Urban Planner: Executive Summary

By Marty Nemko
Posted December 19, 2007

Should a new stadium be built downtown? How can a county reduce sprawl while providing appealing, affordable housing? What should the city demand of a developer who's pushing a new project? To address questions like these, planners gorge themselves on data, conduct studies, and hold public hearings. Before making a recommendation, they'll end up wearing many hats: civil engineer, architect, economist, budget analyst, sociologist, and politician. A diplomat's touch is necessary if you expect your plan to survive all the stakeholders with competing interests.

In larger communities, you might be able to specialize in redeveloping blighted areas; choosing proper land use for a particular parcel; or managing transportation, housing, environmental protection, or historic preservation. In smaller communities, you'll probably handle it all.

Median Pay

National: $68,800. More pay data by metropolitan area

(Data provided by PayScale.com)

Training

Most entry-level jobs require a master's degree in planning. You'll be more marketable if you take courses in structural or civil engineering, economics, architecture, finance, or geographic information systems. The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning publishes a complete list of accredited training programs.

Smart Specialty

Private-sector Planner. Consulting firms hire planners to do things like develop a corporate security plan that's subtle and that blends in with the laid-back feel of a building
park or corporate campus. Private-sector planners enjoy more freedom than do those in government.

Other Resources

- American Planning Association
- *Contemporary Urban Planning (7th Edition)* by John Levy

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Urban Planner: A Day in the Life

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You're a planner for a midsize city, and, rather than filling the distant suburbs with
minimansions, you're eager to redevelop faded urban areas. That approach will require
fewer new roads and make better use of existing resources. So you've solicited proposals
from developers and selected one. Now the real work begins. Today, you're reviewing
gеographic information system maps and other computer-based data to predict how many
city services will be needed, from lampposts to libraries to fire hydrants. What mix of
parking garages, additional bus service, and other transportation should be required?
What about plug-in shared electric cars? You work with the mayor's office to figure out
how to extract as many freebies from the developer as possible, things like subsidized low-
income-housing units, wireless Internet for the community, and money for the local
schools. You call the developer to float the proposal. He's furious and quickly turns the
conversation to demanding variances in the building codes and zoning regulations. You
knew that was coming.

You get off the phone and weigh the impact of the various proposals on all the people
affected. You need to get out of the office, so you visit one of the proposed building sites to
mull over the options firsthand. Finally, it's back to your office for a phone call with an
economist, who can provide some figures to plug into the first-draft budget you'll start on
tomorrow. The official workday ends at 5 p.m., but tonight, you need to attend a public
hearing on the project. Everybody has a complaint. Environmentalists warn that wetlands
will be destroyed. Preservationists worry that historic buildings might get torn down.
Supporters insist that the community desperately needs redevelopment. Your job is
simply to present the data. It's up to the politicians to decide whether to build or not.

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