Andrew Orr, principal planner for Franklin, Tennessee. Orr was hired in 2009 and was Franklin's first sustainability-skilled employee.

- Connect with a city councilor for summer volunteer work, or find a citizen liaison group to volunteer with to meet people and hone your skills.
- Look for large consulting firms to intern with for experience and connections.
- Applicants who have experience working with different kinds of people should include those skills in their resume and interview presentations. Dealing with a variety of people is crucial to success as a sustainability planner.
- If you have experience in fundraising, include that in your application too. Many cities need extra financing to tackle sustainability projects.
- Describe your background in sustainability, even when applying for jobs in cities that advertise only regular planner jobs, especially if research shows that the city has or is developing a sustainability plan.

Additional preparation that will make job applicants stand out includes the following:

- Take part in at least one "charrette" (citizen planning session) to find out how they work and to meet city officials who sanction charrettes. A growing number of cities are using the charrette process to develop their sustainability plans.
- Learn the connection between politics and planning to gain a deeper understanding of why some plans are approved and others are not, even when the plans not approved might have been more efficient and useful. Articulating this understanding during an interview can help an applicant stand out.
- Read the sustainability plans of cities that have adopted them. Reviewing sustainability plans can help you describe how your skills match the city's needs.
- Study the City of Curitiba, Brazil, to find out how that city achieved its sustainability goals. This will provide an additional conversation piece to include in interviews. Curitiba is one of the world's first smart cities and has an amazing transportation system.

## Conclusion

Jamie Errickson, executive director of the planning department in Everett, Massachusetts, said that the city hired its first (and only) sustainability planner just two months ago. He said the planner was hired to develop a sustainability plan, find financing for redevelopment and sustainability projects, and oversee the city's conservation committee.

Like Everett, there are a growing number of cities across the nation, large and small, just getting started with sustainability programs. Planners can provide the necessary skills but should emphasize during interviews that they understand sustainability, especially when applying to smaller cities that have recently committed to "going green." Follow the job search tips provided here to enhance your chances for finding work in this field, and you will stand out in the next sustainability job search.

*Susette Horspool has worked with government, nonprofit, and private business entities, and has more than 30 years of experience in project development, public relations and marketing, and sustainable living. She holds a master's degree in wise use of natural resources and a bachelor's in business management. Her key development philosophy is: The first and next step in achieving any goal is utilizing available resources wisely, from which new resources then emerge. Contact her at sh.writer@att.net or visit her website [www.susettehorspool.com](http://www.susettehorspool.com).*

## References

American Institute of Architects. Local Leaders in Sustainability. Available at [www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia/documents/pdf/aia075288.pdf](http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia/documents/pdf/aia075288.pdf).

Andrew Orr, interview by Susette Horspool, December 20, 2013 (telephone).

City of Las Vegas. 2013. "Building Community Green to Make Life Better."

Doyle, Kevin. 2008. "Job Market Sees Growing Demand for Sustainability Managers." Grist Magazine. Available at [www.experience.com/alumnus/article?channel\\_id=green&source\\_page=home&article\\_id=article\\_1208550373072](http://www.experience.com/alumnus/article?channel_id=green&source_page=home&article_id=article_1208550373072)

Jamie Errickson, e-mail message to author, January 20, 2014.

Marco N. Velotta, e-mail message to author, December 31, 2013.

Sustainable Cities Institute. "City Profiles." Accessed at [www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org/cities](http://www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org/cities).

U.S. Conference of Mayors. Climate Protection Center. Available at [www.usmayors.org/climateprotection/revised/](http://www.usmayors.org/climateprotection/revised/).

Vince Bertoni, interview by Susette Horspool, January 2, 2014 (telephone).