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Background Essay

Urban planning as the profession we know today in the United States began in the early 20th century, with the establishment of the American City Planning Institute (later renamed the American Planning Association) and the nation's first zoning laws, in New York City in 1916. Between 1810 and 1910, New York City had grown from a population of 96,373 to 4.8 million, and the haphazard crowding of city slums posed severe public health problems.



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In the 21st century, there are about 40,000 urban and regional planners in the country, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). About two-thirds are employed by local governments. In the private sector, planners often work for architectural, engineering, or consulting businesses. To be employed as an urban or regional planner usually requires an advanced degree, in such fields as urban design or geography. Coursework often involves architecture, law, geography, economics, and management, and specializations like community development and redevelopment, land-use or code enforcement, transportation planning, and natural resources planning.

Planners address the most basic of geographical considerations on where people live and how they get to work; how utilities are delivered to them; where parks, retail districts, hospitals, and schools might best be located; and many other concerns. They make recommendations to city governments on zoning laws and how desired public projects can be paid for, including water and wastewater treatment facilities, sewer and water lines, and sports and recreation facilities. They coordinate public hearings to inform, and receive input from, the community's residents (the taxpayers). Often they work within the constraints of existing layouts and structures that may or may not have been well-designed to begin with, but they also plan for, and try to regulate, growth. Mapmaking is another highly valued skill for a planner, as maps of existing city areas and proposed areas for expansion are crucial tools for planning and for informing the public.



An important planning tool is the formulation of a general plan that projects growth into the future and devises ways to accommodate it, taking into consideration the community's social, economic, and environmental well-being. As urban sprawl in some metropolitan areas has raised concerns among environmentalists and residents facing long commutes to work, one concept that urban planners have considered in general plans is called Smart Growth, also sometimes called New Urbanism. This concept seeks to curtail the outward expansion of urban areas, instead focusing on revitalizing existing city neighborhoods and setting up mixed-use areas so that homes, jobs, shopping, and other needs are closer together, within easy distance of public transportation, bicycling, and walking, thereby reducing traffic congestion.

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One U.S. city that has focused on Smart Growth in its planning is San Jose, California, which in the second half the 20th century was one of America's fastest-growing cities. From 1950 to 2000, San Jose grew from 95,280 residents to nearly 900,000. One factor spurring this growth was the city's development as the center of the nation's tech boom, and the surrounding Santa Clara Valley became better known as Silicon Valley. From 1950 to about 1970, the city encouraged growth in every way it could, and annexed additional land for expansion. In the early 1970s, amid an environmental movement mushrooming nationwide, the drawbacks of unrestrained growth became apparent to city residents faced with high municipal debts, congested traffic, overstretched city services, and the threatened and actual loss of natural areas to urban sprawl. San Jose began efforts to direct and regulate growth. The first general plan was approved in 1975, setting the initial Smart Growth goals.

The city kept growing: by 1990, San Jose had more residents than San Francisco; as of 2010 it was the nation's 10th largest, with a population of just under 1 million. The city's idea was never to actually stop growth, but to direct, manage, and in some ways limit it. As a city official put it in 2001, "New housing is great; new jobs are great. But we must also be concerned about the livability quotient for our residents and be environmentally sensitive."

In November 2011, after a four-year process that included more than 100 meetings seeking public input, the San Jose City Council approved its fourth general plan, called Envision San Jose 2040. The plan anticipates the addition of 120,000 new housing units by 2040, with the idea of accommodating this growth through higher density and "infill," rather than outward development. In fact, the plan, as with other San Jose general plans before it, reinforces what are called "urban-growth boundaries" to protect natural areas, particularly in the hills in the eastern part of the city and Coyote Valley and South Almaden Valley in the city's southern area. The plan seeks to establish self-contained "urban" villages," with shops and workplaces close at hand, to cut down on long commutes.



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The accompanying city maps show areas slated for growth as well as the areas off-limits for growth set in Envision San Jose 2040. The city makes these maps and the planning document available on its website and city offices. Whether residents agree or disagree with the city's plans or believe the planning is effective in achieving its goals, the information is freely available.

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