

# Urban and Regional Planners



## Occupational Brief Title Codes:

- D.O.T.: 199.167-014
- G.O.E.: 11.03.02
- S.O.C.: 19-3051
- O\*NET™: 19-3051.00
- N.A.I.C.S.: 541320, 925120
- H.O.C.: ESI

## Work Classification Based Related

### D.O.T. Occupations:

- Energy-Control Officers
- Environmental Analysts
- Parking Analysts
- Research Assistants
- Traffic Technicians

## Interests Based Related

### G.O.E. Occupations:

- City Planning Aides
- Intelligence Research Specialists
- Planners, Program Services
- Political Scientists
- Research Workers, Social Welfare

## Skills Based Related

### O\*NET Occupations:

- Actuaries
- Fish and Game Wardens
- Residential Advisors
- Sociologists
- Surveyors

## Noteworthy Quote:

*"In planning you can make a difference in the future of a whole neighborhood or city, not just today but for years to come. It's a field for generalists with far-ranging interests. Planning appeals to people who are creative, who like to see how complicated puzzles can be fit together, and who like to work with people."*

– Dr. Francis Parker, Professor of Urban Planning, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana

*Urban and regional planners* (ur-ban and `re-gion-al `plan-ners) develop long- and short-term land use plans to provide for growth, stability, revitalization, and the health and welfare of urban, suburban, and rural communities. They also help local officials make decisions concerning social, economic, and environmental problems.

Most cities devote effort and money to the orderly development and growth of new sections, as well as the renewal of old residential, business, and industrial areas. They create economic opportunities and promote economic development by attracting convention centers and stadiums, or assisting in the establishment and placement of new enterprises. They also focus their efforts on the sustainability and stability of such plans, as well as the health and welfare of community members.

Urban and regional planners direct and participate in these activities. They devise plans to promote the best use of community lands and resources for residential, commercial, and recreational purposes. Planners address issues such as public transportation system plans, resource development, and traffic congestion. They may formulate plans relating to the construction of new school buildings, public housing, or other infrastructure. They are concerned with ecologically sensitive issues such as air pollution, wetland preservation, forest conservation, and the location of new landfills. Urban planners may also be active in the social issues such as the needs of senior citizens, shelters for homeless people, or the establishment of a correctional institution.

## Work Performed

Because local governments employ a large proportion of urban and regional planners, they are often referred to as *community* or *city planners*. Before preparing long-range plans for development, planners first conduct detailed studies of existing and proposed land use. They examine aerial maps and surveys. They look at the distribution of people, buildings, businesses, and other elements that make up cities and towns. They draw up reports and maps showing the locations and capacities of streets, highways, water and sewer lines, schools, factories, and recreational sites. They examine the kinds of industries, housing, the makeup of the population, and employment and economic trends. They learn what communities need and what they want to accomplish by studying what they already have.

With this information, along with input from citizens' advisory boards or city councils, urban and regional planners draw up plans and proposals on ways to use undeveloped or unused land. They may formulate plans for the construction of new school buildings, public housing, or sewage systems. They design the layout of proposed buildings, traffic circulation, off-street parking, and open space. They may prepare materials for community relations programs. Their proposals also suggest ways to carry out these programs, their costs, and how to pay for them.

Planners examine proposals for new community projects such as schools to be sure they will meet the needs of a growing population. They look at services

such as health clinics to see how well they serve the people. They keep informed on the economic and legal issues of zoning codes, building codes, and environmental rulings. They may recommend changes in housing and building codes. They see that builders and developers follow these codes and regulations.

Planners often coordinate the work of those in charge of public works, schools, health and welfare, parks, mass transit, streets and highways, capital budgets, and other public affairs. For example, they work with transportation engineers on the routing and design of roads and bus lines, and the placement of parking lots for commuters and shoppers. Or, they may work with environmental and parks officials on new recreational sites, such as parks, playgrounds, or public pools.

Urban and regional planners attend meetings of planning commissions and city councils. They speak on radio and television to keep all informed of events and changes that have a bearing on the development of the community. They talk to people interested in business, school, or development projects. Planners work with civic leaders, public officials, architects, land developers, lawyers, computer programmers, writers, artists, engineers, and other professionals. Planners may serve as mediators in community disputes. They may present options acceptable to both parties. Planners may appear before legislative committees to explain their proposals.

In large organizations planners usually concentrate on a single activity such as transportation, housing, historic preservation, urban design, environmental and regulatory issues or economic development. The work of planners in small towns or cities is often more diverse. They work more closely with the public. They often have more responsibility in housing, transportation, economic development, design, zoning, and social services.

Planners today use computer technology and geographic information systems, to record and analyze information and to prepare reports and recommendations. They set up and use databases, spreadsheets, and analytical techniques to determine costs and to forecast trends in employment, housing, transportation, or population. Computerized maps help planners work with geographic variables such as land areas, populations, land uses, and land development.

### **Working Conditions**

Urban and regional planners spend much of their time in an office, but make frequent field trips to gather facts on proposals for land development. They may examine housing, traffic, or other matters. They also attend meetings of town or city councils, or public hearings to present or explain proposals to the public or citizens' groups. Some local government planners involved in site development inspections spend most of their time in the field.

Much of the time urban and regional planners work alone developing and drafting plans. But they also work with public officials, land developers, civic leaders, and other officials. The support of these groups is essential to the adoption of proposed programs.

The work is not physically demanding, but it can be stressful at times. Planners may experience the pressure of deadlines and tight work schedules. They may also experience political pressure generated by interest groups affected by land use proposals.

### **Hours and Earnings**

Most urban and regional planners work a scheduled forty-hour week. However, they often work many more hours attending meetings or public hearings with citizens' groups in the evenings and on weekends. Rush projects and deadlines may also demand longer hours.

Earnings for urban and regional planners vary with their education, experience, employer, the size and wealth of the employing community, and region. A report issued in 2004 by the American Planning Association listed the median salary of urban and regional planners at \$60,000 a year. Overall, salaries ranged from less than \$40,000 a year to over \$100,000 a year. Half earned between \$48,000 and 78,000 a year. By employer, urban and regional planners tended to have the highest earnings working in federal government followed by economic developers, city government, and state government. The lowest earnings were found in county, metro/regional, and joint city/county administrations.

Most urban and regional planners enjoy generous fringe benefits. They get paid sick leave, health insurance, paid vacations, and pension plans. Many also have the use of a city automobile, or are reimbursed for gas and mileage for on-the-job use of their own vehicle.

### **Education and Training**

High school students thinking about a career in urban and regional planning must take studies to prepare for admission to college. Social sciences and mathematics courses will prove especially useful in this work. Part-time or summer jobs in city or community government offices can also be helpful.

Although individuals with a bachelor's degree from an accredited planning program may qualify for some beginning positions, a master's degree from an accredited program in urban or regional planning is the best preparation for this work. A bachelor's degree from an accredited planning program, paired with a master's degree in architecture, landscape architecture, or civil engineering is also good preparation for entry-level planning jobs in various areas, including urban design, transportation, and the environment.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2003, sixty-seven colleges and universities in the United States offered an accredited master's degree program in urban

and regional planning. Another thirteen offered an accredited undergraduate (bachelor's) degree program. These programs are accredited by the Planning Accreditation Board, using standards approved by representatives of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), the American Planning Association (APA), and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP).

Most graduate programs in planning require a minimum of at least two years of study beyond the bachelor's degree. Graduate students combine studies with laboratories, workshops, and studios where they learn to analyze and solve planning problems. They are often required to work part-time or through the summer in a planning office. This practical experience is called an internship, and provides invaluable experience in obtaining a full-time position after graduation.

Some of the schools also offer specializations such as environmental planning, land use and comprehensive planning, economic development, housing, historic preservation, social planning, community development, transportation, and urban design. Because of the increasing use of computerized models and geographic information systems in urban and regional planning, the ability to use computer models and statistical techniques is important. Courses in related disciplines such as architecture, law, earth sciences, demography, economics, finance, health administration, geographic information systems, and management are also highly recommended.

### **Certification and Professional Societies**

Although certification for urban and regional planners is not a requirement, it often is an advantage to those seeking promotions to better paying positions. The American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), the professional branch of the American Planning Association (APA), grants certification to APA members who meet academic and professional experience requirements, and pass a written examination. These individuals may become members of the institute. Michigan and New Jersey even use the AICP examination for the licensing and registration of planners in those states.

The APA is a public interest and research organization which brings together everyone who is involved in planning, including practicing planners, planning commissioners, students, teachers, and youth. With more than 30,000 members, APA works to promote and advance the field of planning through advocacy in government and public forums; through AICP networking, professional development, certification, and educational services; and by setting high standards of planning practice, ethics, and education. APA also gathers, publishes, and distributes up-to-date information on planning issues, practices, and technologies; sponsors conferences and seminars; and offers advisory and job services.

### **Personal Qualifications**

Urban and regional planners must have analytical and design skills. They should be able to visualize the relationships among buildings, streets, parks, and other spaces. Good writing and speaking skills, and creative but logical thinking are important traits.

Urban and regional planners should understand the viewpoints and concerns of others and keep them in mind when they prepare their proposals. They should be flexible in order to bring together opposing points of view and to make constructive suggestions. Top jobs in urban and regional planning, for instance, go to those who socialize easily and who can work effectively with others toward common goals.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

### **Where Employed**

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2002, urban and regional planners held around 32,000 jobs. Although they worked throughout the United States, over half of all urban and regional planners worked in cities. Roughly 70 percent were employed by local governments. Nearly 25 percent worked for private consulting firms providing architectural, engineering, management, scientific, technical, and related services to private land developers, educational institutions, large land developers, banks and mortgage companies, and law firms that specialize in land use. Others are employed in state agencies that deal with housing, transportation, or environmental protection. A small number work for the federal government, mostly in the U.S. Departments of Defense, Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation.

### **Employment Outlook**

Employment of urban and regional planners is expected to grow about as fast as the national average for all jobs through the year 2012. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of urban and regional planners will grow by nearly 11 percent—that is an increase of roughly 3,000 positions. An additional 11,000 jobs will open due to replacement needs as experienced urban planners leave the field.

Driving this growth is an expanding population. State and local governments will need planners to provide greater public services such as regulation of commercial development, the environment, transportation, housing, energy, and land use and development. Planners will be needed to deal with issues including new housing developments which require roads, sewer lines, fire stations, schools, libraries,

and recreation centers. Planners will also be needed to help with the replacement of worn-out bridges, sewer systems, and highways. Others will find employment in areas concerned with historic preservation and rehabilitation.

The demand for urban planners, however, will vary by region. The employment of these specialists will be best, for example, in affluent, rapidly expanding communities. Small town chambers of commerce, economic development authorities, and tourism bureaus will also be growing employers for planners, especially planners with some background in marketing and public relations.

In addition, the number of openings for consulting positions in private industry is expected to grow more rapidly than in government agencies. Budget constraints often restrict job growth in government, and when communities need to cut expenditures, planning services are more likely to be cut than basic services such as police, firefighting, and education. Overall, opportunities should be best for urban and regional planners who graduate with a degree from an accredited program.

### Entry Methods

Federal, state, and local agencies prefer to hire those with a master's degree in urban or regional planning, or with the equivalent in experience. Those with a degree in another field, such as urban design or geography, may be hired for specific work in a planning agency. Some city and state agencies also require applicants to take and pass a civil service test.

Graduates with a master's degree may apply to the college career services office for assistance in their job search. Professional organizations are another useful resource in finding job leads. The American Planning Association, for instance, offers a searchable online job services database listing open positions. State and local employment agencies also list openings and any requirements for urban and regional planners, and can offer assistance in the application process.

Graduates with a bachelor's degree in urban planning may start in an architect's office or a construction firm. This work may give them the experience to qualify for employment as an urban planner. Others may find a position as city planning aides in city, regional, or urban planning offices. New planners may help design a project, collect facts, interview people, write reports, or do field surveys. They work with more experienced planners.

### Advancement

Advancement takes the form of transfers to more responsible and better paying positions within a planning agency or development group. In some agencies the planner becomes an overall director. Often planners move to larger cities where the potential range of development offers broader opportunities. They may plan and design layouts for large developments, make policy decisions, or have heavier funding responsibilities.

Some planners become consultants. They may serve communities, businesses, or institutions that cannot afford a full-time planner. Other planners may move into related fields such as public administration, real estate development, business planning, economic development, and civil engineering.

### For Further Research

**American Planning Association**, 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20036-1904. Web site: [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org)

**Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning**. Web site: [www.acsp.org](http://www.acsp.org)

### Acknowledgments

Chronicle Guidance Publications appreciates the cooperation of the individuals who reviewed the information in this brief

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