

## Interview with Alumnus Trevor Keith

Master in City and Regional Planning, Cal Poly;  
Energy Program Coordinator, County of San Luis Obispo.

**FOCUS:** When did you graduate?

**Trevor:** I received my MCRP degree from Cal Poly in 2003 where I completed a Masters Thesis comparing a New Urbanist development "The Crossings" in the city of Mountain View with a Planned Unit Development to determine the success of the New Urbanist principles.

**FOCUS:** Describe your current job. What are your primary responsibilities and what type of work do you do?

**Trevor:** I am the Energy Program Coordinator for the County of San Luis Obispo, and lead the energy group in the Planning and Building Department. We work on implementation of various energy programs offered throughout the County which include the Energy Watch Partnership. This partnership specifically focuses on engaging with municipalities and small / medium businesses to assist them in a reduction in their energy use by applying energy efficiency methods. We also sponsor Energy Awareness Month in San Luis Obispo during October in order to educate our residents and business owners about energy efficiency opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

We anticipate the upcoming approval to expand the emPower Program across the Central Coast to offer a residential energy efficiency loan program similar to one that is currently available in Santa Barbara County.

In addition to my work in the energy efficiency sector for our County, I also oversee the development of the Los Osos Habitat Conservation Plan. This plan is part of an application by the County to obtain incidental take permits from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). The HCP identifies the suite of activities that will be covered by the permit (covered activities), their anticipated impacts to the listed species covered by the permit (covered species), and the steps that the County and other plan participants will take to avoid, minimize, and mitigate the impacts of the covered activities on the covered species (the conservation strategy).

**FOCUS:** Can you briefly describe your previous jobs?

**Trevor:** I have had the opportunity to work for three separate, private environmental/planning consulting firms here in SLO.



*Trevor Keith and his team accepting the Energy Awareness Month Resolution from the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors.*

Prior to coming to the MCRP program, I worked in the bay area at a software start-up firm that handled supply chain management for internet retailers. Before my software days, I worked in Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks managing the concession services in the two parks.

**FOCUS:** How is your education reflected in your work? Do you feel that the classes and skills from our program support your professional practice? What did we provide you with that you feel is fundamental for your professional practice?

**Trevor:** The MCRP program was a great learning lab for me, where I learned the fundamentals of the planning process and how it is applied in the jurisdictions here in California. In addition, I received exposure to innovative projects the CRP Department faculty were involved in at and around Cal Poly. Specifically, I spent time on research with Dr. Richard Lee; gained professional experience during my internship at Crawford, Multari, and Clark; and of course, my thesis advisor Dr. Vicente del Rio provided an excellent foundation of knowledge and practice for my career in planning.

**FOCUS:** Which do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the MCRP program?

**Trevor:** The strength of the MCRP program is the mix of classes and exposure to all the different elements of planning. This allows you to understand theory and then apply it to the planning process. Cal Poly's approach in the "learn by doing"

<sup>1</sup> For more about the 2013 Energy Event go to the San Luis Obispo County website at <http://sloenergymonth.org/>. For the promotional video, go to <http://youtu.be/qCTqsjZldK0>

method truly differentiates Cal Poly's program from others I had considered attending. The MCRP program has continually recruited stellar professors who work on innovative projects and research which allows the students opportunities for close collaboration with faculty and involvement in a real-world 'learning lab.' The only weakness of the MCRP program is that the number of projects and opportunities for work outweighs the time and availability a student will have to be involved.

**FOCUS:** What are the critical knowledge areas for planners entering the field? (e.g. land use law, research methods, zoning, housing finance, CEQA, etc.)

**Trevor:** I think the saying "jack of all trades and master of none" is a great initial approach and self-expectation for first steps into the planning field. Once you have developed a good understanding of the planning landscape, then you can begin to specialize in certain areas. I would stress a strong background in current planning and CEQA to have the fundamentals so when you work on other aspects of planning you will always remember how that will affect implementation of your work.

**FOCUS:** What are the critical skills and tools for planners entering the field?

**Trevor:** Good communication is the key to planning (and life). This takes on many forms whether it's writing an understandable staff report, presenting to a community group, or giving an applicant updates on their project. Using creative technology can help deliver your message. I find that being clear and concise always helps. Lots of folks like to judge

a plan by the number of pages; I find that if the plan itself is accessible and people use it, you have found success. Most projects that I have seen breakdown is due to poor or non-existent communication about an expectation. Hand-in-hand with communication goes professional interpersonal skills; I highly recommend paying attention to developing your interpersonal skills. After working in Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Park, where I directly managed staff employees and interacted with the public regularly, the most important skills were maintaining a positive attitude and actively listening.

**FOCUS:** What was the most challenging aspect of moving from the MCRP program to professional practice?

**Trevor:** Not getting the amount of opportunities to pursue research and using the REC center on a daily basis. I really appreciated the amount of opportunity to assist on different projects that the MCRP program provided me.

**FOCUS:** What do you see as planning's big challenges in the near future, and what do we need to teach students so that they may successfully engage on these challenges?

**Trevor:** I see the planning field becoming less specialized. I have found that in my career that I have had to be more versatile instead of specialized. In addition, projects have become more complex so you end up working on a project as a team instead of independently. The MCRP program does an excellent job of offering opportunities to work with groups and multi-disciplinary teams on projects.

*The SLO County team at the 2012 Energy Event.*

