

Planning’s Role in Wildfire Mitigation

HUMAN SETTLEMENT IN WILDLAND AREAS was initially driven by the need to be near resources that provided shelter and economic opportunity—timber harvesting and agriculture, for example. But those reasons have changed. Since the mid-20th century, wildland settlement has increasingly been driven by aesthetic, recreational, and lifestyle values.



A hand crew supporting the Arroyo Grande Interagency Hotshots prepares to take on July’s Ferguson Fire, which burned 96,901 acres in Yosemite National Park and killed two people.

Large wildfires resulting in catastrophic damage to communities are not new. The deadliest fire in U.S. history took place in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, in 1871; it resulted in 1,200 deaths. The second deadliest occurred 100 years ago in Cloquet, Wisconsin, with 453 deaths. These fires and others led to dramatic improvements in firefighting capabilities—including equipment, tactics, and communications. Those improvements, along with better access, increased water flow, and fire-resistant building techniques, reduced the impact of wildfires on our communities for decades.

Now it is clear that those improvements were not enough. As development adjacent to wildlands proliferated and traditional management practices such as controlled burns became more difficult—and unpopular—large and damaging wildfires have become more common.

Climate change has exacerbated the problem, bringing warmer temperatures, shorter “wet” seasons, droughts, and increased wind intensity.

The result, particularly in the West, is an accelerating cycle of increasingly damaging fires—and a major increase in loss of life. The current wildland fire crisis is a call to action for all involved in long-range planning and development review.

Back to the basics

As planners, we have a critical responsibility to minimize the impact of wildfires on our communities. To accomplish this, we must first make sure that we are fulfilling our traditional responsibilities by considering the following:

- Is the development in the right place? Slope, elevation, aspect, vegetation type, fire history, and weather patterns are

the key factors that define the severity of fire hazards in a particular area. With modern mapping techniques we have much of this important information at our fingertips, and it has critical utility for both long-range planning and development review. Understandably, it is not always possible to prohibit infill development in fire-prone parts of existing communities. Still, it is up to planners to ensure that building design, controlled density, and ongoing maintenance minimize the risk. This can be accomplished using traditional police powers (recognizing that community health and safety are at stake) and under state-mandated review procedures such as the California Environmental Quality Act.

- Is the roadway infrastructure, including neighborhood streets and arterials, adequate to allow emergency vehicle access along with resident evacuation? The recent Camp Fire in Paradise, California, offers a stark reminder that egress plans must consider routes that provide safe refuge under all predictable scenarios. Is there a program in place to reduce various fire fuels—woods, timber, brush, and grasses—adjacent to roads, and is there adequate right of way and funding to permanently manage those fuels?
- Are firefighting water flows and water storage adequate to protect buildings while fighting a wildland fire?
- Are new structures built with fire-resistant materials, and are they “fire hardened” by design?
- If development is proposed adjacent to wildland, what risks are presented? Does the wildland present a tangible risk to the development? Can it be managed to minimize risk? What is the management plan for the adjacent wildland?
- Is there a program in place to ensure that fire fuels are minimized (and maintained that way) on rural residential properties—particularly those with timber or brush? Are these requirements appropriate in the context of the neighborhood? If not, the proposed development may not be in the right place.

THE COMMISSIONER

Planning Tools

Proactive planning

The current wildfire crisis demands that planners become significantly more proactive and begin to tackle this challenge at the local level. Truckee, California, the High Sierra community where I live, is an example, with its complex land ownership and management responsibilities. The mix of agencies in and around the town includes two local fire districts, the statewide Cal Fire, and the U.S. Forest Service. Creating a comprehensive wildfire management plan involving all of them is complicated, but planners are well equipped to facilitate such an effort.

The first step is a comprehensive wildfire management plan. If your community's general plan does not contain policies that support and direct the preparation of such a plan, you should consider recommending an amendment that would do so.

A CWMP would assess the risk to life and property associated with wildland fires at the community level and, in some cases, at a regional level. It would integrate all available information, including weather patterns, slope, aspect, vegetation type, fire history, and location of existing and planned development.

Once likely fire patterns are understood, traditional planning tools can be used to reduce the risks, including the following:

- Long-range planning to steer new development into the safest areas and away from the riskiest
- Capital improvement planning and funding to improve access, fire flows, and firefighting capacity
- Neighborhood design that incorporates managed fire breaks (greenbelts, parks, trails, roads, golf courses, and so on) in strategic locations and ensures a permanent mechanism to maintain them

The CWMP should articulate a program of vegetation management on larger parcels (both public and private), designed to slow down the spread of wildfires. It should prioritize fuel management projects based upon risk and

HISTORY THE 100-YEAR INFLUENCE OF THE BAUHAUS

With the renewed interest in mid-century modern architecture and furniture, it is worth noting that this year is the 100th anniversary of the Staatliches Bauhaus, the renowned German design school. It is also a good time to consider the school's impact on decades of city planning.

The Bauhaus began in Weimar, a cultural center in Germany not far from Berlin. It was the brainchild of a young architect named Walter Gropius. His idea was to unite art, design, and industrial education with the aim of providing a better life for all classes of society. Several moves followed, first to a nearby industrial city, and then to an old factory in Berlin in 1932. A year later, the Nazis closed down the operation.

In 1937, the Hungarian artist and industrial designer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy founded the New Bauhaus at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. Another refugee, architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, became the school's director. His starkly modern approach to design is evident in major office and residential complexes in Chicago, Toronto, Detroit, and other cities.

What was known as the International Style soon caught on across the world. The program called for the rejection of almost all ornament and a limited color palette. In Brazil, Oscar Niemeyer designed a new capital city, Brasilia. Its high rises are impressive, but the streets are often deserted. Smaller versions popped up in U.S. cities, where the same criticism is heard.

From the 1950s onward, social reformers argued that the tall glass towers are efficient. They occupy less land than smaller buildings and they allow more sunlight and unobstructed views of local scenery. Real estate interests came out with figures that show a great financial savings for taller buildings.

But then there is the other side. In 1981, journalist Tom Wolfe wrote that the International Style was elitist and indifferent to site, climate, and local history. In a 1993 article titled "Bauhaus Blunders," critic Witold Rybczynski condemned a Chicago public housing project called Cabrini-Green. "In the name of housing the poor," he wrote, "the well-meaning social reformers of the 1950s invented a new type of urbanism, quite foreign to any previous American idea of city planning." Cabrini was, of course, built in the modernist style prevalent at the time. Visit toplanning.org/timeline to learn more.

—Ruth Eckdish Knack, FAICP
Knack is a former executive editor of *Planning*.



Bauhaus-inspired apartments by Mies van der Rohe off Chicago's Lake Shore Drive.

include a long-term funding component. California's worst fires this year demonstrated the danger of allowing flammable vegetation to build up amid developed residential and commercial properties. A comprehensive and continuous program to address private property must be in place if we are serious about reducing risk. These are not one-time efforts.

Planners have the skills and the tools to lead this effort. The safety of

our communities demands not only our complete attention, but also our best work. Getting buy-in and creating a comprehensive long-term funding program could take years and will be challenging in many ways, but the risks demand the effort. ■

—Tony Lashbrook

Lashbrook recently retired from a 36-year career as a planner and city manager in the Sierra Nevada region of California. Norb Szczurek, retired division chief for the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District, contributed to this article.

Starting Small in Milwaukee

SOMETIMES PLANNING WITH A SMALL “p” takes a surprising form. That’s the case in Milwaukee, where a former high school biology teacher has sparked the renewal of three local parks and, to some extent, the neighborhoods that surround them. The man in question is Ken Leinbach. As a newcomer to the city in the mid-1990s, he lived on the east side, near Riverside Park, a 25-acre public space designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1892. Walking or cycling, Leinbach would often stop to chat with local residents along the Milwaukee River, which edges the park. This would be a great place to teach people about nature and conservation, he thought.

Taking root

As a graduate student, Leinbach researched why some people have a concern for the environment and others do not. “If kids grow up with regular access to nature and with appropriate mentors,” he concluded, “they have a good chance of developing an environmental ethic.”

Seeking a place to carry out his idea, he looked again at the park’s only building, a double-wide trailer that was then the home of a neighborhood group called Friends of Riverside Park. The friends group eventually became the Urban Ecology Center. Three years later, Leinbach became its first executive director.

“I learned to fund-raise,” he says, “and eventually we had enough to build a true community center.” In 2004, a new, environmentally sound, 20,000-square-foot building was completed, with room to teach children and adults about everything from climate change to acid rain.

The lessons started with the park itself, including clean-up days and neighborhood field trips. Leinbach considers the center itself to be a sort of “third place”—a welcoming space for local residents. It includes classroom space and rooms for exhibits, clubs, and social events. The center now has a fleet of buses to pick up students from some 60 schools that it has contracted with to provide classroom programs and

field trips. Volunteers help with all the center’s programs, from nature study to land stewardship.

The volunteers and stewardship staff are largely responsible for reclaiming

more than eight acres of once-polluted land along the river, which is now part of the Milwaukee River Greenway. Their work also led to the creation of the 40-acre Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum on former riverfront industrial land. The arboretum encompasses parts of Riverside Park.

“Our goal,” says Leinbach, “is to inspire people

to understand and value nature and to motivate them to create positive change.”

The surrounding neighborhood benefits as well, Leinbach says. “Our first step in creating the Urban Ecology Center was to engage the Riverside Park neighborhood in the cleanup.” A side effect, he notes, was a notable decline in criminal activity—down by 95 percent by 2004.

Reviving neighborhoods

The first center proved so successful that Leinbach took on another project—this one in a less prosperous neighborhood. Washington Park is also an Olmsted-designed park. The Urban Ecology Center opened there in 2007 in a building owned by the Milwaukee County Parks. The center is in the process of negotiating a long-term agreement to expand its activities in

the park and to build a new facility.

There has been some opposition in this case to a private entity, even a well-meaning one, having a stake in the park. The issue is reminiscent to the brouhaha surrounding the development of the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago’s Jackson Park, another revered Olmsted Park.

A third project is UEC’s Menomonee Valley center. It opened in 2012 in the 24-acre Three Bridges Park on the south side of the Menomonee River. This park, on the site of an abandoned rail yard, is owned by the Milwaukee Redevelopment Authority.

UEC is part of an ongoing effort to revitalize the entire, 1,200 acre Menomonee River Valley. It is working with a public-private partnership led by the nonprofit Menomonee Valley Partners to carry out a master plan for the valley and to reconnect a distressed neighborhood to the city as a whole. The Urban Ecology branch is located in a rehabbed old tavern and uses the Three Bridges Park as its outdoor classroom.

“We see the centers as a way to revive neighborhoods,” says Leinbach. “In our case, they are all in older areas and close to schools.” He sees possibilities for similar facilities throughout the U.S. “Milwaukee could be a national model for revitalizing civic landscapes—and saving families,” says.

Last year, Leinbach’s first book was published: *Urban Ecology: A Natural Way to Transform Kids, Parks, Cities, and the World*. In it, he explains how his ideas came about and how others can benefit from them. “This is more than a book,” he writes. “It is an invitation to create something like this in your own community.”

As a follow-up, the Urban Ecology Center has sponsored an institute to teach others how to create similar programs. Last summer in Milwaukee, there were representatives from Mexico, Columbia, and Israel, all of them seeking ideas for their own revitalization projects. ■

—Ruth Eckdich Knack, FAICP

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—KEN LEINBACH

Zoning and Housing Segregation

MOST AMERICANS KNOW ABOUT THE history of segregation in the U.S., but a recently published book examines how the three branches of government actually thwarted many efforts to achieve equity. In *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Government Segregated America*, (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), historian Richard Rothstein explores the complex role played by planning and zoning in shaping segregation in the 20th century.

The color of law

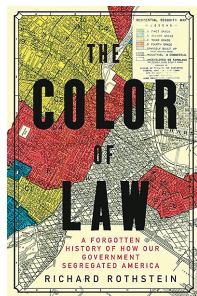
Throughout the book, Rothstein carefully untangles the various efforts to impose segregation using governmental power. In a chapter on “Racial Zoning,” for example, he describes the ways in which prominent early planners used zoning as a tool to create homogeneous districts, defined both by use (e.g., industrial, residential) and housing type and value. Planners, federal government officials, and others argued that it was important for the government to protect the financial value of housing, which was depressed by the presence of African Americans (and in other cases, Jews and recent immigrants). Rothstein builds a persuasive case that the federal government, aided by local officials, created the programs and regulations that kept African Americans in segregated neighborhoods, often in poor quality housing in undesirable locations. He also shows that recent research contradicts the perception that racial integration lowers housing values.

In the mid 20th century, planners began to critique their own actions and call for more just and equitable planning. In 1992, planners created the “Ethical Principles of Planning,” a guide for commissioners and officials that emphasizes “policies and actions that best serve the entire community” and promotes “the highest standards of fairness and honesty among all participants.”

Of course, not all discrimination has been aimed at African Americans. The late Stuart Meck, FAICP, demonstrated in

“Zoning and Anti-Semitism in the 1920s: The Case of ‘Cleveland Jewish Orphan Home v. Village of University Heights’ and Its Aftermath” (*Journal of Planning History*, May 2005) that the desire to keep communities homogeneous meant that multiple groups have been targeted for exclusion. However, race has provided the excuse for the most far-reaching discrimination with long-term consequences.

Rothstein’s book is divided into chapters on public housing, zoning, home ownership, private agreements and government enforcement, white flight, and the IRS, among others. These tools together effectively blocked African Americans from having the same choices as white Americans.



Among the serious consequences of these housing policies and laws was the inability of African Americans to develop wealth (or at least a nest egg) from home ownership. The federal government denied African Americans access to the mortgages that helped white urban dwellers buy single-family houses in the suburbs starting as early as the 1920s, and escalating significantly after World War II. Prospective African American home owners were left with the option of contract sales, which denied equity in the property until the entire debt was paid off. Missing even one payment could lead to eviction and the loss of the entire investment.

The book illuminates the complex interplay of congressional acts, federal policies and programs, local regulations

and legal tools, and the private housing market and individual choices. Adding to this complexity are the courts, which interpret the Constitution in light of these actions. It is the challenging role of planners and local planning commissioners to care for the well-being of their community while considering the demands of the Constitution, federal laws and rulings, and ethical principles that promote fairness.

The Color of Law offers a refresher course on how we have created our cities, often at the expense of some citizens. It is also remarkably insightful about how the various branches of government interact and respond to societal expectations.

Coming to terms with history

June Manning Thomas, FAICP, currently a professor at the University of Michigan, wrote a paper called “Race, Racism, and Race Relations: Linkages with Urban and Regional Planning Literature” in 1997 at the behest of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning and the White House. Since then, literature on this topic has greatly expanded.

Joseph Heathcott’s blog essay on Aggregate.org (March 2015), titled “Race, Planning, and the American City,” provides an overview. While *The Color of Law* thoroughly details the history of federal actions that have affected all U.S. cities, Heathcott notes that “racism hides behind many masks, and insinuates itself into the city building process through a wide variety of policies, laws, customs, habits, and beliefs.”

Much of this history has been brought to light through studies of urban growth in major American cities and through studies of African American communities in such cities as Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Birmingham. The relationships between race, real estate, and development have also been thoroughly examined in Baltimore, Kansas City, Durham, and other cities. ■

—Carolyn Torma

Torma is a former director of education for the American Planning Association.