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Best Careers 2009: Urban Regional Planner

A multi-faceted job for a multi-talented person

By *Marty Nemko*

Posted December 11, 2008

Overview. 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 wants to build a new project?



To address questions like these, planners analyze trends, population needs and desires, the area's assets and liabilities, and [laws](#) and policies. Planners conduct studies, lead meetings with experts, and hold public hearings.

Before making a recommendation, planners 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 of the stakeholders' 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 may handle it all.

A Day in the Life. You're a planner for a rapidly growing small 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 geographic 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? What accommodations must be made to increase the business tax base? To comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act?

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

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schools. You meet with 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 lead 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.

Smart Specialty

Transportation planner. In light of America ' s desire for energy independence, concern about climate change, and President -elect Obama ' s prioritization of mass transit, you might want to make tracks to this specialty.

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

Salary Data

Median (with eight years in the field): \$62,500

25th to 75th percentile (with eight or more years of experience): \$54,300-\$85,600

(Data provided by [PayScale.com](http://www.payscale.com).)

Training

While half of planners have only a bachelor's degree, as in many fields, degree requirements have been ratcheted up. Today, most entry-level jobs require a master's degree in planning. You'll be additionally marketable if you take courses in structural or civil engineering, economics, architecture, finance, or geographic information systems.

The American Planning Association's offers [information on training options](#).

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning publishes a complete [list of accredited training programs](#).

Learn More

- [U.S. Department of Labor's Profile of Urban and Regional Planning](#)
- [Contemporary Urban Planning \(8th Edition\)](#) by John Levy

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looking for a job as an urban planner

I have a degree in urban and regional planning and I would like a serious person who can connect me to a university to be undertaking my masters degree as I teach freshers.

ANTHONY MWANGI GITHAIGA
of **KS**
Apr 10, 2009 04:13:37 AM [\[permalink\]](#)
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Planning Newcomer

I was actually very lucky to get an internship while I was still pursuing my bachelor's with my county's Planning and Zoning Department and it was paid. I graduated in May of '07 and was able to get a full time job there in November of that year. I make the lowest in my pay grade, approximately \$38,000, because I have the least amount of experience in my field. I'm not your typical story, I just happened to be at the door when opportunity knocked.

T MacK of **VA**
Apr 06, 2009 16:15:22 PM [\[permalink\]](#)
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ITA that experience is valued more over education. I am looking to get my Masters, but I wanted to be 100% sure planning would be my field of choice. I am currently a subdivision/site planner which I don't find too appealing. I'd much rather be a long range or environmental/sustainability planner.

To the gentleman who was a civil engineer, I found the two professions go hand in hand. If you are in the public sector, you will work with civil engineers from the private sector all the time. However, I find that they look at projects in a different manner. You might find that planning takes a different way of thinking, but with experience it gets better. I wish I had some kind of background in CE because I'm still trying to understand best management practices, drainage, and all that jazz.

The pay is definitely not on par with a civil engineer. Be prepared to have the public and developers think you're not competent--everyone seems to have a professional opinion but none of the experience to back it up.

Landscape design

A bachelor degree holder should be the chance to showcase his worth, hence the experience 'll follow and thereafter, if given the incentives can proceed for

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MURP program.

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