

WHAT DO PLANNERS DO?

Planning is a systematic, creative way to influence the future of your neighborhood and city, your country and the world. **Urban and regional planners** use their professional skills to assist communities to respond to social, economic, environmental, and cultural challenges by:

- preserving and enhancing their quality-of-life
- protecting the natural and built environment
- promoting equity and equality
- improving services to disadvantaged communities, and
- dealing effectively with growth and development of all kinds

Planners do many types of jobs. Most work in land use, environmental, economic development, transportation, community design, housing, and social planning. While the majority of planning jobs are in these broadly defined specialties, individual planners can still have a very wide variety of responsibilities. Since many kinds of planning practice are strongly related, some planners become *generalists*—they develop a level of expertise in several substantive areas. Because planning is such a diverse field, you can find urban and regional planners involved in almost any kind of government or private activity which seeks to affect the future or respond to community change.

Most planners share a common set of skills and values even though they may specialize in one or two substantive areas. Using their “planning toolkit” they:

- involve all affected parties in important planning decisions
- help communities to develop their own vision of the future, preparing plans responsive to shared objectives

- analyze qualitative and quantitative information to suggest possible solutions to complex problems
- evaluate the cost-effectiveness of proposed projects and plans, and
- present recommendations to public officials and citizen groups in a comprehensive and understandable way

Planners work in government, with non-profit agencies, and in private industry. Those who work in the public sector often work for city or county governments but there are also planning jobs at the state and Federal level. International organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank also hire planners. Planners who work in the private sector can be found in utility companies, law firms, real estate development companies, and consulting firms. Planners also work in the non-profit sector or with non-governmental agencies like the United Way or advocacy groups for the elderly or community development organizations.

Some planners have responsibility for specific *geographic* areas like individual neighborhoods in a city or region; within those areas they may provide assistance on a variety of substantive issues from land use to housing. Other planners have *substantive* responsibilities—such as transportation or environmental planning—and provide assistance in their specific specialization to many communities within a city or region. Some planners work on projects which will be undertaken within a year or two while others focus their efforts on projects many years in the future.

Today, planners may move back and forth between jobs in the public, non-profit, and private sectors over the course of their career. They may also work for different levels of governments at different times. And they may change their specialties or their focus long after they leave school in response to on-the-job experiences or the opportunity for new challenges.

While you may think of planning as an urban activity, it actually occurs in communities of all sizes. Many planners work in small cities, in rural areas, and for Indian Nations. Others work in suburban neighborhoods at the periphery of large regions while still others have jobs in the dense core of major metropolitan areas.

In the next few pages we'll describe the most common planning specialties.