



Planning Directors' Important Role in Energy and Climate Change

As energy and climate change issues continue to garner national media attention, local planning departments are poised to play a critical part in ensuring that energy efficiency and renewable energy systems are included in comprehensive planning efforts at the state and local level. The strategic position planning directors play as advisors to policy-makers in town, city, county, and regional governments can significantly influence actions addressing these timely issues.

Energy and climate change advocates should look to planners for expertise in the following areas. Planning directors have the ability to influence policy development and decision-making in their municipalities, ensuring these timely issues are moved to action and ultimately improving the lives of local residents.

Planning directors undertake key planning actions in their communities.

- Visioning
 - Setting short (5-10+/yr) and long-term (20+/yr) goals for communities
 - Public dialogues on what the community wants to be in the future.
 - Using growth forecasts, including population, economic, and land development, to see what the trends indicate and if they are going in the desired direction.
 - Linking development objectives to other goals such as land-use, transportation, economic development, and affordable housing.
 - Connecting these goals and objectives to achieving energy efficiency and use of alternative energy sources in their communities, such as through energy-efficient building siting standards.
- Plan Making
 - Creating comprehensive (municipal, regional), functional (land-use, economic development, transportation, parks and open space), and sub-area (neighborhood, central business district) plans to achieve community goals and objectives and site specific
 - Incorporating an energy element or a greenhouse gas reduction element in these documents helps to ensure that energy and climate issues are addressed consistently and comprehensively in communities.
- Facilitation and Advocacy
 - Engaging the public in the planning process helps involve individuals in community planning initiatives.
 - Working with interest groups to incorporate their concerns and issues into planning decisions.
 - Advising elected officials on the implementation of planning goals as well as advocating the views citizens have toward planning objectives and projects.
 - Working with developers and other groups to ensure regulatory compliance with codes and ordinances.

Planning management tools can address energy and climate issues.

- Zoning and subdivision ordinances
 - Reviewing and revising as necessary adopted regulations to make sure they allow for and support energy efficiency and climate change mitigation strategies.
 - Using regulatory tools to ensure development patterns like mixed use and cluster development can occur.
- Smart growth
 - Adhering to smart growth principles, which include walkable communities, vibrant mixed uses, appropriately scaled and affordable homes, efficient and accessible transportation options, smart industry, sustainable economic development, and strategic land conservation.
 - Making sure that energy efficiency and climate change are explicitly part of a smart growth strategy.
- Transit-oriented and pedestrian-oriented development
 - Advocating transit-oriented and pedestrian-oriented community design, which encourages residents to use public transit or walk more for daily trips, reducing greenhouse gas emissions through fewer vehicle trips while also improving public health.
- Overlay zones and density bonuses
 - Using techniques that can achieve identified goals for specific areas in a community can help to make change happen where needed. Overlay zones allow for an additional layer of regulation to occur to preserve open space, protect historic structures, promote infill development, or other similar goals.
 - Providing density bonuses for development projects that meet certain goals provides an incentive for developers to “do the right thing.” Density bonuses, often used to encourage affordable housing, can be provided if developers meet certain energy efficiency goals with their projects.

Planning directors can reduce barriers to energy and climate planning.

- Regulatory barriers
 - Rethinking and revising outdated zoning and subdivision codes can help make sure these tools are not prohibiting innovation in building and siting practices.
 - Using planned-unit development (PUD) regulations to allow for development project innovation.
 - Ensuring that “minimum” parking standards are not precluding projects where transit and other alternative transportation modes reduce parking demand.
- Organizational and institutional barriers
 - Connecting stakeholders, including elected officials, developers, interest groups, and the public, in energy and climate discussions to ensure cross-disciplinary interests are met.
 - Educating elected officials and the public about alternative and renewable energy choices, such as solar, wind, geothermal, and biomass, to reduce resistance to pursuing energy alternatives.

- Establishing relationships with the development community to help eliminate protective covenants and deed restrictions that reduce the potential for energy efficient design projects.

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