

Plannerisms We Can Do Without

by Dave Stauffer

When you talk planning with people other than fellow planners, skip the planning jargon and stick to plain English. (Read “English” as including Spanish, Vietnamese, et al., depending on your audience. This article is concerned with terms and their definitions – no matter the language.)

Too often, when we who dwell in the world of planning address those who know little or nothing about our line of work, our jargon – what I call “plannerisms” – can prevent understanding and promote confusion. Sometimes the message received (if any) bears little resemblance to the message delivered. The complexity and nuances of planning are challenge enough for our audiences to understand without raising another hurdle in the form of plannerisms.

If planners were to delete only one word from their vocabulary, I’d vote for “sprawl.” True, it’s not jargon in the sense of being of obscure meaning to most people. Rather, it’s a plannerism because it’s been rendered meaningless by having too many meanings. A community activist in my town, whose exurban mini-mansion is situated in the middle of her 20-acre

ranchette, regularly condemns sprawl, which to her is exurban development with any density exceeding one home per acre.

We planners need to replace the word sprawl with terms that say, at least a little more precisely, what we mean. Sometimes we can substitute a density ratio,

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other times a median square footage of residences. On occasion the sprawl of which we speak may be single-story and/or single-use development – so we should use those more specific terms.

I used the word “density” above – which many planners regard as a plannerism due to its growing perception as a pejorative. Many people appear to regard the word as synonymous with “tenement,” as intentionally promoted by professional denigrators of compact and

mixed-use development. “Density is a relative term, from low to high,” a planner told me. But “in most people’s minds, it is an absolute term that means high.”

In most cases, it’s not hard to purge density from your dictionary. For example, instead of saying “the proposed density is eight units per acre,” say, “the proposed development calls for eight units per acre.”

An argument can be made that the greatest single impediment to the advancement of smart growth has been use of the term “smart growth.” By inference, it tells anyone who may oppose or question it that he or she must be for something that’s dumb. Why needlessly antagonize people we may otherwise persuade?

That alone is reason enough to abandon the term, but another strike against smart growth is its imprecision. Do we in all cases intend to say it includes compact growth? At what number of units per acre? Does that apply to retail, office, and industrial as well as residential? Does smart growth always include mixed use? Which types are being mixed? Industrial as well as residential?



Online Comments

Editor’s Note: We received dozens of comments on LinkedIn on Dave Stauffer’s article. Included are a sampling, posted with permission.

“My vote is to get rid of ‘stakeholder.’ I can’t stop joking about which way the pointy end is facing. In my work I use the term participant, which I think is neutral and more descriptive. A stakeholder is someone I have to deal with. A participant is someone who chose to invest their time in my work.”

– Dave Andersen, Spokane, WA

“I agree with the assessment of the term ‘Smart Growth’ in the article. It is simply arrogant, and assumes that anyone whose vision deviates from ‘Smart Growth’ is stupid. ‘Smart Growth’ has good ideas attached to it, but it is already a hard-enough sell for many people.”

– Douglas Zang, AICP, Hilo, HI

“I’m pretty tired of ‘sustainability.’ I think the word has become so green-washed and over used in advertising that it has become completely meaningless. I think there should be a rule that whenever anyone uses ‘sustainability’ their next sentence should have to start with, ‘And by sustainability, I mean ...’”

– Kendall Webster, Alameda, CA

“‘Signage.’ It just reminds me of when someone uses big words just for the sake of trying to sound smart. I actually got a good laugh out of my commissioners at a former city I worked at by using the word ‘pewage’ in a site plan review report when doing off-street parking calculations for a church. Why not ‘roadage’ or ‘buildingage’ too ...”

– Mark Stec, Warren, MI

“‘Low Impact Development.’ Next to ‘sustainability,’ only planners and stormwater engineers understand what those three words really mean. And those three words don’t even convey the concept of natural stormwater management well.”

– Amy Tarce, Alexandria, VA

“I say let’s ditch ‘thinking outside the box.’ If I had a quarter for each time I’ve heard that cliché over the last ten years, I wouldn’t have to be a planner any more!”

– Howard A. Smith, AICP, FITE, Alameda, CA

“I’ll vote to ban the word ‘voluntary.’ There is nothing voluntary when a planner tells a developer they ‘should think about’ doing something. It either gets done or you don’t get recommendation for approval. There is no ‘voluntary’ in planning.”

– Warren Wakeland, Franklin, TN

“The phrase ‘a sense of ...’ such as ‘a sense of place’ or ‘a sense of community’ REALLY grates. This

A sampling of plannerisms suggested by planners (and those in related professions).

Sustainable. We all define it differently. So we'll agree on the term, but not on the specifics. *Advertising Age* magazine calls it "a squishy, feel-good catchall for doing the right thing."

Cluster development. If one person in your audience doesn't know it, you have to start from square one.

Mixed-use. Sounds like uses randomly stirred together in a mixing bowl.

Transit-oriented development. In an APA survey, nonplanners conjured visions of small apartments above loud, smelly buses.

Multifamily residential. Ask people if they want to live in a multifamily project and most will say no. We need a term to cover the "missing middle": duplexes, fourplexes, bungalow courts, etc.

Planning. There's financial planning, strategic planning, and summer vacation planning. Why not use an equivalent term that's meaningful and unique: land use planning?

A national survey earlier this year defined smart growth as "places where businesses, shops, and restaurants are within walking distance of homes." A division of the U.S. EPA says smart growth is "development that serves the economy, the community, and the environment." At the same time, Wikipedia breathlessly calls it "an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in compact walkable urban centers to avoid sprawl and advocates compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including neighborhood schools, complete streets, and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices."

So what do we say instead of smart growth? Depending on the audience,

implies something less than genuine; how about creating REAL places and REAL communities, not fake 'senses of them?'

– John D. Said, AICP, Elmhurst, IL

"I think that the terms sustainability and smart growth are used too much without any thought to what they truly mean. They have become overused umbrella terms that have lost meaning because they are now catch phrases. For example, the sentence, 'my development project is sustainable and should be approved because it incorporates smart growth principles' will not necessarily mean anything to a lay person or even to someone in the planning field."

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– Tracy Sato, Anaheim, CA

"Stakeholders is my vote. We are not Vampire hunters!"

– Jim Plonczynski, Bartlett, IL

"I was just writing a mission statement recently and found myself uncomfortable with the word 'sustainable,' yet I could not come up with a single word that really covered 'a system that can maintain itself indefinitely,' so I begrudgingly stuck with the word."

– William Sinclair, Spokane Valley, WA

occasion, and context, possibilities include: progressive or traditional development, new urbanism, planned growth, and other terms that, yes, usually require definitions of their own. But at least they avoid the "dumb" inference and include words that are more descriptive than "smart."

So make an effort to purge plannerisms. It's the "smart" thing to do. ♦

Dave Stauffer is a freelance writer and director of "Linx," The Yellowstone Regional Transportation Cooperative. He is a former planner, planning commissioner, and council member in Red Lodge, Montana.



"I agree the word 'sustainability' is overused ... but for all intents and purposes, it is an important word that carries a positive connotation with it no matter how it's used. But if the word sustainability is being used for a project that isn't very sustainable, the way in which the word is being used compromises its integrity and usefulness. Let's work on using plannerisms more carefully, and be sure that they are not used just as marketing words to gain project support."

– Ricky Caperton, Santa Rosa, CA

Drowning in an Acronym Sea



by Larry Pflueger

Over the years, I've observed that what has oftentimes caused nonplanners, including elected officials and the public, to go crazy is the unceasing use of jargon acronyms.

When I would make a presentation before a county board, after being "educated" by a county commissioner regarding what type of language the board members wanted me to use, I would either say the full term followed by the acronym or vice-versa, e.g., "The DCA, that's the Florida Department of Community Affairs" or "The Florida Administrative Code Chapter 9J-5 which we generally shorten to just 9J-5." Then I'd mix it up. Sometimes acronym first, sometimes the full term so that the board as well as the audience got used to hearing me say it.

We planners use the acronyms as our shorthand so that we don't have to say long phrases when speaking to each other. But when we speak to or write for the public, we need to be sensitive to the fact that they don't use the acronyms like we do, so we have to slow it down and explain what the letters mean before using them – and even then, be careful not to drown citizens in an acronym sea.

Before a public meeting, hand out a preprinted sheet containing words, terms, and acronyms likely to be heard during the proceedings. Rather than not use our vocabulary when communicating with the public, it is incumbent upon us to explain what we mean when we use potentially unfamiliar terms.

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