

QUICKNOTES

The Value of Planning

Everyone makes plans. Sometimes we plan to accomplish specific goals. Other times we plan to avoid otherwise negative outcomes. These are the same basic reasons why towns, cities, counties, and regions choose to plan. However, because community planning is, by definition, a collective effort requiring commitments of both time and financial resources, it makes sense to consider how that investment is likely to pay off. One way to think about the benefits of sound planning is through the “triple-bottom-line” lens of sustainability assessment. That is, communities invest in planning because it has social, economic, and environmental benefits, and these multidimensional benefits of planning typically far outweigh the costs of inaction.

Social Benefits

Planning encourages consensus on shared goals and priorities. While individuals can have conflicting values and priorities, in many communities there is general agreement about a wide range of issues and opportunities of public consequence. An authentic participatory planning process is crucial to identifying these areas of agreement and pursuing a shared vision for the future. Simply put, planning processes are designed to educate and inform all participants. And it is this educational basis that creates a sense of investment and increases the likelihood that communities will make meaningful progress toward shared goals.

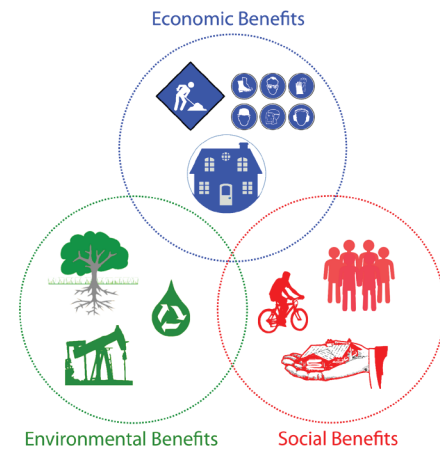
Planning helps ensure that the costs and benefits of community growth and change are equitably distributed. For example, many communities have unmet demand for housing affordable to lower-income households in locations that are readily accessible to jobs, transit, and other desirable community amenities. Planning processes can help address this market failure by coordinating public and private efforts to provide housing choice, as well as equitable access to jobs, transportation, and other community services.

Planning promotes public health. Individual health depends on a variety of factors, including clean air and water, opportunities for physical activity, access to nutritious foods, and safe means of transportation. Community design has a significant impact on many of these factors. Planning processes help participants understand how conditions in the built environment affect public health and provide a forum to discuss potential changes to improve health outcomes for all members of the community.

Economic Benefits

Planning leads to better decisions about where and when to provide public infrastructure, facilities, and services. In most communities, a large percentage of local tax revenue goes toward constructing and maintaining infrastructure and facilities (such as roads, schools, and sewer and water systems) and providing basic services (such as police and fire protection and primary and secondary education). Some land uses contribute enough tax revenue to cover the costs of providing infrastructure and services, while others do not. Local and regional planning processes help residents, business owners, public officials, and other community stakeholders understand the fiscal implications of different types of development in different locations.

Planning sets the stage for job creation. Businesses need suitable space and a willing and able workforce to operate. In order to attract and retain employers, communities must first provide adequate space for nonresidential development, with access to infrastructure and services and enough capacity to accommodate new activity. Communities also need to either demonstrate that the local labor pool has skills and interests that align with an employer’s needs or that they are fostering the type of place that



Community planning has economic, environmental, and social benefits.



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will attract skilled workers. Planning processes help communities understand if there is enough suitable space for commercial and industrial expansion and whether the local workforce is well matched to a particular industry or sector. Having a plan in place makes a town, city, county, or region more attractive to prospective businesses because they can see that the community has considered the needs of employers and workers.

Planning protects property values. Residents often buy homes in a specific location because they appreciate the character and amenities of the community. When community growth and change is not coordinated by a plan, home owners may feel the consequences acutely. For example, a quiet residential area may lose value if new industrial or intense commercial development is sited in close proximity. Similarly, residential subdivisions may be constructed and occupied before the new home owners realize a particular area is prone to flooding.

Environmental Benefits

Planning leads to better decisions about how and when to use natural resources. All communities have access to some types of natural resources (such as sunlight, forests, or mineral deposits) that confer benefits on users. However, choices about the methods and timing of resource development often have broad implications for community members that are not directly connected to the resource in question. Local and regional planning processes help residents, business owners, public officials, and other community stakeholders understand the environmental implications of consuming or conserving local natural resources.

Planning helps communities benefit from ecosystem services. All towns, cities, counties, and regions depend on natural ecosystems to provide clean air and a habitable climate. For example, trees and other forms of vegetation create oxygen, remove carbon dioxide, and filter pollutants from the air and provide shade to moderate temperature changes. Most communities also rely on natural systems for clean water. Planning processes help participants understand the cost savings associated with the services provided by ecosystems and evaluate the potential for maximizing the benefits of those services by conserving or expanding renewable resources.

Planning enhances community resilience to natural hazards and a changing climate. Some locations and some types of development are more vulnerable than others to damage and destruction caused by natural disasters, extreme weather events, or climate change. The concept of resilience describes a community's ability to absorb these types of shocks with minimal disruption. Having a plan in place increases the likelihood that a community will be able to steer new development away from high-hazard areas and mitigate potentially harmful effects of a changing climate.

Summary

Communities that do not plan are often forced to deal with problems reactively. Perhaps more importantly, though, they are less likely to seize opportunities for transformative and positive change. This is not to say that community planning is akin to having a crystal ball; there will always be unexpected challenges and unanticipated outcomes. Rather, the key point is that plans based on the best available information and the most inclusive processes will confer economic, environmental, and social benefits that far outweigh the investment of resources in the planning process.

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FURTHER READING

1. Published by the American Planning Association

Daniels, Thomas L., et al. 2007. "Why Plan?" In *The Small Town Planning Handbook, 3rd ed.* Chicago: American Planning Association. Available at www.planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK_A64330.

Duerksen, Christopher J., C. Gregory Dale, and Donald L. Elliott. 2009. "Why Plan?" In *The Citizen's Guide to Planning, 4th ed.* Chicago: American Planning Association. Available at www.planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK_ACGU4.

2. Other Resources

Hack, Gary et al., eds. 2009. "The Value of Planning." In *Local Planning: Contemporary Principles and Practice*. Washington, D.C.: ICMA Press.

"Why Do We Plan? A Guidebook for Citizens and Local Planners." 2013. Atlanta: State of Georgia Department of Community Affairs. Available at www.dca.ga.gov/development/PlanningQualityGrowth/programs/downloads/guidebooks/WhyPlan.pdf.