

MAKING THE CASE FOR PLANNING ANALYSTS: A STUDY OF NORTH CAROLINA
LOCALITIES

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Abstract

This project considers whether an analyst within city and county departments would be beneficial to its growth and success. An individual in this role could address roles of budget preparation, strategic planning, special projects, and more. A variety of departments currently have this type of position, and this paper outlines the recommendations for this position. In addition, it clarifies that based on qualitative interviews, it may not be necessary for all planning departments. Typically, those with over 250,000 people benefit the most from these positions.

Municipalities like Raleigh, Durham, and Wake County were the most interested in this opportunity. As such, I recommend that localities consider adding these positions, and their benefits can be further studied.

Introduction

As a student working towards a dual master's degree in Public Administration and City & Regional Planning, my interests are varied. The combined degrees have led to an interest in administrative roles within municipal planning departments. As such, the goal of this project is to consider whether the addition of an analyst would be beneficial to a planning department.

The original interest in this project came from a conversation in the Fall of 2020 during Performance Management with Dr. Bill Rivenbark in the School of Government. He was discussing that Planning Departments do not participate in the SOG's Benchmarking Project, which tracks departmental outcomes and success. The point was made that there aren't necessarily things that they could track; in this conversation I disagreed with that point and said that for some departments with large budgets there would be a variety of options to follow. However, one way to make this process easier would be to add an analyst to these departments, as they tend to focus most on benchmarking and general outcomes.

Therefore, I wanted to find what the position might look like and what the benefits would be for planning departments in North Carolina. For a variety of cities and counties, it is likely that this addition would assist with department processes.

Background

As they function now, city and county planning departments do not have internal analysts. However, many other departments do. This is the expectation for budget departments, public works departments, and more. However, planning departments typically assign analyst-type tasks to those who serve as a Planner I, II, III, and so on.

The addition of an analyst within a planning department would make way for designated planners to focus on their planning-specific projects while analysts could work on tasks like budget preparation, performance measurement, and strategic planning. An analyst in a planning department would likely prove to be beneficial whether they were working on internal or external roles.

Local government analysts play large roles within their respective departments. The question this research project will consider is - Would municipal planning departments benefit from the addition of an analyst? To make this determination, the study will hold interviews with practitioners in local government departments within North Carolina. Processes will be discussed further in the methodology section, but there will be two formats of interviews.

First, current analysts in other departments will be asked about their own roles and how they could see them applying to a planning department. Second, department heads of planning departments will be asked about what projects analysts might take on, and if they think there would be a benefit to their addition.

The goal of the author is to share the findings for practitioners to view. Although it is not clear what the outcome will be, the assumption is that practitioners, department heads and analysts alike, will determine that on some level this change would be beneficial to planning departments. As such, this will be important for other planning departments to know, so it will be ideal to share any relevant discoveries.

Before discussing the study and what the process for research was, it is important to explain the background behind specific rules in North Carolina that make a unique place for this research. The State of North Carolina functions under Dillon's Rule, which means that municipalities and counties do not have autonomy to make their own rules. Essentially, they can

do anything that has been approved by the state government (Richardson, 2011). This is in opposition to Home Rule, which gives local governments autonomy, and allows them to do anything that has not been explicitly outlawed by the state (Richardson, 2011).

As such, North Carolina has to function under Dillon's Rule, and follow all processes the state tells them. One example of this is within budget creation and preparation. North Carolina local governments have many unique rules to follow under the Local Government Budget and Fiscal Control Act. Due to Dillon's Rule, each municipality has to follow the rules set out in this Act, and have many processes throughout they need to consider. Under Article III for the North Carolina State Statutes, there is the Budget and Fiscal Control Act. There are requirements like how to balance the budget, where certain funds need to go, and the need for a budget officer. These rules make it easier for North Carolina localities to know what to implement but also adds more elements to the final budget.

This makes it so that analysts within budget departments are a great addition, as they can handle many of the legalities during the implementation process. Further, within other local departments analysts ensure that these budget requirements are met. As such, with capital improvement and debt service projects, as well as those in the general fund, a planning analyst would make it easier to ensure all statutes and requirements are met.

Methodology

This study was done through quantitative interviews. Individuals were asked a series of questions to gauge how they view their role as an analyst, whether they think an analyst could contribute to a department, and how the breakdown goes for analyst roles. Further, the same process was followed for the directors of planning departments. After that, the rest was done

through a literature review explaining the background of these topics, followed by recommendations.

The study started by reaching out to various faculty from the School of Government and Department of City & Regional Planning to gauge whether they know of individuals who may have insight into this topic or issue.

From there I sent emails to individuals asking to interview them. In each interview, I asked if I could both record and take notes, but also addressed this in the email requesting an interview. During the interview I asked them eight to ten questions, depending on how the conversation went, about how they relate to the analyst position, and what they think about it. For those who are analysts, this will be very specific to their job. For those who are not analysts and do not have any in their department, this will be about what they think such an addition will bring.

Most conversations lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour. Total, about twenty hours of interviews occurred over the process of two months. The questions can be found below.

General

1. What organization are you with?
2. What is your role?
3. How long have you been in municipal government?

Questions for Analysts

1. How do you view your position as an analyst, and what does your day-to-day look like?
2. How do you think others in your department view your role?
3. How do you think people outside of your department view your role?

4. Who do you think would take on these tasks if there was no analyst position?
5. Do you feel that the analyst role benefits your organization?
6. From what you know of planning, do you think municipal planning departments would benefit from an analyst position?

Departmental Leadership Questions (Non-Analyst Departments)

1. Have you previously worked in a department with an analyst before?
2. Would your position and department benefit from the addition of an analyst?
3. Have you considered adding an analyst position to your department?
4. If you did, what types of tasks and roles would you likely assign them?
5. Who currently is in charge of these tasks now?
6. What would the analyst addition look like within your department?

Literature Review

The literature review will consist of three separate topics: 1) the growth of local government, 2) the history of the analyst, 3) the impact of the analyst, and 4) analyst expectations. Each element will consider how the analyst has come into local government and how they can continue in a planning department.

Growth of Local Government

There are various schools of thought about the creation of cities and the overall growth of local government. Whatever the case may be, cities have existed for far longer than is generally assumed by those outside of the planning field. To understand the position of analysts and the work that they do, it is essential to understand how local governments came to be.

One theory that Childe discusses, cities have experienced various changes throughout the history of time (Childe, 1950). The first stage is considered “agricultural primacy” and was the period of 8000-5000 BCE, when plants and animals became domesticated by nomadic peoples. These groups of people eventually became attached to permanent sites (Childe, 1950). Slowly, populations began to grow in these locations and “intensive agriculture” was created. As is often the case, social and political organizations evolved to prevent total chaos and anarchy (Childe, 1950).

However, there is another consideration that Jane Jacobs proposes that there were “small quasi-urban areas” that pre-dated large-scale agriculture (Jacobs, 1969). Her theory is that this eventually led to the establishment of trading centers and specializations among tribal groups. This change assisted in creating urban growth (Jacobs, 1969). Although it is not clear which is more accurate for explaining the growth of cities, agriculture played a large role in both theories.

As industry started to grow in both scenarios, it became clear that government entities would be needed. In many cases this was to prevent horrible incidents, but it was also to provide for those living in these blossoming urban areas (Childe, 1950 & Jacobs, 1969).

In the case of the United States, Jacobs’ theory appears to be more likely when considering its growth. The colonizers who came to North America were no longer nomads, wandering the terrain. They came to the specific place they wanted to land and settled there immediately. Trade became prominent, and again a system was needed to govern (Schlesinger, 1940). Intensive development of the cities in the US began in the early 1700s.

Both Jacobs and Childe’s theories focus on the growth of cities as a part of agricultural changes. This is also discussed as the key for growth in the United States in Nelson and Stenberg’s writings (Nelson & Stenberg, 2018). The early stages of local government were

adapted from those who had colonized early on, so there were many European tendencies. Different political subdivisions were called, “townships, towns, or parishes” (Nelson & Stenberg, 2018). These subunits eventually were used to create counties (Lemon, 2001).

Residents began to follow technology, transportation, and better health, so more people moved to more populated areas. Trends such as this continued into the Industrial Revolution, which caused more corruption. This led to a need for better management in these areas by the government. These changes were often funded and supported by wealthy benefactors, hoping to create more efficient and effective local governments (McDonald, 2010). Local governments became more hands-on and started working towards innovation in the field and studying how to improve services. One of the outcomes of this became the creation of analysts.

History of Analysts

The position of “analyst” has grown in the local government field over time. Many hypothesize that it has grown in a similar manner to that of the council-manager position due to a change in expectations for local government (Nalbandian, 1991). As local government corruption has been occurring more heavily in the field, benefactors chose to invest in changes (McDonald, 2010). As political machines increased, people realized there was a need for change (Nalbandian, 1991).

Reformers started to respond to the corruption occurring by advocating for the end of politics from administration and making administration a technical field to be trained in (Nalbandian, 1991). In the 1930s this ideal sprouted and became more popular, becoming what is now known as the council-manager form of government (Stillman, 1974; Svara, 1989). This theory is generally known as the politics-dichotomy and comes from Woodrow Wilson’s early

writings. He believed that the two, politics and administration, needed to be kept separate (Wilson, 1887).

Going forward, this became a large part of the administrative process and the goal of making it a technical field. It has been discussed that this furthered the idea of scientific management and made it so that administrators were experts (White, 1926). The goal became efficiency. It was stated that, “The fundamental objective of the science of administration is the accomplishment of work in hand with the least expenditure of man-power and materials. Efficiency is thus axiom number one in the value scale of administration” (Gulick, 1937).

Based on this information, we can see the switch into administration as a science and its own field, which led to the creation of analysts (Nalbandian, 1991). They became the ideal way to place multiple jobs and projects into one singular technician that was an expert in the field. Positions such as these furthered the concept of maximizing the budget while also improving and increasing efficiency.

They have now become an integral part of many local government departments. They are most common in budget and management departments but can also be found in community development, human resources, public works, and many more. It tends to be the perfect entry-level job in local government for those who have recently finished graduate school (ICMA, 2020). Analysts take on many different roles and it varies with each department; however, some of these roles include data collection, processing data, budget preparation, research best practices, and even the connector of departments (Furterer & Elshennawy, 2005; Hoffman 2016; McCue, 2003).

One author summarized it best when specifically discussing budget analysts, “They possess the knowledge and expertise in both budget process and content, and are often the only

direct link between an agency, department, and elected officials” (McCue, 2003). Whether it is as a budget analyst or an analyst in any department, it is apparent that these staff members make a big impact.

Impact of Analysts

Due to analysts’ training and typical expertise in the field, they can assist in various forms and functions within departments. In terms of budget processes, they can work to create all the documentation going forward and use MUNIS software to ensure the budget is being followed (McCue, 2003). Many analysts also work on performance management and strategic planning for their department (GFOA, 2010). Further, they can run research reports to assess any dangers to the department or choices to be made. (Jones, 2009).

These tasks are expectations that have been placed on all local government departments. Almost everyone is expected to manage their line-item budget and create efficiency measures. The addition of analysts takes some of the pressure of other individuals in the department, especially leadership (Nalbandian, 1991). By adding people who have been trained for these tasks, it leaves other staff to take care of their projects related to the department. For example, often, planners must take on these tasks in planning departments, but the addition of an analyst would give them back their time to work on their tasks in the job description. As Gulick said, it is the best way to ensure efficiency for the lowest dollar value (Gulick, 1937).

Analysts have a unique connection to the organization, within their department and externally. By adding analysts to the planning department, it would greatly benefit efficiency and effectiveness going forward, or so the theory is. However, interviews with current analysts and department heads will help create conclusions.

Expectations of Analysts

During my interviews with analysts I found a variety of expectations for analysts. Although my interviews are not yet done, so far I have talked to people in budget, police, public works, and management departments. From the analyst perspective, their main role is to be a data collector and presenter (Haygood, 2020). Much of the work that a local government analyst does comes from the Manager or Budget office and is sent down to each department for various tasks. This can be general information that all departments prepare, like the budget; however, it can also be department-specific information that is needed, like a report about year-to-year police response time.

The role of each analyst is different in different locations and departments within the localities. However, each analyst that has been interviewed made it clear that the main goal of the job is to process and understand data. Although it is important to note that they are not decision-makers, they merely make recommendations for leadership in the hopes that they will agree (Haygood, 2020). This is a common misconception of analysts, people assume that they make the decisions. If the position of analyst were to be added to the planning department, this would need to be a point of clarification. There is still information to uncover about the daily role of analysts, but it is clear that they take on many roles and without them certain projects would fall through the cracks (Haygood, 2020).

Interview Results from Analysts

The findings will now be explained by each inquiry in the “Questions for Analysts” section of the methodology. This will hopefully pair everything down and make it easier to

understand. From the first stage of interviews, with strictly analysts, a variety of unique findings have been realized. However, the department head interviews will occur next and may bring different perspectives that align with current findings, or may change existing expectations. This will determine the possibility of adding this position to various planning departments. However, it was apparent that the first aspect needed to be understanding analysts.

As such, the first question for analysts was, “How do you view your position as an analyst, and what does your day-to-day look like?” For many people they saw their position as being data-driven and focused on assisting those in leadership with their questions. Many had taken on unique miscellaneous projects. This made them feel like their role served as a “catch all” for important things that needed to be done but people did not have the capacity for. Although many feel their jobs are important and make a difference for general outputs, they may not be necessary or expected (Haygood, 2020).

The next question in the interviews has been, “How do you think others in your department view your role?” All of the analysts felt that people in their department had positive views of their work. Additionally, they often brought them into their projects for tasks and questions. This goes to show the ability of the analyst to get involved in multiple projects and opportunities. Hopefully this would make them a unique addition to planning departments, as they would have many projects to join. However, this question will require more information from department directors before further generalizations are made.

One of the most interesting parts of the interview was consistently around the question, “How do you think other departments view your role?” For many people, the way that other departments view their role is from a place of confusion around their daily work (Haygood, 2020). More specifically, when departments do not have an analyst they do not understand the

work that they do. They assume that they are decision-makers, which is not the case.

Consistently throughout each interview I have found that people have the most inaccurate assumptions about analysts within the budget departments. This is because in most localities they work with every department because they have a “portfolio” of agencies that they assist with budget creation.

However, most departments blame their analyst when a budget request does not approve of their request. This is not the case, as they function more like the messenger and ensure that the manager receives budget information (Haygood, 2020). To reiterate the information from above, the analysts take the data and make it digestible for others but do not make the decisions themselves. This is typically a point of confusion for budget analysts, but often occurs for all analysts. As such, this may be an issue with a planning analyst but may also be a way to inform employees about the work that analysts do.

The two questions of “Who do you think would take on these tasks if there was no analyst position?” and “Do you feel that the analyst role benefits your organization?” often had similar answers within them. All analysts that I have interviewed so far agreed that if there were no analysts to take on general data processing and reporting, many things would fall through the cracks. Additionally, in some cases directors would have to take on some tasks. However, the most common assumption was that these tasks would fall on current staff members who may already be at capacity. This was already part of my hypothesis going into the study. I assumed that most planners had taken on roles that could be done by analysts, like budget creation and performance management. While talking to budget analysts that work with planners, they explained that this was often the case (Haygood, 2020). In that similar context, everyone felt that

their position was a benefit to the organization and made a difference for what the department was able to accomplish.

Finally, the last question I asked that was analyst-specific was, “From what you know of planning, do you think municipal planning departments would benefit from an analyst position?” This has been my favorite question to receive insight on because the responses vary. Many individuals express that based on the work that they do, they think this position would be beneficial (Haygood, 2020). This is particularly noted among budget analysts that work with planning departments. They tend to note that planners are strung quite thin due to the many tasks they are required to take on. Therefore, an analyst would be beneficial to address the tasks that are added on to the daily roles of those who are already overwhelmed (Haygood, 2020).

However, one person that I interviewed during this process noted that this would likely not be beneficial for their organization. This is because of the size of the community, and they felt like all of the tasks assigned were being handled based on organization structure. This made it clear to me that this may not be a generalizable study in many ways. Of course, for some municipalities it may be applicable, but my goal now is to find specific characteristics of a locality that may specifically benefit from these changes.

Interview Results from Directors

Similar questions were discussed during interviews with Planning Department Directors and Assistant Directors. The first intensive question of the interview was whether or not they had worked with an analyst in any capacity. Almost every person said that they had not worked with an analyst, as the majority had only worked in planning and that was not the norm (Haygood, 2020). Although, most knew what they would be looking for in an analyst. They wanted

someone that was a team player, sociable, had a research background, and had a Master's degree (Haygood, 2020).

I also tried to gauge whether or not they thought the position would be beneficial for the work that is done. This varied in similar ways that it did during the analyst interviews; those in larger municipalities tended to agree that it would be beneficial. However, those in smaller towns and counties discussed that it was already difficult to add more planners, an analyst would like not get through. There was also not a need in many cases. During some interviews, the directors expressed that they were in charge of making the budget and it was not difficult. As their department was smaller, the funds were not immense, so the budget was a yearly one-off that did not take much time. In these scenarios, an analyst would be far from essential.

Additionally, for some small-to-medium sized localities, it was not something that they would need aside from three months of the year during budget preparation (Haygood, 2020). In this situation, for some it may be more beneficial to contract out for a temporary position, while others discussed the benefits in terms of benchmarking and budget creation (Haygood, 2020). Despite these conversations, it was generally not something people had considered adding to their department.

One interviewee expressed that an analyst position would be beneficial for serving across different planning topics, such as long-range planning and transportation (Haygood, 2020). For the larger localities that have multiple divisions, a filtered position like this could assist in many ways. One such example could be by serving as a director source on initiatives, as they would likely work on many.

In terms of the work these employees would be doing, answers were across the board. Some individuals said it could be either in long-range or short-range planning. However, some

thought it would be ideal to have them work on budget preparation and performance management. This was my thesis going into the project. As this is what most analysts start with, it seems like a planning analyst could do this work and pivot as new assignments came along. The eventual reason for recommendation, personally, can also be seen in the interviews. I attempted to inquire about who was handling roles that analysts could likely take on. Naturally, these tasks fell on the Planning Director and Assistant Director in most cases, which only added to their heavy workload. Although it may be difficult to navigate at first, I predict that analysts would be beneficial in the long-run for many organizations.

Limitations of Scope

Although over twenty interviews were conducted as part of the study, there were still a variety of limitations that imposed the finding. The three main limitations were timing, COVID-19, and existing positions for interviews. Despite these influences, the conclusions are still applicable and assist in coming to a greater conclusion.

In regard to the timing, although the interviews were conducted over the course of two months, more time is always beneficial. Each interview took roughly an hour, which means that over twenty hours went into interviewing, but not much more time could be dedicated so that the writing could begin. In an ideal research setting, there would have been interviews over a longer period of time, so that broader conclusions could be reached.

Additionally, as for many students, COVID-19 played a role in the outcomes. It largely impacted the amount of interviews conducted, as many local government employees were busy with the crisis, they did not have time to meet. This impacted the number of interviews I held, as well as the people who were interviewed. Many came from places that had larger populations or

were not in specific departments dealing with the crisis, as they had time to sit down for an hour. However, this decreased the number of Planning Directors that were available, which is brought up in discussion.

Finally, as my research was gaining an understanding of whether or not a Planning Analyst would be a benefit to local governments, it is currently a rare position. As such, it was difficult to explain to some professionals what this might look like if it were to be implemented in local governments. However, after the interviews more came to understand and even consider what it might look like if this position were located within their department.

Conclusion

Most of the conclusions from the study were well-aligned with the literature review and research from before interviews started. Although some directors and analysts could see the benefits of an analyst addition, others were wary. Typically, the larger municipalities disclosed that it was something they would be interested in pursuing or had considered adding before. Those with a constituency of around 250,000 people tended to express this view.

However, smaller or rural localities often did not feel ready for this addition. In several instances, the person creating the budget for planning departments was the director, as the budget was not large enough to need more involvement. Additionally, some did not feel that they had the funds available for this option. It may take some time before this option becomes a normal idea, and then other planning departments will likely catch on. The City of Raleigh has announced that they are seeking a Fiscal Analyst for the Planning Department. As more localities of a larger size start adopting this position, smaller ones may eventually follow.

Further, while it may not be possible to hire a full-time analyst for some planning departments, there are other solutions for the time being. For example, if the work of an analyst

would be beneficial for a shortened time period, a municipality could hire someone who had retired for part-time work. Many Public Works departments do this for Solid Waste collection on days when too many collectors are unable to come.

A unique program could also be created around this idea, possibly through the UNC School of Government. Whether it is with graduate students or full-time employees, municipalities could share an analyst through a special program. Depending on the time of year, they could work on budgeting, benchmarking, or more. There are a variety of unique options available.

Although a locality may not need an analyst yet in their planning department, there are ways to incorporate one for a trial-run or budget season. As more and more departments find themselves including this position, Planning will likely do the same within the next decade or two. It will be an interesting change to watch and hopefully increase effectiveness and productivity across North Carolina and further.

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