Life After Cal Poly: Moving Beyond the Classroom

Christopher Jordan
California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo

Abstract
In this article Chris Jordan writes about his work at PMC, a large planning consultancy firm based in Sacramento, CA. While an undergraduate student at CRP, Chris helped put Focus together and was assistant editor for the two first issues. His class received a state award from the American Planning Association and a national award for best student project from the American Institute of Architects for the San Miguel Community Plan in 2004.

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/focus

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/focus/vol3/iss1/24

This Spotlight is brought to you for free and open access by the City and Regional Planning at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Focus by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact mwyngard@calpoly.edu.
In this article Chris Jordan writes about his work at a PMC, large planning consultancy firm based in Sacramento, CA. While an undergraduate student at CRP, Chris helped put Focus together and was assistant editor for the two first issues. His class received a state award from the American Planning Association and a national award for best student project from the American Institute of Architects for the San Miguel Community Plan in 2004.¹

As graduation neared in the spring of 2004, I knew I needed to find a job and get into the working world. I wanted something flexible - that would provide a smooth transition from the Cal Poly experience to professional practice, yet would help build my skills for the future. I also wanted a job that I could grow into by showcasing my skills and proving myself as a leader. So while filling out job applications and interviewing with Planning Departments that were well off the beaten path, I made a phone call to my old boss at Paciﬁc Municipal Consultants (PMC).

While my internship with PMC in the summer of 2003 was short (only six weeks and part time at that), it gave me an opportunity to see how this organization of highly motivated people function as a team. I got to observe how PMC, a consulting firm that works exclusively for municipalities, special jurisdictions, and other governmental agencies, addresses the needs of their clients by producing a high quality product in a fun and exciting atmosphere that is the very dichotomy of stereotypical municipal planning work. When I started looking for employment I knew instantly that I wanted to return.

My First Project

The first project I worked on – and continue to work on to this day – was the General Plan for Rancho Cordova. The City of Rancho Cordova is one of the newest cities in California, having incorporated in July of 2003. It is located in Sacramento County along the Highway 50 corridor between downtown Sacramento and Folsom. Today, it is a small community of about 55,000 people; however over 35,000 dwelling units are in the pipeline for development between now and 2030. When the General Plan reaches buildout in 2050, the planning area will be populated with over 310,000 people.

The project has been unique to say the least. What started out as a fairly “normal” project had mushroomed into what could conservatively be called the most exhaustive and comprehensive general plan process. At the heart of it all has been the creation of a General Plan Pro Forma that evaluates the fiscal implications of new development on the City. Rancho Cordova is fairly unique in that, as a result of the revenue neutrality agreement with the county at the time of incorporation, almost all of the property tax generated in the City is returned to the County. The only real money generator is sales tax. For that reason, it is important that the City include an adequate supply of commercial land while at the same time balancing the infrastructure and service costs associated with new development so as to insure that the City will maintain its fiscal solvency for the next 30 years.

One of the requirements for completing the Pro Forma has been the creation of accurate land use projections. With nearly two-thirds of the City undeveloped and the City committed to not being in the land planning business (leaving detailed planning to a developer initiated specific plan process), development buildout potential is not as simple as totaling up the acreages in GIS (Geographic Information System) and multiplying by a density. Rather, assumptions need to be made that reflect the most likely land uses but still leave the specificity to a later date.

¹ For information on the San Miguel Community Plan see Focus 2 (April 2005).
The solution has been two fold. First, all greenfield areas of the City are located within “planning areas” that do not lock down land uses to specific parcels. Second has been the creation of a land development scenario in PLACE’S – a GIS-like system that calculates development potential based on an assumption set. I have been leading up this effort, creating value-rich data sets that can be used for economic analysis, traffic modeling, and overall statistics generation for the General Plan.

**The Design of the City**

While working on the General Plan for the Rancho Cordova, I was asked to assist in the development of that City’s first Design Guidelines. Many areas of the City feature older patterns of development (e.g. strip retail centers) that are not in keeping with the City’s vision. For some folks it is the design of these areas that helped them decide to vote for incorporation in the first place.

The Design Guidelines for Rancho Cordova are, as the title states, “provisions for a quality community.” It lays out four design goals and a series of design objectives, guidelines, and standards that implement the vision as identified in the General Plan and serve to provide design professionals, property owners, residents, City staff, and decision makers with a common understanding of the City’s expectations for the planning, design, and review of development proposals in Rancho Cordova.

The resulting document is illustrated cover to cover with vibrant imagery that showcases design concepts preferred and encouraged by the City. Also include are so-called “don’t do” images – illustrations that show how not to design a project.

**Creating the New Code**

My third big project with PMC has been a project with the City of Elk Grove. Like Rancho Cordova, Elk Grove is a newly incorporated jurisdiction that has been slowly replacing its existing County-created documents with ones that it can call its own. The latest effort has been a reworking of the Zoning Code.

The entire project, when completed later this spring, will have taken just over two years to complete. Over twenty public workshops, stakeholder, Planning Commission, and City Council meetings will have been conducted, on top of the countless staff meetings. Hundreds of comments will have been received from rural residents, religious organizations, retail developers, and even a computer software company.

Still a traditional Euclidian Zoning Code, the new code is a clear departure from the organizational crisis that is the

---

**Figure 1.**
The Design Guidelines for Rancho Cordova feature a two-page layout that describes the objective area, includes design guidelines standards for implementing the objective, and is well illustrated to help describe the concepts included inside.
existing. Rather than development standards being spread out across dozens of pages, all the information a builder or staff needs is contained in nice, neat, little tables. Use listings are consolidated and all uses are defined.

Best of all, the document features many custom-made graphics that illustrate the concepts and regulations contained within. Using skills I developed at Cal Poly, I have, in addition to writing several sections of the document, created many of these graphics.

**How this relates to Cal Poly**

If someone asked me how I have been able to handle so many complex projects so early in my career, I would have so say that it is a result of my Cal Poly education. The “Learn by Doing” atmosphere prepares you for the kind of work you experience after college – crazy project schedules and constant deadlines, demanding bosses and clients, and cranky coworkers. Not to mention projects that are designed with real-world applicability.

I am constantly reminded of my experience with the fourth-year community planning lab where we drafted a community plan for the town of San Miguel. My experience at the public meetings, work on development projects, and coordination skills developed while working with team members are constantly being called upon. Without these skills and experiences, I do not think that I would have been able to transition as well has I have from the academic world to the working world.

*Figure 2.*

An example illustration from the Elk Grove Zoning Code. This figure describes the requirement for screening rooftop equipment from public view through performance standards.