



WESTERN CENTRAL CHAPTER

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Three Rules for Better Writing

by Natalie Macris

(Note: This article is adapted from Planning in Plain English: Writing Tips for Urban and Environmental Planners, by Natalie Macris, published by the American Planning Association. The book is available from the APA Planners Book Service (at www.planning.org/book.service). Copyright by APA.

A well-written plan or other planning document can be a valuable resource for citizens, decision-makers, government agencies, consultants, and many others. It can keep a planning process running smoothly, advance policies, prevent misunderstandings, head off legal challenge, and even improve the public's perception of government.

Then why are so many planning documents hard to read, understand, and use? There are many reasons. Some planning documents are difficult to write clearly because they need to "please everyone," from citizens who want to know what will happen in their neighborhood to lawyers who may need to defend the planning organization against a lawsuit. Political pressures can make planners "soft-pedal" controversial points, rather than write in clear, direct statements. Esoteric legal requirements have made some planning documents longer and introduced complicated terminology. Meanwhile, schedule and budget constraints mean that most planners do not have much time or money to spend on editing and rewriting, let alone adding maps or other graphics that would make their documents more interesting to read.

With those limitations in mind, here are three basic rules for avoiding some of the writing idiosyncrasies of the planning field. These rules are common suggestions found in almost any guidebook on writing – you have no doubt heard them before. Consider, though, how they apply specifically to the writing quirks of the planning profession.

Rule 1: Write Simple Sentences - Generally speaking, each sentence you write should:

- Be short (no more than 20 to 25 words long), and
- Express only one main idea.

Short sentences that deliver one idea at a time are usually easier to understand. They also force you, the writer, to think more carefully about the message of each sentence. Using short sentences can be especially effective when you are explaining a process or sequence of events (something that planners do routinely).

Example

- *Long Sentence:* The City Council adopted the ordinance in October, following which Planning Department staff identified a change that they believed to be necessary to one of the conditions, requiring the Council to review and adopt a revised ordinance in November.
- *Shorter Sentences:* The City Council adopted the ordinance in October. Planning Department staff later identified a necessary change to one of the conditions. This required the Council to review and adopt a revised ordinance in November.

In the above example, the three shorter sentences follow the "one-idea-per-sentence" rule.

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DIRECTORY

President

Ramona Mattix
 Planning & Community Services
 510 North Broadway, 4th Floor
 Billings, MT 59101
 p: 406.657.8289
 f: 406.657.8252
 e: MattixR@ci.billings.mt.us

Vice President/ Montana State Director

Don Contraman
 223 South 2nd Street
 Hamilton, MT 59840
 p: 406.363.3316
 f: 406.363.2102
 e: bear@bitterroot.net

Secretary

*This position is
currently vacant.*

Treasurer/Idaho State Director

Dave Abo, AICP
 Boise Planning & Development
 Services
 P.O. Box 500
 Boise, ID 83701-0500
 p: 208.384.3830
 f: 208.384.3753
 e: dabo@cityofboise.org

N. Dakota State Director

Stephen E. Miller, AICP
 Kadmas, Lee & Jackson
 P.O. Box 1157
 Bismarck, ND 58502-1157
 p: 701.255.0076
 f: 701.255.0943
 e: smiller@kljeng.com

S. Dakota State Director

Ben Orsbon, AICP
 South Dakota DOT
 700 East Broadway
 Pierre, SD 57501
 p: 605.773.3156
 f: 605.773.4870
 e: ben.orsbon@state.sd.us

DIRECTORY

Wyoming State Director

Mike Archibald
 Lincoln County Planning Office
 P.O. Box 468
 Kemmerer, WY 83101
 p: 307.877.9256
 f: 800.877.6439
 e: marchibald@lcwy.org

Immediate Past President

W. Randall Johnson, AICP
 Gallatin County Planning
 311 West Main Street #200
 Bozeman, MT 59715
 p: 406.582.3130
 f: 406.582.3135
 e: rjohnson@co.gallatin.mt.us

DIRECTORY

Chapter Grants Committee

Betty Clack, AICP
 Nez Perce County Planning
 P.O. Box 896
 Lewiston, ID 83501
 p: 208.799.3089
 f: 208.799.3149
 e: bettyclack@co.nezperce.id.us

Professional Development

Jeff Bollman, AICP
 Planning & Community Services
 510 North Broadway, 4th Floor
 Billings, MT 59101
 p: 406.657.8247
 f: 406.657.8252
 e: BollmanJ@ci.billings.mt.us

NEWSLETTER INFORMATION

This newsletter is published by the Western Central Chapter of the American Planning Association. Circulation is to APA members of the Western Central Chapter (WCC). The WCC Board welcomes submission of original articles, editorial letters, and any other information of interest to both professional and citizen planners. Submissions should be made to the newsletter editor:

Jody J Sanford, AICP

City of Bozeman
 Department of Planning & Community Development
 P.O. Box 775
 Bozeman, MT 59771-0775
 p: 406.582.2266
 f: 406.582.2263
 e: jodyolsenmt@hotmail.com

2004 WCC Newsletter Schedule

Spring - March 5 (submittal deadline February 13)
 Summer - June 4 (submittal deadline May 14)
 Fall - September 3 (submittal deadline August 13)
 Winter - December 3 (submittal deadline November 12)

CHANGES OF ADDRESS

American Planning Association
 122 South Michigan Avenue
 Chicago, IL 60603-6107
 p: 312.431.6107
 f: 312.431.9985
 e: membership@planning.org

DIRECTORY

Western Planning Resources Chapter Rep

Joanne Garnett, AICP
 WLC
 200 Pronghorn
 Casper, WY 82601
 p: 307.266.2524
 f: 307.235.5604
 e: joaneg@wlcwyo.com

State Continuing Education Coordinators:

Idaho

*This position is
currently vacant.*

Montana

Jeff Bollman, AICP
 Planning & Community Services
 510 North Broadway, 4th Floor
 Billings, MT 59101
 p: 406.657.8247
 f: 406.657.8252
 e: BollmanJ@ci.billings.mt.us

North Dakota

Stephen E. Miller, AICP
 Kadmas, Lee & Jackson
 P.O. Box 1157
 Bismarck, ND 58502-1157
 p: 701.255.0076
 f: 701.255.0943
 e: smiller@kljeng.com

South Dakota

Sam Trebilcock, AICP
 Sioux Falls City Planning
 224 West Ninth Street
 Sioux Falls, SD 57104-7034
 p: 605.367.8888
 f: 605.367.7801
 e: STrebilcock@SIOUX-FALLS.ORG

Wyoming

Jeffrey D. Hamerlinck
 Spatial Data & Visualization Ctr
 P.O. Box 4008
 Laramie, WY 82071
 p: 307.766.2532
 f: 307.367.7801
 e: itasca@uwyo.edu

Land Use Planning Tools to Support Agricultural

American Farmland Trust Helps Communities Plan for Agriculture

Planning for agriculture is as important as planning for development. It creates the framework for an economically and environmentally sustainable agricultural industry. An effective plan includes land use policies and programs to keep land available and affordable for farming, as well as economic development tools to make farming profitable. By incorporating both of these elements into a plan, communities can preserve their rural character, support farmers and protect important natural resources.

American Farmland Trust (AFT) helps communities plan for agriculture. AFT is a private, nonprofit organization that has 23 years of experience protecting land and working with land use planners, the agricultural community, government agencies, elected officials and others. AFT fills a special niche in the land protection movement, helping communities build support for the protection of working farm, ranch and forest land and create effective land protection strategies. Its team of experts includes more than 100 staff members with a wide range of professional and academic backgrounds - land use planners, farmers, ranchers, lawyers, policy experts, agricultural economists, appraisers and wildlife biologists.

AFT can help you prepare a plan for agriculture that includes:

- Land Use Policies and Programs: Purchase of development rights, transfer of development rights, agricultural districts, agricultural zoning, cluster zoning, right-to-farm, and tax relief.
- Economic Development Tools: Agrotourism, direct marketing, branding of local products, value-added processing, and product diversification.
- Policy and program creation and implementation: Cost of Community Service studies, workshops, surveys and focus groups, agricultural industry profiles and mapping.

AFT has successfully worked across the country with communities and organizations including the state of Maine; the three-county Connecticut River Valley in Massachusetts; Saratoga County, New York; Pierce County, Washington; Lake County, Illinois; Teton Regional Land Trust, Idaho; and the Colorado Cattlemen's Association. For more information about how AFT can help your community plan for agriculture, please contact Jill Schwartz at 202-331-7300, or visit AFT's website at www.farmland.org.

Study Broadens Knowledge of Farm Conservation Easements

Washington, D.C. - A new study on agricultural easement programs finds that use of this land conservation tool is most prevalent in suburban and semi-rural parts of major metropolitan areas - counties with at least 100,000 people that have been experiencing rapid population growth for years.

A *National View of Agricultural Easement Programs* is the most in-depth and comprehensive analysis of agricultural easement programs undertaken in the United States. This report, the first in a series to be issued from the study, profiles 46 agricultural easement programs in 15 states - nearly half of all publicly funded farmland protection programs in the nation. The 46 programs studied have spent a total of \$1.8 billion to protect 887,000 acres on 5,800 farms. The study was done by American Farmland Trust and the Agricultural Issues Center, University of California, in collaboration with Farm Foundation.

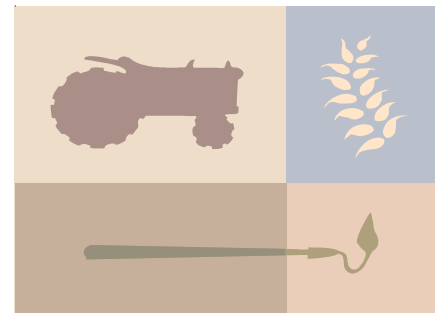
"This study reveals a diversity of ways that farm conservation easement programs are conceived, managed and funded," said project director Alvin D. Sokolow, University of California-Davis. "What all of the programs have in common, however, is that they were launched by a show of strong public support for farmland protection. This common conviction supported the bond issues, revenue measures and public deliberations needed to establish and maintain the programs."

Agricultural easements allow landowners to sell the development rights on their farms to government or nonprofit organizations in exchange

for agreeing to keep the land permanently available for agriculture. The use of farm easements has grown exponentially since the 1970s; today 26 states have at least one publicly funded easement program at the state or local level.

One interesting finding was that the cost of agricultural easements - generally the difference between the market and agricultural values of the land - varies tremendously. Although the average price of easements for all 46 programs studied was approximately \$2,000 per acre, the report explains that easements are often worth far more than their price tags. "Donations by landowners for tax benefits can help lower the price of easements and sweeten the deal for communities wishing to protect farmland," said Julia Freedgood, Director of American Farmland Trust's Technical Assistance Services.

The report, *A National View of Agricultural Easement Programs*, along with maps of land protected through most of the 46 programs studied, is available at www.farmland.org and www.farmfoundation.org. Additional reports from the study will address acquisition strategies, land use planning, and the impacts and effectiveness of easement programs.



Three Rules for Better Writing, continued

Rule 2: Write Active Sentences - Consider this sentence: “It is the determination of City staff that there is a possibility of associated increases in traffic noise if this project is approved and constructed.” It sounds bureaucratic and dull, doesn’t it? It’s also unclear. Who is going to approve the project? Who is going to construct it? The sentence is “passive”; it uses the passive voice (in this case, the verb “is”) and has several nouns (“determination,” “possibility,” “increases”) that the writer could convert to verbs. Planning documents are usually full of sentences that needlessly use the passive voice. Here are some common examples.

The Ambiguous Sentence - By using the passive voice, the writer avoids identifying the subject of the sentence (that is, who or what is responsible for the action implied in the sentence). This use of the passive voice is the worst offender because the writing is not only dull, but often unclear.

Example

- *Passive Sentence:* A preliminary grading plan shall be submitted prior to project approval.
- *Active Sentence:* The developer must submit a grading plan before the City approves the project.

Notice that the active sentence identifies who should submit the grading plan, as well as who will approve the project. Clearing up this type of ambiguity allows the reader – the planner enforcing the project’s conditions of approval, for example – to understand who is responsible for what.

The Lazy Sentence - Sometimes, a writer just gets lazy. Phrases that begin with the words “in” or “by” are often clues that the writer could easily turn the sentence around to read in the active voice.

Example

- *Passive Sentence:* Existing contaminant levels at the project site are summarized in Table 5.
- *Active Sentence:* Table 5 lists existing contaminant levels at the project site.

Using Verbs as Nouns - Nouns created from verbs are common culprits in passive sentences. You can convert many of these nouns back into verbs to create shorter, clearer, and more active sentences.

Example

- *Passive Sentence:* It is the determination of City staff that there is a possibility of associated increases in traffic noise if this project is approved and constructed.
- *Active Sentence:* City staff has determined that traffic noise may increase if the County approves this project and the developer builds it as proposed.

Rule 3: Use Simple Words and Avoid Jargon - The best way to recognize planning jargon in your writing is to imagine that you are speaking directly to one of your readers, or better yet to a friend – someone who is reasonably intelligent but who may not know a lot about your subject. How would you convey your ideas if this person were sitting across a table from you? Would you use the same words? The words that seem too complicated, pompous, or formal for that situation are probably the jargon words.

Example

- *Jargon Sentence:* Grading activity required by new development would have associated short-term erosion impacts.
- *Plain English Sentence:* Grading would cause soil to erode.

The jargon sentence above uses the words “activity” and “impact” – two jargon words that usually appear too often in planning documents and can obscure the meaning of a sentence. The plain English sentence makes the message clearer.

- *Jargon Sentence:* Public infrastructure can be growth-inducing from a local and regional perspective.
- *Plain English Sentences:* Construction of streets, sidewalks, and water and sewer pipes would allow development plans for the area to move ahead. Development in this area could bring changes throughout the region.

Again, the example shows how just a few jargon words can cloud the meaning of an entire sentence. Notice how removing the terms “infrastructure,” “growth-inducing,” and “perspective” forces the writer to convey the idea more clearly. (Of course, that can mean using more words, as in this example.)

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Three Rules for Better Writing, continued

Some words that clutter planning documents do not qualify as planning jargon. These words are not specific to our profession, but they are still unnecessarily complicated. It's generally best to replace these words with shorter, more common ones.

Example

- *Complicated Words:* The property is located contiguous to the airport and comprises 30 acres.
- *Simpler Words:* The 30-acre property is located next to the airport.

- *Complicated Words:* The Planning Department utilized newspaper ads to disseminate further information concerning the General Plan update.
- *Simpler Words:* The Planning Department used newspaper ads to issue more information about the General Plan update.

It is important to remember that almost no one follows all of the rules all of the time. Sometimes there are good reasons for this. For example, in writing about planning matters, the passive voice can be the right choice when it isn't practical or appropriate to list every party that will be carrying out an action. The actors may be unknown, unimportant, obvious, or best left unidentified for political reasons. Sometimes, too, jargon can be useful as shorthand – for example, in a memo to colleagues – as long as you can be certain that all of your readers will understand it.

Another important point: some offices have already set up report formats and standard language requirements that violate “the rules” and make clear communication more difficult. You may not have the time (or, especially early in your career, the clout) to make wholesale changes. In these instances, it's best to recognize that change, like the planning process itself, usually happens one small step at a time. The same applies to the process of becoming a better writer.

Natalie Macris is a San Francisco-based urban and environmental planner who specializes in writing and editing planning documents. You can reach her at nmacris@planningediting.com.

Report on the North Dakota Planning Association's Annual Meeting

North Dakota Planning Association held its annual meeting November 5-6, 2003 in Fargo, ND. The weather proved a challenge, with snow and cold blanketing the state since the end of October. Being hardy souls, some 50 members and interested parties attended. Dr. Clyde Forrest, Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Attorney at Law and chair of the APA Divisions Council, presented a four hour workshop on “Avoiding the Pitfalls of Zoning.” He talked at length about the legal basis of planning and zoning, and the steps that can be taken to avoid problems.

The conference included sessions on how the Trails and Scenic Byways and the Renaissance Zone programs are being successfully used in our state. Representatives from Watford City, West Fargo, and Fargo talked about the exciting impact that the Renaissance Zone has had in their communities. Representatives from various levels of state and federal government talked about how the Trails and Scenic Byways programs can and are being used throughout the state. The conference concluded with a special dinner at Bonanzaville, complete with museum tour and a Theodore Roosevelt interpretation.

NDPA's past year has been exciting one in that several of our major goals for 2003 were accomplished; the start up of the web page (www.NDPlanning.org) and working with League of Cities for Legislative tracking. One of the major items left undone is the revision of the planning handbook from the 1970s. The annual meeting concluded with plans for participation in MarketPlace 2004, establishing the 2004 meeting in Bismarck in order to prepare for the next legislative session.

Planning Education at a Distance (PED) Program

The Ohio State University has just launched a new Site Planning course as part of its Planning Education at a Distance (PED) program. PED is an Internet based educational tool that provides planners and government officials with on-line urban and regional planning related continuing education opportunities.

Courses Now Available: Managing Public Meetings, Site Planning, Zoning Basics, Design Review, Conservation Zoning, Transfer of Development Rights, and Smart Growth Initiatives.

- Location: Your Office or Home
- Time: At Your Convenience
- Cost: \$40 and up
- Continuing Education Credits: 2 hours and up
- Visit our website listed below for more information about each course.

PED provides education opportunities designed specifically for Planning Commissioners and other public officials, such as Basics in Zoning. PED also offers continuing education programs for professional planners, such as Design Review and Smart Growth. All of the PED courses qualify for AIA Continuing Education credit. Many of the courses qualify for AICP continuing education credit. PED is a great way to earn continuing education credit conveniently from your home or office.

Each course allows participants to move at their own pace. Participants can stop and come back at any time to complete the course. Each course is designed to be completed in 1/2 day or less. Each class includes presentations by experts in their field, as well as case studies by planners, developers and public officials.

Members of the Western Central Chapter of APA can take the “Planning Ethics” course by Carol Barrett for a discount. For more information, see <http://knowlton.osu.edu/ped/index.htm> for more information.

AICP Exam Update

The American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) is in the process of revising the membership application and exam. The revisions include a change to the eligibility requirements. The AICP Exam Application will be available in an interactive on-line form and a retrievable printed form (PDF) at the AICP web site later this year.

As part of the application, applicants will need to describe their professional planning experience according to the established criteria and include a job verification letter from each employer. AICP will also require applicants to submit confirmation that their degree was received.

The 2004 Exam will be offered in two 12-day testing windows (May 8 through 22 and November 6 through 20). The application submission deadlines for each window will be January 7, 2004 for the May 2004 testing window and July 6, 2004 for the November testing window.

The initial application fee will be \$60.00. The AICP Exam registration fee will be \$325.00. AICP dues, upon passing the exam, are \$75.00 to \$115.00 (salary-based).

In the meantime, we encourage you to periodically visit the AICP web site at: <http://www.planning.org/certification/index.htm>. You can also contact your Professional Development Officer (PDO), Jeff Bollman, AICP, at 406.657.8247 or BollmanJ@ci.billings.mt.us, to keep abreast of exam related deadlines, fees, preparation resources, and other information.

Editorial: Mandatory Professional Development in the Age of Pragmatism

by Jack E. Molenaar, AICP/PP

Planners involved in the leadership of APA at the national level have been debating, fairly regularly, the issue of mandatory versus voluntary continuing education for AICP members over the past four years. This debate resulted in a "pilot" mandatory continuing education program for three chapters: New Jersey, Ohio and Western Central. The program that was tested has not done well, mostly because of the paper work that was required of the volunteer officers of the chapters. How can a pilot be mandatory without any enforcement? It has been pointed out by more than a few that a mandatory pilot is an oxymoron, but that is a story for another article. To understand why anyone would want a mandatory education program you really have to ask the question, "What are we trying to accomplish by imposing mandatory education on our members?"

As a former two-term President and two-term Treasurer of the New Jersey Chapter I have seen the seedy side of trying to set up programs, trying to break even on costs all without burning out volunteers within our chapter. Anyone who works in, or with, nonprofits knows it is a

daunting experience, and you will burn out if not for the occasional meeting at the local watering hole. So why are we expending so much energy on a program that seems to require so much additional effort on the part of our members? What are we trying to accomplish within the dark rooms of APA leadership? What problem(s) are we trying to solve?



The problems I have been trying to solve have been the lack of good affordable professional development opportunities for all our members, both non-AICP and AICP, and the lack of involvement of the typical member in their own organization. I believe that these two issues are intricately linked. In order to have more quality affordable opportunities for all APA members you need people to organize and run them. This means using volunteers, especially if we want programs to be affordable. The Chapter Presidents Council of APA (representing 46 chapters around the country) has discussed and set as a priority the issue of affordability and access to more and better programs because at the chapter level, that is what we deal with regularly. How do we get educational programs to members that may be cut off from the rest of us because of a lack of funds, or even by physical distance? Remember, that any program that is created has to work as well in New York City as it does in Montana.

Another problem with a continuing education program is the "education" label itself. How do we determine what programs should be allowed for "credit", AICP or other wise? As an organization that has policy statements or papers on many planning related issues, this goes to the heart of "What is Planning?" question. I will not even attempt to cover that beast in this article.

After looking at the issues and the problems that need to be solved in order to make a stronger organization of better-informed, well-rounded planners, I have come to the conclusion that mandatory continuing education is the wrong solution. That is why I propose a program of mandatory professional development. This is a slight difference but a critical one. We are a profession with many faces and hats. It is very difficult to be a planner without knowing a little bit about everything. How do we learn anyway? I believe that we learn not just from sitting in a class or attending a conference. We learn from talking with each other over a cup of coffee or a beer,

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Mandatory Professional Development in the Age of Pragmatism, continued

from discussing issues with residents at a public meeting, from helping out other organizations or community groups, from running a conference, from advocating for changes in our own state's planning related legislation, from lobbying for positive or not-so-positive change, from mentoring students at all levels of the educational ladder, etc. If we look at education/learning more globally, it automatically leads us to professional development and isn't that what we should be encouraging of any planner with the AICP designation? Do we really want planners with that designation stuck in their offices for years without any contact with another planner? It's time to drag these planners out of their offices and bring them back into the family of planners. It's time to pull together as an organization and help each other push the planning agenda to the forefront so we can all move forward - together.

Obviously voluntary requirements (oxymoron anyone?) don't cut it. We have been testing voluntary compliance since 1979, I think we can safely say that we need some changes. Why not make a new program that is both simpler and self-reporting? Every year APA asks us to be honest when reporting the salary range we fall into during dues time. Has anyone from APA called you to check up on your salary level to ensure that you are being honest? Of course not, it would be ridiculously expensive and time consuming with no benefit. Why can't we create a system of self-reporting annually of the learning activities in which each member has been involved over the past year? APA staff would only audit a set number of members each year to check on its validity. If you don't meet the requirements or if you are dishonest about what you actually did, then there would be enforcement. This is a very general concept, and the details of what should be considered a learning activity should be debated and kicked around. This is where you come in.

I strongly believe that our profession needs more learning opportunities and more involvement of its members in its own organization. I have offered one proposal to meet these two problems. What is your solution? Add your voice to this important discussion and let's come up with a program that is of high quality and low cost for all planners in APA! Let's not leave any Planners behind!

Jack E. Molenaar AICP/PP is a Transportation Planner with Township of Plainsboro in New Jersey. He can be reached at 609-799-0909 or molenaar@plainsboronj.com.

Western Central Chapter Election - Candidate Information

Andrew Epple, AICP - Candidate for President

As a past president and director of the Montana Association of Planners, and with over twenty-four years of professional planning experience in the Northern Rockies, I believe I have much to offer my colleagues by serving as your 2004-05 WCC President. Since 1987, I have served as Planning Director for the City of Bozeman, MT, and fully understand the pressures that community planners experience everyday managing growth in our increasingly popular (and populated) part of the country. I have also participated extensively in legislative processes, both at the state and local level, to bring about improved planning laws and awareness in our region.

I have BA and MS degrees in geography from UCLA and the University of Utah, respectively, and am familiar with all facets of long-range and current community planning. My professional interests and areas of expertise range from urban design and transportation planning to comprehensive planning and implementing "smart growth" regulatory policies.

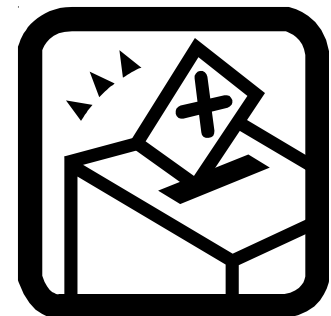
As Chapter President, my goals would be to: 1) Ensure the delivery of timely and relevant information about planning trends and tools to our Chapter members from APA, through division newsletters and PAS Reports with increased focus on our region; and 2) Improve communication among our membership, and with the interested public, through development of a Chapter website. Please let me know how you feel your Chapter might better serve you – I am committed to making certain that the interests and views of the practicing planners in our region have a voice at the national APA level. If you wish to contact me with your thoughts, I can be reached most easily at (aepple@bozeman.net), or by phone at (406), 582-2260. Thank you for your consideration.

Don Contraman - Candidate for Vice President

Education: BA Engineering Long Beach State College. Graduate work at University of Southern California & University of California at Irvine.

40 years of Planning Management Experience including Private Consulting, Municipal and County Planning. Have prepared General Plans, Comprehensive Plans, Specific Plans and the related environmental documents in accordance with State & Federal Statues.

Active within community in various community functions in Ravalli County including community, civic groups and business groups.



WCC Secretary Position Open

The Western Central Chapter of APA is looking for someone from Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota or Wyoming to serve as the Chapter's Secretary.

If you are interested in the position, please contact Ramona Mattix at:

Planning & Community Services
510 North Broadway, 4th Floor
Billings, MT 59101
p: 406.657.8289
f: 406.657.8252
e: MattixR@ci.billings.mt.us

ID Continuing Education Coordinator Position Open

Idaho, one of the member states of the Western Central Chapter of APA, is looking for someone to serve as the State Continuing Education Coordinator.

If you are interested in the position, please contact Dave Abo at:

Boise Planning & Development Services
P.O. Box 500
Boise, ID 83701-0500
p: 208.384.3830
f: 208.384.3753
e: dabo@cityofboise.org

2004 Western Planner Conference to be Held in Missoula, Montana

The 2004 Western Planner Conference will be held August 3-6 in Missoula, Montana. Check out the Western Planning Resources web site for more information at: <http://www.westernplanner.org/2004conf.htm>.

Conference information, including a preliminary conference schedule and a registration form, will also be provided in the Summer 2004 (June) issue of the WCC-APA newsletter.

See you in Missoula!

**From: Western Central Chapter
American Planning Association
c/o Jody Sanford
P.O. Box 775
Bozeman, MT 59771-0775**

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