

# Glossary for the Public

## Introduction

Given the heightened scrutiny of planners by some members of the public, what is said — or not said — is especially important in building support for planning.

These suggestions are designed to help planners frame what they say in positive terms; use examples that people can identify with and relate to; avoid jargon and technical words; and turn allies and elected officials into strong and articulate champions of planning.

When talking about planning and its value to the community, keep in mind the messages APA developed several years ago that emphasize value, choice, and engagement:

*APA members help create communities of lasting value.*

*Good planning helps create communities that offer better choices for where and how people work and live.*

*Planning enables civic leaders, business interests, and citizens to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people's lives.*

## Frame your message

Certain words in the planning lexicon have been seized upon by some planning opponents and critics to be "code" for top-down, government-controlled policies and approaches that interfere with individual choices and freedoms. Some opponents of planning argue in blogs that, for example, sustainable development, including its definition and implementation, adversely affects not only an individual's rights and freedoms, but also true local control. Given such a perspective, it is imperative that planners frame discussions about sustainability, regionalism, livability and the like (see trigger words below) in a way that emphasizes the economic value, long-lasting benefits and positive outcomes that result from good planning and plan implementation.

A Fall 2010 Ford Foundation national poll found overwhelming public support (79 percent) for sustainable development when defined as *"An urban, suburban or rural community that has more housing and transportation choices, is closer to jobs, shops or schools, is more energy independent and helps protect clean air and water."* This finding underscores the importance of discussing sustainability and planning in terms of generating more jobs, lowering housing and transportation costs, and using limited public funds more wisely.

APA Chief Executive Officer Paul Farmer, FAICP, likens good plans to stories and planning to conversations with the community. To have meaning, plans and planning need to be relevant and meaningful to the everyday lives, hopes and aspirations of residents, community leaders, business interests and elected officials. This guide offers suggestions about how to define and discuss planning terms and concepts in ways that are understandable and non-technical, and that resonate with your audience's concerns, priorities and goals.

## Critics see red

The following are examples of words and phrases that have become highly politicized and generate suspicion among some citizens:

**Affordable; Agenda 21** (see *Communications Boot Camp How-To Guide #1, "Agenda 21 & Planning: Myths & Facts"*)

**Collaboration, Consensus**

**Delphi technique**

**Density**

**Livable; Localized planning; Long-term, region-wide planning**

**Organize and facilitate**

**Public visioning; Public-Private Partnerships**

**Regional, regionalism, regional planning**

**Smart growth; Stakeholders; Sustainability**

**Walkable**

## Make it meaningful, relevant, memorable

This list includes examples of terms and phrases that planners use every day that, depending on the audience and situation, may exacerbate misunderstandings. ***These are not words to avoid, but are singled out to help you think about how to describe plans and planning to non-professional audiences, or to elected officials and other decision makers in the public planning process so they are meaningful, relevant and memorable.***

Remember people are most interested in themselves and things that affect them directly, so you will get and hold a person's attention when talking about plans and planning in ways to which they can relate. Always focus on the outcomes of good planning and meaningful public engagement as opposed to planning process.

**Business improvement district, Central business district** — Some may find the words "district" or "central" to be an indication of a "top down" or "Big Brother" process. Using the common word "downtown" or "business area" may be more neutral and preferable.

**Charrettes** — "Meeting" or "workshop" are simpler and don't require definitions, or provide the opportunity for others to seize upon the French origins of the word to accuse you of trying to make American cities more European.

**Code enforcement, design review, design review standards** — Avoid talking about or linking plans and planning with regulatory matters. While code enforcement, code violations and design review may be among the responsibilities of your department or office, these are separate issues from plans and planning. Don't mix them with conversations about plans and planning.

**Comprehensive plan, master plan, general plan, plan update, etc.** — To some critics, words describing any kind of "plan" may be met with disagreement and skepticism. In such situations, it may be more productive to not focus on the plan itself, but the tangible benefits and outcomes to the neighborhood, community, etc. from a plan. For example, plans are a way for residents to talk about what is important to them not just today, but tomorrow. Plans give residents an opportunity to talk about what is important to them over the long term and to see if their priorities and preferences have changed since the last time they had a chance to look at (and the city approved) the last plan.

**Councils of governments (COGs), metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regional planning agencies, etc.** — Some problems or issues facing one's community (or neighborhood for that matter) cannot be adequately addressed alone. Watershed protection, for instance, involves many communities working together. Focus on the benefits and what an individual community stands to gain by not "going it alone."

**Density, cluster development, infill development** — Any discussion of density may cause alarm bells to ring among some audiences who are concerned about the location of multi-family dwellings in areas where single-family homes predominate. Density is also context-dependent. Use these discussions as an opportunity to talk about the cost of shared services (sewer service, roads, schools, fire protection, etc.), what residents like about their community, and the benefits that can result from changes to the number and type of available housing. Listening to concerns and identifying shared values are important parts of reasoned discussion about density and related issues.

**Eminent domain, police powers, taking, condemnation, land assembly** — Used only as a tool of last resort, discussions about plans and eminent domain should be site- and case- specific, and underscore the multiple benefits that result and the lack of other options or alternatives. Extreme public opposition may be an indication that the use of eminent domain in this instance is not appropriate or that not enough time was spent securing public support for a project requiring the use of condemnation.

**Green infrastructure** — Discuss in terms of protecting clean air and water and the plants, animals and environments people are familiar with — trees, streams, lakes, forests, soil, rain water, etc.

**Moratorium, building moratorium** — Any discussion needs to include the reasons, time-limited nature of moratoria, benefits, and value to a community at a particular time and place. Critics may cite it as an example of government restricting individual freedoms and rights.

**Mixed-use development, live-work units** — Seen by some as an example of "smart growth" being forced upon a community. There is a long tradition of mixed uses in U.S. cities, especially during the early history of the country. When discussing this type of development, point out the benefits to residents and the local economy and what makes this type of development especially attractive to the community at this time (attracts new residents, helps keep community vibrant and prosperous, infrastructure cost savings, etc.).

**Overlay plan, overlay zone, overlay district** — Discuss in terms of the benefits to property owners and positive outcomes that result when taking a more focused or concentrated approach to a specific area. Consider using an analogy (similar to rebuilding an older property) to help explain the thinking and reasons additional planning tools and resources are needed for the particular area.

**Smart growth, sustainability** — Consider using the term "quality growth" instead (used by the Envision Utah plan developed for the Greater Salt Lake City metropolitan area), growth that will help ensure the long-term health and productivity of our local economy.

**Tax increment financing (TIF), tax increment financing district** — Discuss in terms generating new investment, creating new jobs for the community, and cost-effective development incentives. Discuss in terms of the tangible benefits and outcomes that will result from this method of attracting new investment to the community.

**Transportation corridor** — Describe in terms of transportation routes and location of roads, highways, public transit, etc. Some may view the term "corridors" with suspicion simply because it is "planner speak." If critics are alarmed by this term, listen to them describe what negative outcomes or concerns they associate with the word.

**Urban growth boundary, urban service area** — Discuss in terms of minimizing the cost of services used by the entire community, and protecting existing land use outside of the boundary or service area. Recognize that these terms can generate much controversy and disagreement. Given nature of discussion, it may be more productive to listen to critics and gain a better understanding of their concerns and fears about such terms.

**Zoning, conditional zoning, Euclidean zoning, pyramidal zoning, Zoning Board of Adjustment, form-based zoning, inclusionary zoning, exclusionary zoning** — Focus on the benefits zoning provides property owners and the role it plays in protecting property values. Listen and learn from objections being raised to better understand what it is about zoning that has people concerned, worried, etc.

#### **Stay on message**

The following phrases may be useful to help you frame your message in a way that is positive and inclusive, when transitioning to a local example, or to stay on message during public meetings where critics may attempt to distract from the agenda or topic at hand.

*Plans and planning are time-tested ways for communities and neighborhoods to create more options and choices for their residents. Let me give you an example ...*

*Plans produce tangible results. Take \_\_\_\_\_, for instance, which came about because of the plan the community developed.*

*Local choice and control is important, and planning is a way our community can choose its future. When it comes to making investments in our community, planning can lead to a return on public investments many times over. Let me give you a couple of examples ...*

*Planning is a way to exercise democracy and our country's constitutional form of government. The founders of this country, going back to the 1600s and 1700s, planned their towns and rural areas this same way we are today. There is a long tradition of planning in America. It is the way we protect what we love and fix what we don't love about our communities.*

*Protecting and improving property values over the long term is one of the ways plans benefit property owners. Plans provide certainty, which gives people confidence to invest in our community for the long term.*

*We have a responsibility to think through the long-term consequences of our decisions. Planning enables us to do that. Take \_\_\_\_\_, for example.*

*We need to understand together how to make sure our local community and our local economy are strong enough for our children to grow up and have a good life here. Planning helps us do that.*

*We need to make decisions that are careful, cost effective, efficient, and fair to everybody. That is the purpose of this meeting. There is no hidden agenda.*

*There is no hidden agenda. But there is a responsibility to make wise, long-term decisions and this meeting has been set up to make sure all points of view are heard and are equally important. All points of view will be part of the permanent record and copies of the permanent record will be available to the public.*

### **Remember big picture**

As planning and planners have become targets of suspicion and mistrust, it is more important than ever to avoid polarizing jargon, to focus on outcomes important to local citizens, and to maintain a fair, open, and transparent process in which even opponents of planning have the opportunity to express their desires for their communities. Also, the book *Planning in Plain English* by Natalie Macris (APA Planners Press, 2000) may be useful. It is available at [www.planning.org/apastore/Search/Default.aspx?p=1867](http://www.planning.org/apastore/Search/Default.aspx?p=1867).



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