

SMALL TOWN & RURAL PLANNING



American Planning Association
Small Town and
Rural Planning Division

Making Great Communities Happen

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Fall 2025

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Cooperative Extension: A Collaborative Partner for Small Town and Rural Planners

By Kara Salazar, Ph.D., AICP

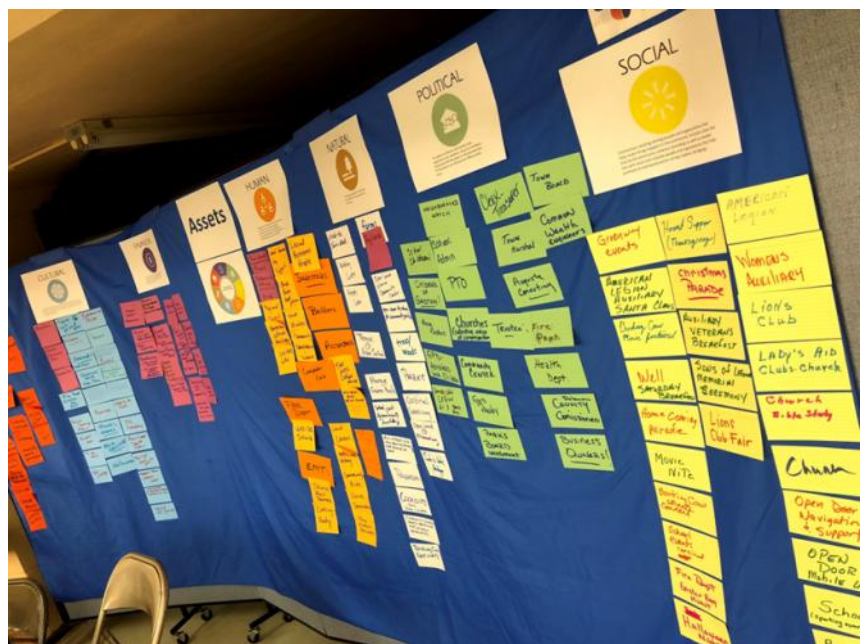
Planning requires diverse expertise and collaborative partnerships, which are increasingly important in small and rural communities. Limited budgets and staffing constraints make it essential to utilize all available resources effectively. Among these partners, land grant University Extension programs offer unique collaborative opportunities.

The Cooperative Extension System operates four program areas: Agriculture and Natural Resources, Community Development, Health and Human Sciences, and 4-H Youth Development. These program areas are supported through the land-grant

university system, funded by the [United States Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture](#) (USDA NIFA), as well as state and county funds. Community Development Extension programs offer services and technical assistance to enhance multi-disciplinary planning teams, including research capacity and community engagement expertise. Throughout the nation, Cooperative Extension programs are meeting the needs of small to mid-sized rural communities by addressing contemporary planning challenges, including issues such as renewable

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Community asset mapping for parks and public spaces planning
Photo courtesy of Purdue Extension



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From the Chair

First day of fall has come and gone... temperatures are dropping... days are getting darker... and the leaves are falling... Autumn season is here!

First, I would like to thank the STaR board members and STaR members for attending our Business Meeting on September 30. We formally adopted the 25-26 budget, and discussed upcoming STaR events and activities.

I will be attending the Divisions Council Fall Leadership Meeting in Phoenix, AZ, from November 14 to 16. This is the first fall in-person meeting event since before the 2020 COVID pandemic. I will be given updates on upcoming APA national activities, including early plans for NPC26 in Detroit. Also, I hope to hear more about the registration changes for all member where Division membership will be included in the renewal membership, but you can still add additional Divisions for \$25 each. Hopefully this will entice more practicing planners and students to choose STaR as their division.

The STaR Division Awards nomination announcement will be sometime in mid-December with submittal forms ready to go. Feel free to reach out to Mary Howard at her contact info on the left of this page if you have any questions about your proposed submission or application processes. The Awards will be announced prior to NPC26 and the awards will be handed out during the conference.

Finally, I would love more newsletter and webinar contributions from STaR members. Most of us have just finished our fall season economic development and state chapter's conferences. Were there any hot topics or major projects that were featured at your conferences or events? Please share your biggest and best session topics or mobile workshops of note, particularly small town and rural community related sessions... please share your write up with John Shepard our Communications Vice Chair so that we can include them in future newsletters. I have no shame in repeating myself... Small town and rural community planning successes and challenges know no chapter boundaries and we'd love to hear about what is going on in your area.

As with each fall season, I hope all goes well with your small town and rural communities' autumn time celebrations and festivals. Also, as it getting darker earlier, let's all promote public safety while driving and walking in our local communities and keep an eye out for others that may not be keeping an eye out for themselves.

Take care, be safe out there, and... Prost!, Mark



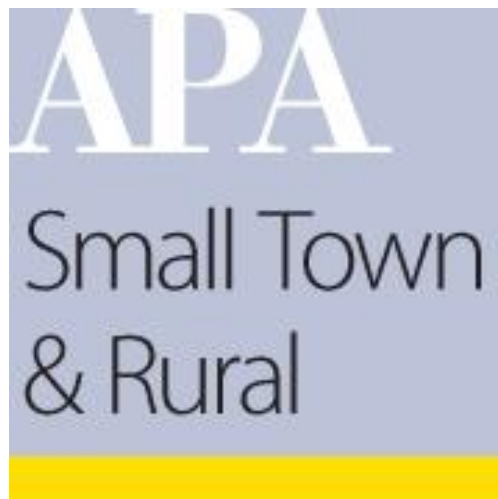
STaR Award Winners

Recognized at #NPC25

Your Small Town and Rural Planning Division annually recognizes excellence among our members—planners, projects, and plans, including student projects.

Vice-Chair for Programs, Mary Howard, AICP, worked with the Awards Committee to review a large number of nominees. How about volunteering to help review next year's nominees next winter?

The first half of awards were profiled in the Summer edition of the Small Town & Rural Planning news. This edition we highlight the rest of the winners. The call for awards for the next year is scheduled for early winter. Around the holidays check our APA webpage at: www.planning.org/divisions/smalltown/



STaR Award Winners 2025

Brownwood, TX Downtown Plan	Vernon Dienes Plan <50k	Honor
Longmeadow, MA Climate Resilience Plan	Vernon Dienes Plan <50k	Honor
Burwell, NE Comprehensive Plan	Vernon Dienes Plan <50k	Merit
Greencastle DePauw Master Plan (Indiana)	Vernon Dienes Plan <50k	Merit
Fairfield County Comprehensive Plan (Ohio)	Vernon Dienes Plan >50k	Honor
Stephenville 2050 (Texas)	Vernon Dienes Plan >50k	Merit
Butte County Evacuation Plan (California)	Vernon Dienes Plan >50k	Merit
Cheyenne Downtown Development Plan (WY)	Vernon Dienes Plan >50k	Merit
East Bay Township Zoning Ordinance (Michigan)	John Keller Planning Initiative	Merit
FRAMEWORK Licking County (Ohio)	John Keller Planning Initiative	Merit
Wyoming State Partnership for Urban & Rural Redevelopment	John Keller Planning Initiative	Merit
Garrett Stritzel: Rural Justice	James Segedy Student Project	Honor

STAR Annual Business Meeting

Your Small Town and Rural Planning Division held our Annual Meeting online on Tuesday 30 September 2025. We heard updates on the workplan and budget, the Awards program, this newsletter and our social media, and other matters of interested from APA national.

Thank you to everybody who took time out of their workday to join the Zoom.

FYI: Watch for an updated Division webpage on planning.org coming this Fall!

East Bay Charter Township (Michigan) Zoning Ordinance

2025 John Keller Merit Award for Planning Initiative

East Bay Charter Township has been awarded the John Keller Award for a Planning Initiative by the APA Small Town & Rural Planning (STaR) Division for its recently adopted zoning ordinance rewrite project.

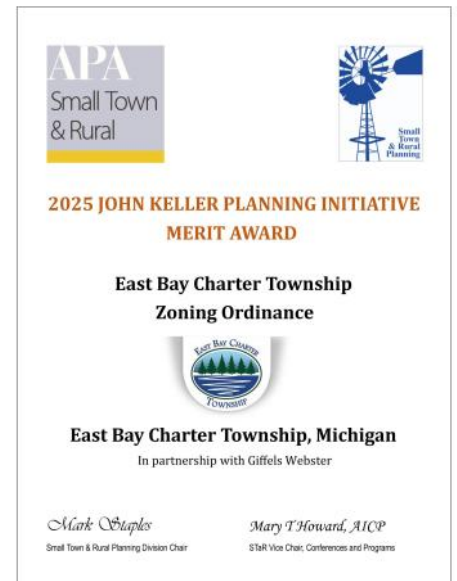
The project introduced significant reforms to address housing accessibility, including density and height bonuses for affordable housing and flexible infill development standards. These measures, combined with reduced lot size requirements and expanded housing options in residential areas, promote inclusion and provide opportunities for lower-income households.

Collaboration was a cornerstone of the project, with subcommittee meetings and public workshops guiding key decisions. Led by the subcommittee,

and assisted by Township Planning and Zoning Director Claire Karner and Giffels Webster, feedback from neighborhood groups, residents, and environmental organizations informed the final ordinance. Highlights included a Riparian Zoning Workshop where 40 residents contributed to developing waterfront zoning protections and environmental standards.

“Working with Giffels Webster and the greater community on the zoning ordinance rewrite was a long journey, but it really brought our community closer together, fostered important conversations, and resulted in a great final product,” said Claire Karner, East Bay Charter Township Planning and Zoning Director. “The new ordinance will allow the Township to better address the regions housing shortage, support vibrant commercial development and public spaces, and protect critical natural features in the Township.”

The ordinance also reflects East Bay Charter Township’s commitment to sustainable growth, incorporating a growth boundary to manage development while preserving critical water features and natural resources. Protections were thoughtfully balanced with respect for private property rights.



Adopted in November 2024, the ordinance is already being implemented, with staff tracking progress through a dashboard aligned with Master Plan goals. These ongoing efforts ensure the project’s long-term impact and success.

For more information about the zoning ordinance rewrite project in East Bay Charter Township, Michigan, please contact Christina Strong-Regan, Giffels Webster Marketing Manager at cstrong-regan@giffels-webster.com



STaR Chair Mark Staples and Vice-Chair John C. Shepard presenting the 2025 John Keller Award for East Bay Township.

FRAMEWORK Licking County (Ohio)

2025 John Keller Merit Award for Planning Initiative

The Licking County, Ohio, FRAMEWORK initiative has been honored with the John Keller Merit Award for a Planning Initiative, awarded by APA STaR, recognizing its groundbreaking collaborative approach to regional growth and sustainability.

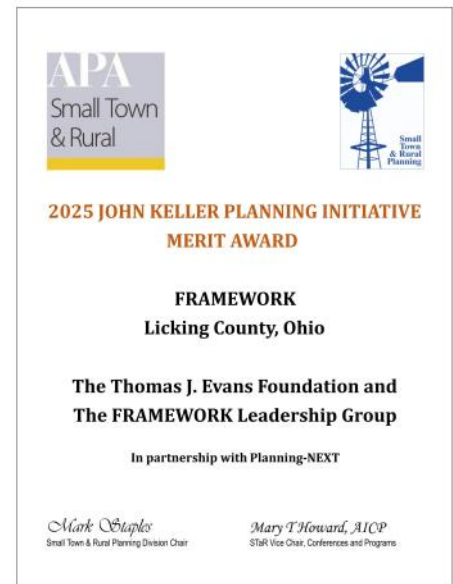
Sparked by Intel's \$28 billion investment in the region, FRAMEWORK brought together 15 local governments, businesses, and the Thomas J. Evans Foundation as a neutral convener to address the unprecedented opportunities and challenges of major development. This united effort—unlike anything previously seen in Licking County—resulted in a comprehensive planning vision covering 264 square miles and set a new model for rural collaboration nationwide.

A key achievement of FRAMEWORK was its ability to strengthen local planning capacity. Many communities in Licking County had not updated their comprehensive plans or zoning codes in decades, leaving them unprepared to respond effectively to rapid growth pressures. To address this, the initiative provided planning education, technical tools, and expert resources tailored to local needs. Communities used these supports to launch zoning audits, draft modernized comprehensive plans,

and tackle infrastructure conflicts more strategically. By doing so, FRAMEWORK helped local leaders build the skills and confidence required to guide development in ways that reflect long-term community goals, significantly improving government efficiency and co-operation.

Equally important was FRAMEWORK's conservation-based approach to growth management. Through detailed technical research, the initiative identified and prioritized the protection of wetlands, forests, water sources, and other natural assets while designating areas best suited for sustainable development. This strategy ensured that future growth would not come at the expense of Licking County's environmental resources. Instead, it directed development toward resilience—protecting ecological systems while providing a foundation for sustainable economic opportunity.

Together, these efforts represent a transformative shift in the county's planning landscape. By fostering deep collaboration, expanding local capacity, and promoting a balance between growth and conservation, FRAMEWORK has not only prepared Licking County for the



impacts of Intel's arrival but has also established a nationally significant model of rural planning innovation.

For more information about FRAMEWORK and to view the final plan document, visit frameworklc.org



STaR Chair Mark Staples and Vice-Chair John C. Shepard presenting the 2025 John Keller Award for FRAMEWORK Licking County

Wyoming State Partnership for Urban & Rural Redevelopment

2025 John Keller Merit Award for Planning Initiative

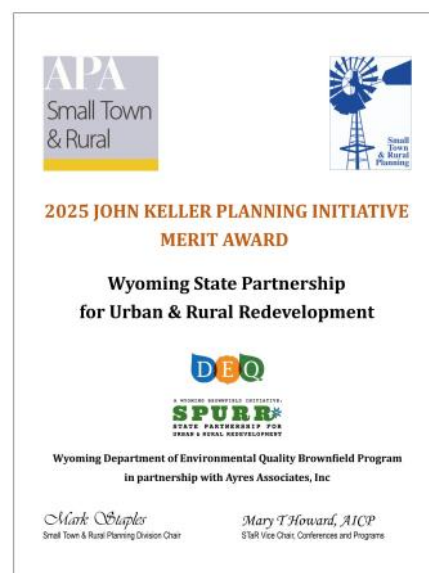
Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Brownfield Program has been recognized for its commitment to redevelopment planning, receiving the prestigious John Keller Award for Planning Initiative for its SPURR initiative.

SPURR, which stands for State Partnership for Urban & Rural Redevelopment, is a Wyoming Brownfield Initiative designed to drive proactive planning and redevelopment. By providing a technical assistance toolkit, SPURR helps communities assess environmental conditions, remediate blighted properties, and develop targeted strategies to revitalize downtown buildings, underutilized rural areas, and other neglected sites.

With a strong focus on planning, SPURR fosters

collaboration among stakeholders, prioritizes key redevelopment sites, and lays the groundwork for long-term investment and economic growth.

To learn more about SPURR and its impact on Wyoming's future, visit the DEQ's Brownfields Assistance page at deq.wyoming.gov/shwd/voluntary-remediation-program/brownfields-assistance and select "Brownfield Brochures."



STaR Chair Mark Staples and Vice-Chair John C. Shepard presenting the 2025 John Keller Award for the Wyoming State Partnership.



Garrett Stritzel: Rural Justice

2025 James Segedy Honor Award for Small Town and Rural Planner

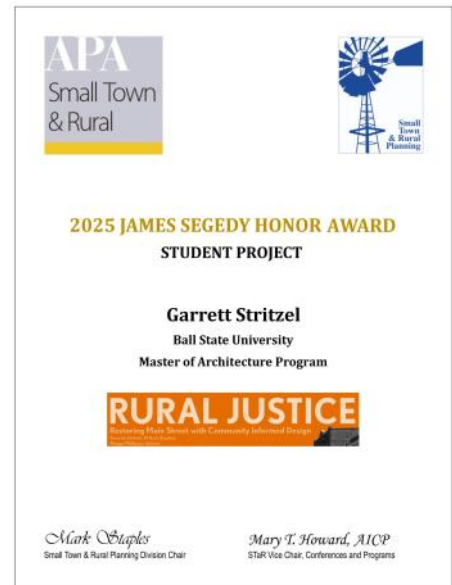
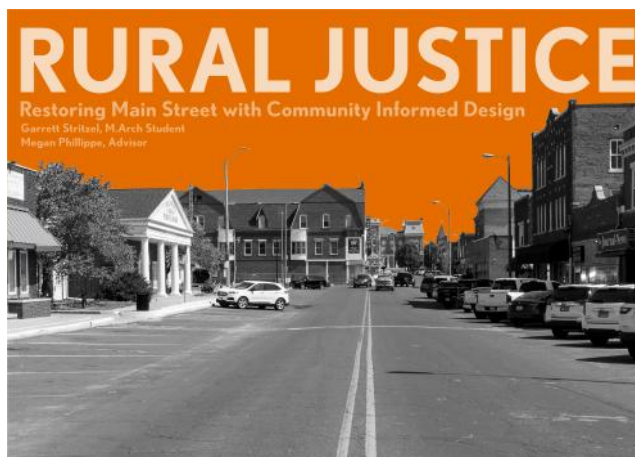
Garrett Stritzel, of Hillsboro, Illinois, has been awarded the James A. Segedy Award for Student Project. His recently completed Master of Architecture thesis: Rural Justice: Restoring Main Street with Community Informed Design; takes a critical look at rural communities, the injustices they face, and proposes a proof-of-concept design strategy.

This award is given by the APA STaR Division to an outstanding project by a graduate or undergraduate class or individual student that addresses a planning issue facing small town or rural areas. Projects are judged on seven categories: Innovation & Quality, Implementation Strategy/Measurable Results and Expectations, Role of Elected Officials, Transferability/Replicability/ Model Project for STaR Communities, Creative Public Engagement/ Collaboration/ Public Involvement, Long-Term Sustainability and/or use of Smart Growth Principles, and the Promotion of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Stritzel's project reveals the injustices faced by many rural communities and implements design strategies to strengthen downtown reinvestment, while addressing locals' needs.

Garrett is a recent, May 2024, Master of Architecture graduate from Ball State University (BSU), who also holds a Graduate Certificate in Social and Environmental Justice from BSU and a Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.

Since graduating in May 2024, he has moved back to his hometown of Hillsboro, Illinois, accepted a position at a local architecture and engineering firm, and has been appointed to the city's planning commission and historic preservation board. He is an Associate Member of the American Institute of Architects.



In his future, he hopes to continue bringing awareness to the injustices faced by many rural communities and to use his work to make meaningful, and necessary, changes to Hillsboro and other small towns throughout the Midwest.



STaR Chair Mark Staples and Vice-Chair John C. Shepard presenting the 2025 Carol Thomas Honor Award to Garrett Stritzel

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energy siting, sustainable development, placemaking strategies, hazard mitigation, parks and recreation, downtown redevelopment, and zoning technical assistance, among others.

From a state-level perspective, Purdue Extension has a long history of supporting Indiana communities with support on a variety of land use topics and technical assistance for local planning and zoning. Purdue Extension educators play a unique role through service on county plan commissions as directed by state statute. To support this service, [Purdue Extension Community Development](#) partners with the [National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals](#) (NACDEP), [the Extension Foundation](#), and [Michigan State University Extension](#) to offer the American Citizen Planner-Indiana program, which offers professional development training to lay planners.

Another current initiative, Indiana R-STEP—[Reliable Energy Siting through Technical Engagement and Planning](#)—is a statewide effort funded by the U.S. Department of Energy to help Indiana communities navigate land use and renewable energy projects. The IN R-STEP team supports local governments as they plan for utility-scale wind and solar developments through research and education efforts,

including workshops, webinars, and bus tours. These events bring together planners, land owners, utility representatives, and community leaders to discuss siting, permitting, and the economic implications of renewable energy projects. Extension's role is to provide technical tools, data, and community engagement strategies to support locally driven decision-making.

While each state offers its own unique extension programs, national and regional approaches provide connections and support to coordinate broader efforts. The four [Regional Rural Development Centers](#) link the research and educational outreach capacity of the nation's public universities with communities, local decision-makers, entrepreneurs, families, and farmers to address rural development issues. These centers foster regional collaboration by enhancing research and extension programs, providing grant opportunities, and facilitating networking through webinars and partnerships.

Additionally, NACDEP supports the professional development of extension professionals nationwide, including a working group focused on community planning and zoning, to ensure consistent quality and knowledge sharing across collaborative networks. Nationwide, Cooperative Extension programs bring

unique assets to collaborative planning efforts through university research, established community relationships, and specialized expertise in rural development.

About the Author

[Dr. Kara Salazar](#) is Assistant Program Leader for Community Development with Purdue Extension and Sustainable Communities Extension Specialist, affiliated with Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant and the Purdue University Department of Forestry and Natural Resources. Working with multidisciplinary teams, Dr. Salazar oversees program development, delivery, and evaluation to support environmental planning, community development, and sustainable development strategies. She holds a Ph.D. in natural resources social science from Purdue University and bachelor's and master's degrees from Indiana University. Dr. Salazar is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners, a Climate Change Professional (CC-P), and a Professional Community and Economic Developer (PCED) with credentials from LEED AP Neighborhood Development, the National Green Infrastructure Certification Program (NGICP), and the National Charrette Institute. She is also president-elect of the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals.

Nine Meals from Anarchy

By Chris Solberg, AICP

What would happen if your community's food supply suddenly stopped? The phrase "nine meals from anarchy" is a stunning warning, suggesting that just three days without food (or nine missed meals) could be enough to send society into chaos.

At this year's National Planning Conference, I had the opportunity to attend a presentation moderated by a friend and colleague, Chad Nabity. Chad is the Planning Director for the City of Grand Island and Hall County in Nebraska. He's also been heavily involved with the American Planning Association, APA Nebraska, and the Nebraska Planning and Zoning Association. [Chad is a former Chair of the STaR Division.]

Amongst all that involvement, Chad also operates a successful CSA where he lives. He has a distinct interest in food systems planning, where he's become knowledgeable of the term "Nine Meals from Anarchy".

In 1906, Alfred Henry Lewis stated, "There are only nine meals between mankind and anarchy." Food is the main commodity we cannot live without. We're physically and psychologically wired to respond strongly to hunger. In the event of major supply chain disruptions, whether those disruptions are caused by natural disasters, pandemics, cyberattacks, political upheaval, or war, the grocery store shelves could empty rapidly.

Why the Food System Is So Fragile

Modern food systems are global, complex, and highly efficient. But these aspects are also what makes them vulnerable. Some of the factors that increase this fragility include:

- **Just-In-Time Supply Chains:** Many grocery stores don't hold extra inventory. They rely on weekly or even daily shipments. Disruption of these just-in-time shipments can cause shortages almost immediately due to the lack of on-hand inventory.
- **Global Dependencies:** Ingredients to many of our foods often cross multiple borders before reaching your plate. A drought in one country, a hurricane in another, or a war on another continent can all have disastrous impacts.
- **Urbanization:** In cities, most people don't grow food. They're entirely dependent on deliveries. If access is cut off, urban centers typically feel the reverberations before the rural areas.

The Floods of 2019

One of the presenters at Chad's session was Jennifer Dam, another one of my colleagues in Nebraska. Though Jennifer is now retired (congrats to her!), she was the Director of Planning for the City of Fremont, a community bludgeoned by the floods of 2019.

From January to March 2019, the state was impacted by



record snowfalls. Up to 16 inches of snow covered areas of Nebraska after the March 11 bomb cyclone. Over the next few days, the temperature in Nebraska surged to the low 60s, causing rapid ice and snow thaw. Making issues worse was the fact that the frost depth was still at 25", forcing the rapid thaw to run off rather than to soak into the ground.

Soon, the floodplains around Fremont were filling up with the onrushing water. The roadways into the community were completely submerged. There was no roadway access in or out. Soon, the grocery stores were selling out of food and supplies. Yet Fremont adjusted and survived. With the airport still accessible, local volunteers flew in food, water, medical supplies, diapers, and more to try to meet the needs of the 28,000 residents.

Lessons Learned

Eventually, the waters receded, and convoys of food and water were triumphantly led into town by the Nebraska State Patrol. Yet, Fremont learned that their Emergency Action Plan needed to be updated and adjusted to consider the fragile food system. They also completed a

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flood modeling analysis to better understand the true potential flood impacts, rather than relying on FEMA maps.

The Greater Dodge County Long-Term Recovery Group was also created through funding by the Fremont Community Fund. The Group is a gathering of local non-profits focused on assisting recovery activities in and around Fremont.

Fremont also conducted emergency preparedness outreach. Working with various agencies to get the message out, Fremont has provided information for residents that helps personal resiliency after a disaster event.

What Your Community Can Do

When considering the “nine meals from anarchy” concept, it is important to understand that it is more than a warning; it’s also a call to build resilience:

Support local farming

Implement policies that support local farming: Support the development of community-supported agriculture (CSA), urban gardening, and agritourism.

Improve emergency preparedness in your community

- Disaster preparedness plan: Create or update your community’s disaster preparedness plan with a section devoted to food security. Consider a post-disaster communication plan as well to inform residents of food sources after a disaster event.

- Conduct regular drills: Community-wide disaster drills can help people familiarize themselves with emergency procedures and ensure that everyone knows their role during a crisis.

Prepare to provide effective communication after an event

- Establish communication networks: Ensure that there are multiple ways to communicate during an emergency, such as community radio stations, text message alerts, or neighborhood apps.
- Create a list of resources: Keep track of local resources, including emergency shelters, medical facilities, food storage, and water supplies.

Support actions that improve resiliency and sustainability

- Food banks and pantries: Establish or support local food banks that provide a safety net for those in need, especially during emergencies.
- Promote energy independence: Encourage the use of solar panels, wind turbines, and other renewable energy sources to protect against impacts to centralized power grids.
- Stock up on basic supplies: Encourage residents to keep essential supplies on hand, like non-perishable food, first-aid kits, and tools.

Some possible implementable aspects include allowing seasonal produce stands/trucks, local farmers’ markets, and allowing small commercial kitchens as a home occupation.



Farmers Markets offer fresh, nutritious locally-grown foods in season.

Source: Bing (CC)

Final Thoughts

The phrase “nine meals from anarchy” is provocative because it’s frighteningly plausible. It doesn’t mean we should panic and revert to an entirely agrarian society. But rather that we should take food security seriously. That’s what disaster preparedness month is for.

Disaster preparedness isn’t paranoia, it’s a form of resilience. And in a world that’s just nine missed meals away from crisis, building stronger systems today is the best way to ensure we don’t test that limit tomorrow.

Read the story and much more on Chris’ blog.

About the Author

Christopher Solberg, AICP, is the recipient of the 2023 Carol Thomas Honor Award for a Small Town & Rural Planner, for his planning advocacy with the Rural Resurrection Blog.

Although Chris works in a suburb of a metropolitan area, his roots are in Red Oak, Iowa, a community of 5,500 southeast of Omaha. He blogs at <http://ruralresurrection.com>.
Excerpted with permission.

STaR Member Honored by Virginia Chapter

Lincoln Lewis, a STaR member, has been honored with the 2025 Larson Award from the APA Virginia Chapter. This award recognizes a planner who is a model to the profession for their experience, breadth of knowledge, high ethical standards, and exceptional skill and achievement.

Lincoln's work focuses on community engagement strategies for comprehensive planning—especially small communities with historic cultural assets. Currently, he covers planning duties for the towns of Scottsville and Gordonsville in Central Virginia while pursuing his PhD degree at the University of Virginia.

Planning is actually Lincoln's second career after architecture. Once working for

ten years in Singapore while obtaining his architecture license there, he then decided during the pandemic to pursue a PhD degree in planning. His dissertation analyzes another small town in Virginia, named Tangier.

The Town of Tangier has approximately 300 residents and is the last inhabited island in Virginia's portion of the Chesapeake Bay. Tangier is known as the soft-shelled crab capital of the world, yet is geographically isolated and requires a 50-minute ferry ride from the mainland. The low-lying island is experiencing dynamic environmental change and has lost more than two-thirds of its area since 1850 due to erosion, subsidence, and sea level rise.



Lincoln is researching for his dissertation how small coastal jurisdictions, such as Tangier, make decisions when they are required to perform planning activities without having the staff capacity or resources to plan. The topics of environmental change and decision-making are clearly relevant to many STaR division members!

Beyond his work and research, Lincoln volunteers for the joint APA and Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning taskforce focusing on expanding undergraduate planning education. He also serves as the national co-lead for the American Society of Landscape Architects subcommittee focusing on documenting historic landscapes.



*Main Ridge Road on Tangier Island during sunny-day flooding
Photo: Lincoln L. Lewis, 20 September 2024*

The Power of Heritage

Fueling Rural Identity and Growth

By John C. Shepard, AICP

Heritage tourism has emerged as a catalyst for cultural preservation, economic growth, and resilience in small towns and rural communities across the country. As the demand for authentic, place-based travel increases, rural areas stand out by offering visitors a true sense of place rooted in distinctive stories, traditions, architecture, and landscapes.

The Relevance of Heritage Tourism for Rural America

Heritage is more than an artifact or an exhibit; it is the living, evolving character of a community. In rural settings, this identity is embodied in historic downtowns, agricultural landscapes, houses of worship, local festivals, foodways, and oral traditions. Heritage tourism leverages both the visible (such as restored buildings and scenic byways) and the intangible (like music, crafts, and culinary traditions) to draw visitors, generating revenue streams that often remain within the community and foster local businesses.

Importantly, heritage travelers are known to spend more and stay longer than average tourists. Their interest in meaningful, immersive experiences supports a diverse



array of local enterprises, from B&Bs and galleries to restaurants, museums, and event venues. This sustained economic activity contributes to a community's independence and long-term vitality.

Community Benefits and Social Cohesion

Heritage revitalization—whether through preservation projects, community festivals, or interpretive programs—can serve as a rallying point, strengthening civic pride and intergenerational connections. When communities define, celebrate, and share their unique stories, they build a collective identity that can adapt to new challenges while preserving continuity. This process is central to resilience, helping towns weather economic shifts and cultural change.

Best Practices for Heritage Tourism

Effective rural heritage tourism initiatives share several core characteristics:

- **Authenticity:** Successful destinations highlight genuine experiences—local music, seasonal foods, and homegrown events—ensuring efforts are driven by, and relevant to, the community.
- **Comprehensive asset mapping:** Identifying the full range of heritage assets, both tangible and intangible, guides decision-making and helps avoid underappreciating local treasures.
- **Partnership-driven approaches:** Collaboration among local government, businesses, nonprofits, and residents is essential. Broad engagement prevents siloed efforts and aligns goals.

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- **Strategic integration:**

Recognizing heritage tourism in land use, comprehensive, and economic development plans elevates its status and secures necessary support.

Case Examples and Global Inspiration

- *Tillamook County, Oregon*, Despite a small population, The community created a Cultural Heritage Trail to connect these sites, promoting storytelling, regional cohesion, and year-round tourism. This rural area on the Pacific Coast is also home to Tillamook County Creamery Association, the cooperative which produces Tillamook cheese.
- *Red Cloud, Nebraska*, channeled its literary heritage, linked to Willa Cather, into successful

tourism products, business opportunities, and downtown restoration in this small town tucked into the middle of the Great Plains.

- *Lindsborg, Kansas*, built on Swedish traditions to revive their downtown, attract visitors year-round, and maintain a vibrant community character. Lindsborg hosts the biennial Svensk Hyllningsfest, October 17 and 18, 2025, a Swedish heritage festival featuring traditional music, dance, costumes, and food.
- International models such as Oamaru, New Zealand, and Ansa, Spain, demonstrate that honoring local stories and landscapes can drive both tourism and global recognition without sacrificing integrity.

Contributor Chris Solberg wrote about Lindsborg, Kansas, [on his blog back in February](#).

Pathways for Sustainable Growth

Planning for heritage tourism means establishing adaptable policies, investing in skilled trades, and utilizing interpretive tools like wayfinding maps and digital guides.

Engaging voices from all segments of the community, including those less often heard, helps ensure that heritage tourism uplifts rather than displaces local culture. Thoughtful, broad-based funding and stewardship approaches further reinforce the long-term health of rural destinations.

Moving Forward

For rural planners and community leaders, heritage tourism is a robust, strategic pathway for renewal and sustainable prosperity. It invites communities to embrace their authentic stories, deepen civic pride, and welcome visitors who value substance over spectacle.

Do you incorporate heritage into your comprehensive plans and downtown plans?

By investing in collaboration, authenticity, and good planning, rural America can ensure that its rich and diverse heritage is not only preserved, but passed on—and celebrated—by generations to come.

About the Author

John C. Shepard, AICP, is Vice-Chair of Communications for the Small Town & Rural Planning Division. John is currently working as a consultant based in Nebraska. He blogs at jcshepard.com



Traditional Dala Horse at the Hemslojd store, Lindsborg, Kansas

Source: [Flicker \(cc\)](#)



PLANNING WEBCAST SERIES

Sponsored by APA Chapters & Divisions

APA's Divisions and Chapters sponsor a series of weekly webcasts, at no cost to members, to help you gain CM credits you need... and maybe learn something useful while you are at it.

October 31 – Zoning for our Future: Solar, Windfarms, EV, and Manufactured/Modular Homes
CM TBD) Guest Host: APA Ohio Chapter

November 7 – Signs of the Times: Mastering Content-Neutral Ordinances (CM 1.5 | 1 L)
Guest Host: APA Ohio Chapter

Local governments must carefully craft sign regulations to ensure content neutrality, especially following two major US Supreme Court cases since 2015 and ongoing lower court challenges. This webinar aims to help planners, zoning officials, and code enforcement professionals create sign codes that uphold free expression, meet legal standards, and are practical to enforce. Participants will learn core legal definitions, explore strategies for writing and applying content-neutral sign codes, and study real-world examples of both successful and problematic regulations, covering issues from political signs to digital displays and murals. Expert speakers will share insights based on experience from around the country, and attendees will receive the Sign Research Foundation's publication on content-neutral sign codes in the wake of the Reed and Austin decisions.

You can see the current listing of all webcasts at www.ohioplanning.org. On-demand webcasts are also [available](#) for your convenience.

For video recordings of past webcasts, visit the Planning Webcast Series YouTube Channel at www.youtube.com/planningwebcast.

The [Planning Webcast Series](#) offers a fantastic opportunity for APA STaR Division members to access dozens of free CM approved webcasts each year. These sessions cover a variety of topics, including the popular AICP-required subjects and both trending and foundational planning themes. Hosted by APA Chapters and Divisions across the country, these webcasts ensure a wide range of perspectives and expertise.

Here are some key details about the Planning Webcast Series:

- Membership Access: Open to all APA [Chapter/Division] members!
- Webcast Schedule: Fridays from 1:00 to 2:30 PM ET.
- CM Credits: Each session qualifies for 1.5 CM credits, covering all required topics.

Recorded Sessions: Available on the [Webcast Series YouTube Channel](#) for on-demand viewing.

If you're interested in staying informed and participating, make sure to sign up for the mailing list to receive monthly updates about upcoming sessions and relevant links.

APA STaR Now on BlueSky

STaR gets Social (Media, that is!) *Selections from our Socials feed*

The American Planning Association and APA STaR maintain a presence across social media to share the latest and greatest news and information throughout the year.

Check out our Facebook and LinkedIn pages, our Twitter feed @APA_SmallTown, and Instagram (plus now Threads) at apa_smalltownrural, for timely updates between editions. And thank you to STaR Student Board Member Finn Meggitt for managing Threads and STaR member Ri Tobin for our Insta-feed.

STaR Division is checking out the new bluebird SoMe scene for the conference. Join us at:

<https://bsky.app/profile/apa-star.bsky.social>.

Planning blog:

<https://www.planning.org/planning/2025/feb/what-makes-bluesky-the-new-it-space-for-urbanists>


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We're small town & rural planners, in the US and across the world.

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Marketplace @marketplace.org · 18d

Cuts to safety net programs will hit hard for rural Americans, eating into earnings that could be spent on housing. After the 2008 Financial Crisis, some say the worries they feel over current economic conditions feel eerily familiar.



Rural program cuts are reminiscent of Great Recession trauma, journalist says

Recent spending cuts to rural safety net programs have some bracing for financial hardship, in light of what they went through during the Great ...

@mktplc.org

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Ollie Douglas @olliedouglas.bsky.social · 19d

In Coimbra for #RuralHistory2025 and the place I'm staying is stuffed full of rural material culture. Seems about right. It's a bit like having a sleepover @themerl.bsky.social, but warmer.



STaR Member Spotlight: Jill Bahm, AICP — Giffels Webster

Name: Jill Bahm, AICP
Partner, Giffels Webster

Education: BA in communications & English from University of Michigan; Masters in Urban & Regional Planning from University of Michigan.

APA Involvement: Michigan Association of Planning – conference presenter, workshop instructor, committee member, and current board member. Also serving as the organization's Professional Development Officer. Member of the STaR division.

How did you become interested in planning?

As a kid, I was always drawn to places where I could walk or ride my bike to on my own. I couldn't articulate it until later, but visiting other places made me see the contrasts in how the built environment impacted communities and how people live. In college, I had a hard time focusing on one profession – I loved being creative, but also had a good mind for business. One day I read a job description for a city planner role in the small town where I grew up. It was a light bulb moment for me and I then knew I wanted to go into planning.

What's the most interesting project you're working on?

We have some really great projects right now, but I think one of the most interesting is our work with a small rural community in northern

Michigan. They're an agricultural community and tourist destination whose challenges include losing farmland, needing housing, and wanting to protect the natural environment and their rural charm. We're in the beginning stages of the master plan process with them and are impressed with the planning commission's understanding of the community and also the initial feedback of the community in our recent surveys. I think we'd expected a "don't change anything" attitude, but we're hearing that people are open to new ideas and best practices from other areas.

What are the biggest differences working in the private sector vs the public sector?

I have worked in both the public and private sectors and there are pros/cons with each. When I started as a city planner, in the public sector, I enjoyed building relationships and seeing projects materialize over time. On the other hand, local politics can be weird at best and demoralizing at worst. In the private sector, we are typically (but not always) an arm's length from this. I also love the variety of work we get to do with our client communities of all shapes and sizes. It's more work juggling things, and we do have a lot of meetings, but overall, it's been a great fit for me over the past 17 years.



What's the best part of working in small towns & rural areas?

We've often said that working in small towns and rural communities is "our jam," because we love the variety of assistance we can provide, typically to people working with limited resources and capacity. We love doing training and sharing best practices from other places – with the ultimate goal of helping people chart their own path for their community. In smaller communities, we often find that we can build nice relationships with staff, officials, and business owners, and become trusted advisors and partners in community-building.

Make plans now to join Jill in Michigan next spring for #NPC26 in Detroit!

Living Off Grid: Practical Insights for Rural Planners and Homesteaders

By John C. Shepard, AICP

Living off grid is a dream for many who move to the countryside, seeking self-reliance and independence. If you work in a small-town or rural planning office, you've likely encountered these modern homesteaders—residents with visions that echo those of early pioneers, building cabins and settling the land. Today's off-grid dreamers often favor tiny homes of their own making, embracing a simple lifestyle. Many of us moved to rural areas with similar hopes. These neighbors might stop by the office to request an address for a land purchase or secure a driveway encroachment permit

after a culvert has been installed. Rarely, however, are their visits prompted by questions about zoning or floodplain regulations.

Ryan Mitchell has been there, on the dreamers' side. In his new book [*Living Off Grid: 50 Steps to Unplug, Become Self-Sufficient, and Build the Homestead of Your Dreams*](#) (Island Press), he relates his own experience in seeking greater self-sufficiency. He started out building his own tiny house on wheels, complete with composting toilet. When I worked in Colorado, the health department only allowed composting



toilets for bonafide campers, not for permanent residency... so folks just didn't ask for permission. It is a conundrum for public policy.

Mitchell largely sidesteps philosophical debates, instead focusing on the lived realities and compromises involved in off-grid aspirations. His narrative is candid about the need to reconcile ideals with practicalities, such as the installation of a sanitary septic system in lieu of less conventional options. These reflections are relevant for rural planners navigating similar requests and for residents working within typical regulatory frameworks.

Even if you are not ready to give up the comforts of living in town or on the grid out in the country, this book speaks to things we should all know as small town and rural planners.



Ryan Mitchell, photo by Island Press

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The book is structured in three parts:

Adopt the Living Off Grid Mindset

Adopt it or not, Mitchell introduces the foundational beliefs and goals that drive those pursuing off-grid living, illuminating the pursuits of many rural newcomers.

Create an Action Plan

Have you ever put together a Permit Guide or a one-sheet for the residents who want to be their own general contractor? Mitchell gives readers a series of quick guides to each step of the development process, from a realistic assessment of small-scale agriculture and hazards of building in a flood zone, to the practical advice to build your driveway first. He goes into detail about surveys, easements, and property records; I just wish he had emphasized going to the township or county first to check if you can even get access to the road.

Make the Dream a Reality

Here Mitchell transitions into the building process. He talks over the challenges of living off grid in an RV or yurt while building out the homestead. He talks about assuring you can get good, clean well water, and handle gray water and black water. He actually spends fewer words specifically talking about the logistics of renewable energy, wind and solar power than I expected, but that he does. He's also honest in recommending a back-up connection to the electric grid—not just for net-metering but a mortgage company may require it.

Mitchell is a good writer. He has been featured in major media outlets, including the New York Times, BBC, and NPR, for his work in helping people downsize and simplify their lives. For those interested in self-sufficient living—or those serving them in planning roles—his book is a worthwhile addition to their resources. In the spirit of self-sufficiency, ask your library to buy the book and ask them to put you first on the wait list.

