

Planning for a Shoestring Budget Solutions for Planning Offices with Fewer Resources

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Have you ever found yourself a few bucks short and in need of an extra carpenter while right in the middle of a home remodeling project? You can't really just stop, so you fall back and regroup, exploring ways to stretch a thin budget even thinner. It's not

exactly a fun exercise, but you know that you want to achieve your vision and complete the project.

And so it is with planning departments these days. Despite having fewer resources at their disposal, the Planning Director is attempting to ensure counter coverage, have staff attend critical regional agency meetings, post an update on the status of a Climate Action Plan, and complete a

Planning Commission packet by 5 p.m. All of these responsibilities-and more-with substantially reduced staff support.

Being asked to do more with less is the reality facing nearly all of California's planning departments. Having to keep General Plans current, but having fewer dollars to draw upon. New environmental and sustainability regulations to address, but fewer planning staff to carry out the work. Meanwhile, departments are experiencing tightening budgets and related staff reductions as a result of the downturn in development application and permit revenues. Quite simply, the pressures placed on city and county planning staff for performing is mounting, resources are tightening, and all while local expectations for "soldiering on" and maintaining quality and responsive public service do not wane.

These growing financial and operational challenges are forcing city and county governments to face a new norm in the way municipal planning offices operate. This new norm means that cities and counties need to examine their current and anticipated service demands, staffing workloads, assess their capabilities, and determine how to prioritize and address these demands given the resources that are likely to be available. It's a new reality, and adjustments are absolutely needed to both set the jurisdiction's expectations and the way services are provided.

Just as in nature, adaptation is the hallmark of survival. And in this era of reduced resources, there are plenty of examples of useful adaptations to help planning offices continue functioning and provide continuity of quality service.

Take the City of Fremont, population 215,000. Reduced by five planners over the past several years, the Planning Department has had to change its business-as-usual in order to improve effectiveness, cut costs, and provide continuity of services. Actions have included closing the public counter every Friday afternoon, revised (and in some cases extended) timelines for product delivery, created self-help Planning website for easy use by the public (reducing demand on staff to respond to public requests for information), and reduced the number of Planning Commission meetings from two to one per month. The overall effect has been to focus the available staff resources within the budget allocated, while maintaining continuity and a relative high quality of service.

Looking at ways to recoup costs is now becoming a norm in how planning offices allocate work. Despite dealing with manpower and budget shortages, Fremont has since the mid 1990's applied a 2.7 multiplier to staff time billed on certain applications. This allows Fremont to cover

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not only staff costs (salary and benefits) but also covers corresponding costs associated with both administrative and support functions as well as information technology costs, vehicle replacement and building overhead. By applying a multiplier that you usually associate with a private contractor, to staff hours, the Fremont planning office is able to generate sufficient revenue to maintain development review functions without severely impacting the City's General Fund. Additionally, the City charges a Community Planning Fee (a surcharge on building permits) to maintain a portion of its long range planning functions including the General Plan and Zoning Code.

Increasingly, a number of planning departments across the State that have borne the brunt of the recession are turning to contract agency staffing as an effective and financially viable stop-gap measure. Certainly there is nothing new about utilizing the private sector to fill specialized needs on a temporary basis. But in the midst of a State economy that continues to grapple with extraordinary debt and reduced revenues, effective and well-managed contract services can be an invaluable tool to maintaining the continuity of high quality city and county planning services. As planning departments constantly search for ways to cut overhead costs, the drop-in drop-out function of a contractor can give an office the flexibility and expertise it needs.

The City of Clayton Community Development Department has also experienced a cut back in staff hours. Although a small department, with a Community Development Director and an Assistant Planner, and a local population of approximately 11,000, the standard State and Federal mandates apply. In addition, this Department must process the typical range of development applications and offer zoning and planning information. Budget cuts have resulted in the Assistant Planner position being reduced to 60% time. In adapting to reduced resources, versatility and the focused, well-managed use of contract planning services have been important in Clayton to providing continuity of high quality planning services during this new reality.

The Community Development Director's range of responsibilities has been increased to provide more direct service to the public when the Assistant Planner is not available, while a cost-recovery-based fee schedule for development applications allows the Director the use of contract planning assistance to assist with the preparations of staff reports, resolutions, and ordinances to maintain schedules and stabilize workloads.

It's the three C's that has really helped Clayton succeed as an office. Communication, Communication, Communication. Clear and open communication plays central role in allowing the Clayton office to deliver on its projects. Regular talks between the City Manager, the City Council, and the Community Development Director are vital in setting expectations on key deliverables related to a prioritized work plan. This has been particularly important in terms of meeting State and regional mandates.

Regardless of budget and manpower shortfalls, the need for these high quality planning services remains.

So what's next? This current decline in municipal budgets doesn't have to be a gloomy prospect. Rather, it can be viewed as an opportunity to reexamine planning department operating efficiencies, learn from the best practices of our peers and better our day-to-day operations. The new norm we currently face is about focused work efforts and cost savings while providing a continuity of high quality, public planning services. Prioritizing and focusing the efforts of staff, well-managed use of contract services, creative uses of technology, self-help programs for customers, cost-recovery fee schedules, and cross-training staff, are but a few of the tools readily available to successfully address this new reality.

Just as open communication has worked for Clayton on the local level, increased communication between planning practitioners across California will be critical to sharing solutions. Tapping into readily available tools that allow dialog in an open forum will open doors to department success.

We all know that economic phases are cyclical and that this downturn should just be viewed as an opportunity to better prepare ourselves and our planning offices for the inevitable upturn.

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