

Planner Profile: Planning in the Field

This piece marks the beginning of a series of interviews with North Carolina Planning professionals which will aim to offer insight into how planning takes shape in a variety of professional contexts.

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Planning Director
Town of Chapel Hill
1983-present
DCRP Graduate, 1976

CP: Can you please describe your role as a planner?

RW: Planners take on different roles, depending on the organization and environment in which they work, and depending on the values and expectations of clients and constituents. In some settings, the planner needs to be an advocate for a particular idea or a particular project.

In Chapel Hill a critical community value is participatory governance. There is a high priority on making sure that everyone has the best and most complete information, with multiple opportunities to offer input and influence outcomes. Elected officials make the decisions. One of my most important roles is to manage the process, to make sure that all parties are represented and have fair and equal access to resources and decision-makers.

A second major role is to put ideas on the table for the community to consider. This is a combination of applying best planning theories and practices to local circumstances, helping the

community create and implement a vision based on community values, and evaluating ideas and proposals to see if they match the vision.

CP: What has been one of your most contentious/challenging projects?

RW: Meadowmont. This 400-acre new-urbanist development was proposed on the east side of Chapel Hill, on undeveloped land that was once a dairy farm. The proposal was highly controversial. Critics focused on traffic impacts and loss of open space; proponents focused on mixed-use, high quality design, pedestrian-oriented features, and an innovative, aggressive stormwater management strategy. There were many meetings, hearings, negotiations, and court dates. The project was approved and is approaching completion, and is now the subject of critical acclaim (by most).

CP: Who are some of the groups you partner with?

RW: It is increasingly common for the Town to partner with neighborhood groups in pursuing a variety of initiatives. In a current example, the Town Council agreed to work with the Northside Neighborhood Association (a neighborhood bordering Chapel Hill's downtown) to prepare strategies and regulations to help preserve neighborhood character. In this case, the Planning Staff meets regularly with neighborhood representatives to prepare new regulations. Other examples include joint sponsorship of workshops with the Chamber of Commerce, and affordable housing initiatives with a local nonprofit organization, the Orange Community Housing and Land Trust.

CP: What planning issues do you deal with on a regular basis?

RW: Key issues facing Chapel Hill are traffic, stormwater management, neighborhood preservation, University growth, affordable housing, and downtown development.

CP: What is one of your most rewarding experiences as a planner?

RW: In 1991, I made a trip to Gaithersburg, Maryland to study Kentlands, one of the country's first New Urbanist developments. Upon returning to Chapel Hill, the twin tasks began: working collaboratively with a developer to design a development along New Urbanist principles on a 350-acre tract just south of town; and working with the Town Council and community to discuss the value of this development form.

The result was Southern Village, a development designed and built along new urbanist principles, and featured in Time Magazine in 1999. The development is now complete, with a fine-grained mix of residential and commercial uses, side-by-side along narrow, tree-lined streets with sidewalks in front and alleys behind.

CP: What are some of the significant changes in the planning field that you have observed in your tenure as planning director?

RW: The most significant change I observe is the changing role of the planner - from a visionary who has all the answers to a community facilitator helping citizens articulate values and achieve results. The second most significant change is technology - sophisticated computer mapping and imagery that open doors to more participation and better analysis.

CP: At what level (local, state, regional, federal) do you see planning having the most impact, and why?

RW: The more local the work, the greater the impact on a particular community. I have enjoyed being a municipal planner and being able to see the positive influences of our planning program on a daily basis. Other planners I know savor the more global changes that can be affected at a larger level, through legislation, funding initiatives, and writing to introduce new ideas. And my consultant friends find satisfaction in taking the good ideas from one community and cross-fertilizing into other communities. For me, local government is where the action is most intense and interesting.



*Roger Waldon engaging community members in planning decisions.
Source: Roger Waldon*