

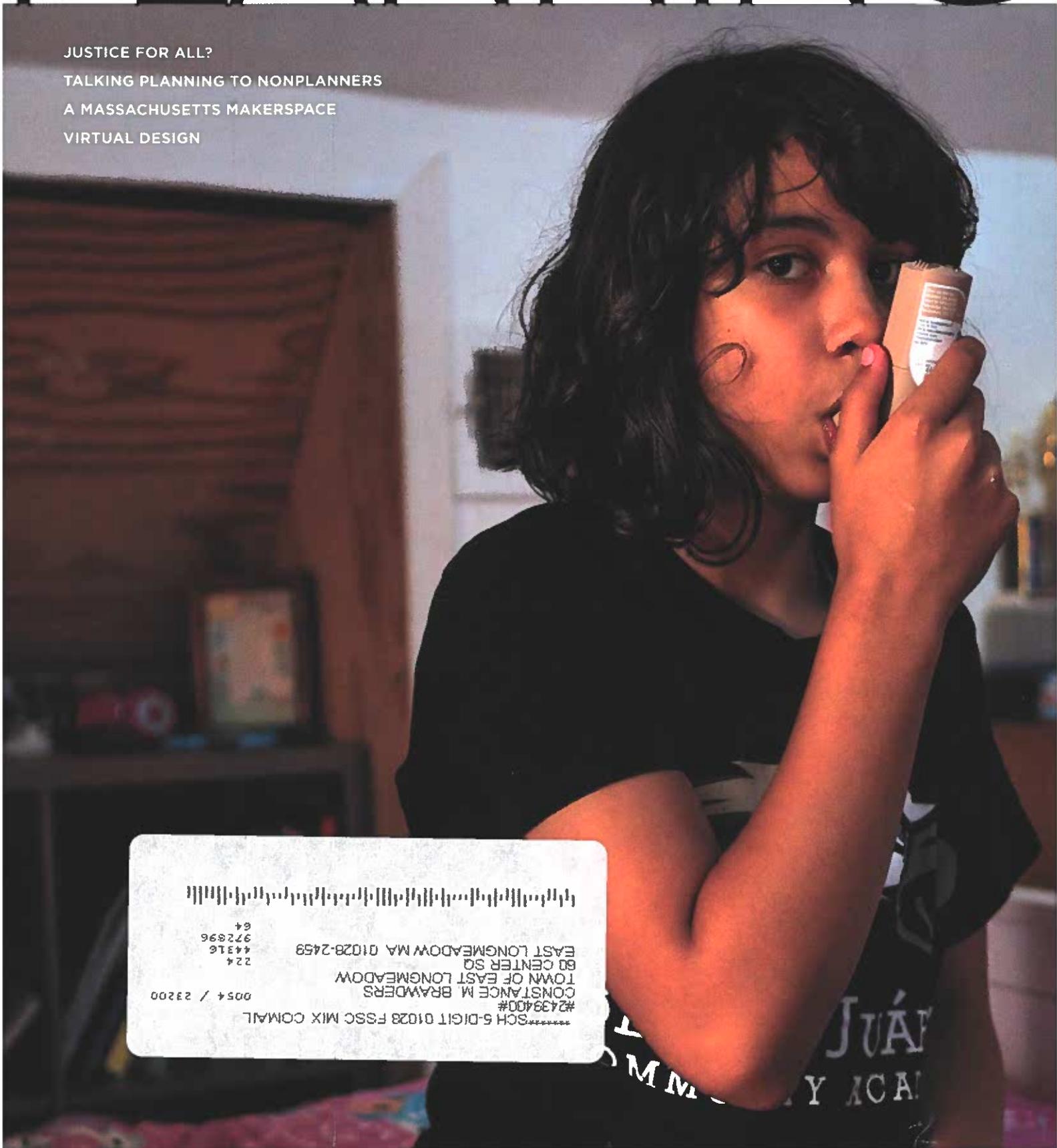
PLANNING

JUSTICE FOR ALL?

TALKING PLANNING TO NONPLANNERS

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CROSS TALK

Make sure your messages to nonplanning audiences don't get lost in translation.

By Linda McIntyre, AICP

THE BUSINESS OF PLANNING, an occasional series on the essential tools of the trade

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNA SIVAK, ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS AS IF HALF THE WORLD—especially nonplanners—is talking about planning: Entitled NIMBYs are ruining cities! Even affordable housing causes gentrification! That “green infrastructure” will never work! In this age of influencers, retweets, hot takes, and seemingly irreconcilable political differences, misunderstanding about planning issues abounds.

We planners don't always help matters. The jargon we learn in school and use as shorthand with each other can complicate, obfuscate, or alienate the people we work with, even when we are working toward the same goals.

The way we talk to and work with our partners in fields like landscape architecture, engineering, and restoration ecology is extremely important. When we understand each other, our plans are better and more responsive to a full range of issues and concerns of our communities. And if we want our plans to become reality, we need to make our cases to local politicians and, increasingly, the court of public opinion. That's who decides plans' fate, after all.

Here are a few challenging situations you might encounter, and some ideas to help the search for common ground with nonplanning audiences.

PLANNER + NONPLANNER COLLEAGUE

GIVEN THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF planning, understanding our nonplanning colleagues' objectives and challenges is as important to the process as understanding the affected community's aspirations and concerns. To do this effectively, “seek to understand before being understood,” says Bryan Jones, AICP, quoting an aphorism popularized by Stephen Covey in the 1989 bestseller *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Jones, a former private-sector planner who now works as the city manager of Eastvale, California, has gone to great lengths to practice what he preaches: He's also a licensed professional engineer with an undergraduate minor in communications. “As we've become more specialized in our professions, we've become more siloed,” he says, explaining the motivation behind his polymath orientation.

Inside such silos, planners—and our nonplanning colleagues alike—can fall into a loop of reinforcing our own views and forgetting there are other perspectives to consider.

David Yocca, an environmental planner and senior landscape architect at the conservation planning and ecological restoration firm

Biohabitats, has made a career of trying to break down silos. “We get brought in by the planning side, then challenged from the engineering side. One of my primary roles, as a nonscientist or engineer, is to characterize why ecology and habitat are important and suggest alternative strategies, with an approach that synthesizes the issues for different audiences,” he says.

Part of making efforts like these successful is learning what motivates all project partners and stakeholders, says Breanne Rothstein, AICP, an economic development planner in the Twin Cities region. And let's not forget that sometimes nonplanners have lessons for us. “Often with engineers, for example, the cost of maintenance or replacements drives [their] opposition to plan details,” Rothstein says. She cites as an example attractive but hard-to-maintain design elements such as brick sidewalks, which are sometimes written into zoning without necessarily understanding the consequences for other agencies. “Instead of taking a negative response at face value, find out what their real concerns are,” she recommends.

Asking questions and sharing information in a nonconfrontational way is often easier in person.

"So much communication is nonverbal," says Jones. "If you give that extra effort, get up from your desk, talk with other professionals, maybe have lunch with them, and develop a relationship,

it's more likely they will step in and help." This is as true in the public sector as in the private sector, he says. "Even if department heads don't talk, that doesn't mean staff can't."



PLANNER + NONPLANNER COLLEAGUE

TAKEAWAY FOR PLANNERS: Listen carefully to partners' objections and look at issues from their perspective. If possible, task people on your team with bridging gaps between different aspects of a project.

INSTEAD OF: "This is what the zoning says, so we have to do it!"

TRY: "I get that you're concerned about X. If we can be flexible on Y or Z, would that make it easier for you?"

PLANNER + THE PARTISAN

CASTING A WIDE NET FOR IDEAS AND figuring out if they might work in your community or city is part of planning. But sometimes ideas are dismissed or attacked based on assumptions about the source.

Clarkston, Georgia, a small city outside Atlanta, is growing, but its housing stock is aging and few new units are in the pipeline. As city officials looked for ways to make it easier to build in ways that reflect the community, which has relatively high proportions of immigrants and renters, a council member reached out to a Washington, D.C., think tank.

Nick Zaiac, a fellow at the R Street Institute, testified before the council with suggestions for modest changes to existing zoning regulations—increasing allowable floor area ratio in some districts; easing restrictions on mixed use development and home-based businesses; and relaxing some lot-size, bulk, and parking requirements, among other ideas—that would target challenges specific to the city.

This standard planning scenario—zoning wonk

advises elected officials in a public forum—was characterized by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* as a "right-leaning think tank's idea to shrink city's lots." Complaints from a few residents that such changes could "drive up the cost of living and speed up gentrification" were described by the paper as "backlash."

While R Street was started by a group that broke off from a Republican organization, its founders were driven by disagreements with the party over issues such as infrastructure and climate change, and it devotes considerable resources to studying them. Its land-use policy prescriptions are squarely in the mainstream of planning.

Zaiac was unruffled by the situation, though he notes that such efforts to conflate planning with partisan politics can have a serious downside.

"We live in a world where local politics is increasingly subsumed into national trends in political partisanship," Zaiac says. "Professors have argued that this erodes the pillars on which sound local government is based, leading to worse outcomes on municipal issues. Garden-variety

NIMBYism can capitalize on this trend, painting age-old land-use deregulatory mechanisms like 'upzoning' as 'right wing' when they've been part of the standard urban planning toolbox since the advent of zoning."

Fortunately, Zaiac notes, the council had heard from many residents who saw friends living in better apartments with similar rents in nearby towns. "Their comments on the testimony made this reality abundantly clear to elected officials," he says, so the council was open to policy changes that could help expand residents' housing options despite the attempt to frame R Street's input as an ideological plot.

Groups opposed to planning projects, which

don't necessarily break down neatly along political party lines, nevertheless frequently frame issues as "us-versus-them," using slogans such as "Developers Win! Neighbors Lose!"—a yard sign sold by a group organized to fight the recent Minneapolis proposal to eliminate single-family zoning. A group formed to support the effort turned this kind of terminology on its head, calling themselves "Neighbors for More Neighbors."

"The polar opposite was what we wanted," Nicole Salica, a volunteer with the NMN group, told me. "We also live here, and we're tired of NIMBYs claiming neighborliness when they're being anything but. Let's have a positive outlook and do some good!"



PLANNER + THE PARTISAN

TAKEAWAY FOR PLANNERS: Strive for inclusivity, even when talking about or with opponents.

INSTEAD OF: "You claim to support policies to improve X. Why aren't you on board with this?"

TRY: "We've heard from residents that they have problems with A, B, and C. We're looking at whether ideas like D, E, and F might help here, the way they have in some other places, as part of our process."

PLANNER + THE EXTRAPOLATOR

THE CONCEPTS THAT OFTEN DOMINATE public conversations about planning—vibrant neighborhoods, diverse communities—can be vague and thus subject to a range of interpretations by nonplanning audiences. To help explain these concepts, planners often turn to data and evidence, but in a context-dependent endeavor, this can be challenging and may lead planners to overstate the implications of existing data for their own projects.

Yonah Freemark, a well-known and respected planner, researcher, and writer, experienced this

first-hand when the *Urban Affairs Review* published his research article "Upzoning Chicago: Impacts of a Zoning Reform on Property Values and Housing Construction" in its January 2019 issue. The article analyzes the impact of a zoning and parking policy change in Chicago over a five-year period, finding that the policy changes drove up land costs but didn't produce meaningful increases in supply.

Various antidevelopment forces seized upon the article's findings, most notably opponents of a California Senate proposal to allow more density near transit, job centers, and good schools (as in

many other places, the vast majority of the state's developable land is zoned for single-family housing). Opponents extrapolated the results, applying them to the statewide proposal, which had been refined from an earlier version to address questions about renter protection and affordability levels. They claimed that the Chicago study refuted the YIMBY movement and constituted incontrovertible proof that housing doesn't respond to supply-side solutions, making a splash in the urbanism media world.

"The intersection between planning, advocacy, and scholarship is not always easy," Freemark told me in an email after publishing a follow-up in *The Frisc*, a San Francisco online news outlet. "Academic scholarship, because of its effort to be rigorous, typically can only say so much about specific public policies. It's difficult to transfer findings from one policy to another policy in another place and time."

Researchers' confidence about which policies should be pursued, he says, should be tempered by humility about the applicability of their work. "Academics should be as circumspect as possible about the limitations of what we know and what we don't know." The same is true for planners using those researchers' data and conclusions.

Even the most thoughtful policy proposals involve trade-offs, and planners using data and evidence from other places should be clear that plans and proposals are not magic bullets. In "Supply Skepticism: Housing Supply and Affordability," an analysis published in the January 2019 issue of the journal *Housing Policy Debate*, New York University

professors Vicki Been, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Katherine O'Regan sought to bridge the divide between economists and YIMBY groups on one side, and development opponents on the other.

The authors noted that, even though a considerable body of empirical evidence suggests that making it easier to build all kinds of housing moderates prices for low- and moderate-income households, such efforts routinely attract opposition from renters and affordable housing advocates as well as property owners.

"Local elected officials, along with housing and land use agencies...struggle to offer persuasive arguments to garner support for the increased production of housing," they write. "[L]eft unanswered, supply skepticism is likely to continue to feed local opposition to housing construction and further increase the prevalence and intensity of land use regulations that limit construction."

They present a clear and convincing summary of the evidence, but they stress that simply building more won't solve all housing problems—regulation and subsidies are also needed, especially at the deep affordability level. They also urge the people making housing policy to "provide more specific and concrete answers to concerns that communities have about the costs, benefits, and distributional effects of development."

In other words, it's complicated, and planners should neither oversell the potential for their plans to solve complex problems nor let opponents dismiss efforts to solve those problems as futile or harmful.

PLANNER + THE DECISION MAKER

ELECTED OFFICIALS DON'T ALWAYS HAVE 10-point plans to support the goals their agencies are tasked with implementing. These days, planners might be charged with, say, figuring out how to produce X number of new affordable housing units with little guidance beyond broad goals and targets.

Kathleen Ferrier, the transportation and land-use policy director for San Diego City Council member Chris Ward, recalls working on a report in a previous position with a transportation advocacy group. She interviewed the leaders of the planning and transportation agencies in each jurisdiction. "The big picture was that every city wanted safety, multimodality, an inviting streetscape—common aspirational goals," she says. "But that was not what was happening on the ground." Hearing officials articulate these goals highlighted the disconnect between what the community wanted and what it actually had. "We had to point out the effects of contradictory policies and ineffective implementation."

Fortunately, sharing these kinds of frank observations with elected officials and other decision makers doesn't have to be acrimonious. "People seemed to really appreciate our attempts to help them figure out how to actually achieve goals that weren't being implemented," says Ferrier. But clarity about trade-offs is important here too—"less

advocacy, more 'if-then,'" says Rothstein.

Planners can clarify some of the implications of choices, she says, especially with measures that have proven popular or trendsetting in other places, like food trucks. "What is the impact on existing, taxpaying, brick-and-mortar businesses? Our role is not to say 'no,' but to say 'here are the consequences.' Then the electeds have the choice to approve or disapprove."

The way you frame the discussion can help make conversations constructive, and better communication with officials can make the difference between a plan that's approved and implemented and one that sits on the proverbial shelf collecting dust.

"Be solution-oriented. Don't get lost in regulations," says Ferrier. Instead, draw on your planning experience and deploy it in a different way. "Interaction with the community forces you to break down problems and potential solutions, and the same skills are useful in this context," she adds.

It's a little bit like learning a new dialect of a familiar language. "To advance projects, you have to appeal to politicians and commissions, and write presentations and staff reports that speak to that," says Rothstein. It's another form of outreach, with a different kind of community. ■

Linda McIntyre is a planner and an award-winning freelance writer based in New York City.



PLANNER + THE EXTRAPOLATOR

TAKEAWAY FOR PLANNERS: Be clear that plans are ideas to help communities, not guarantees.

INSTEAD OF: "That study was just wrong. The political and market situation here is completely different."

TRY: "That was one study in one city. The results are interesting, and we'll take them into account. But we're trying to craft a solution that works for us and our specific challenges, using data and case studies from a lot of places."



PLANNER + THE DECISION MAKER

TAKEAWAY FOR PLANNERS: Be as clear as possible about the potential downsides, as well as the upsides, of all policy options, including sticking with the status quo.

INSTEAD OF: "That's impossible under our existing regulations!"

TRY: "Here are some ways we might reach the target you announced in your plan, and the challenges associated with each option."