

Introduction to the M-Group

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In a few years, the Metropolitan Planning Group has become one of the busiest and most respected planning firms in the Bay Area. Operating from offices in five cities, the M-Group offers staffing and services in policy planning, urban design, environmental planning, and historic preservation. In this article, CRP alumnus and founding principal Geoff Bradley shares the firm's trajectory and describes some of their major projects.

The Metropolitan Planning Group (M-Group) was founded in July 2006 to provide planning services to both public and private sector clients in the San Francisco Bay Area. The founders of the firm had deep roots in the city planning community of the South Bay, having worked for cities in Santa Clara County since the mid-1990s. The three founding principals were Geoff I. Bradley (BSCR 1992 and MS ARCH 2005), Heather Bradley (BSCR 1992) and Whitney McNair. Before joining M-Group, Geoff worked for the cities of Sunnyvale and Campbell; Heather worked for the cities of Sunnyvale, Milpitas, and Saratoga; and Whitney worked for the City of Mountain View.



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From the three founding planners we grew to twelve planners by 2009 and twenty planners by 2012. There was a significant transition in 2012 when Whitney McNair left the firm to join the Stanford University Planning Office. In early 2013, Heather Hines became a principal owner due to her significant progress in managing and growing the North Bay operations.

M-Group currently operates out of five offices located in Mountain View, Half Moon Bay, San Rafael, Petaluma, and Napa. The long term goal is to have at least one office in every Bay Area county in order to most effectively serve the needs of all the Bay Area cities. The firm currently employs 35 staff members including 30 full- and part-time city planners. The firm is currently engaged on a variety of projects and assignments for 25 Bay Area cities. We have worked for over 40 Bay Area cities since 2006—in all nine Bay Area counties.

M-Group Development

Originally, our goal was to provide planning services to Bay Area cities as well as assist private sector applicants with planning related due diligence and land use approvals. The private sector work involved several entitlement projects, including a rezone and use permit for a Sunnyvale church, a senior housing mixed-

use project in Campbell, and a Lowe's anchored shopping center in San Jose.

The private sector work was interesting and challenging; however, it presented a potential conflict of interest with M-Group's public sector work. City planners are so closely involved with sensitive land use issues, it is almost always necessary to "pick a side" in terms of working for either the private or public sector. Over the next two years, the firm evolved to working solely for Bay Area municipalities in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest. The firm is operated under the AICP code of ethics which leads off with this inspiring language:

"Our primary obligation is to serve the public interest and we, therefore, owe our allegiance to a conscientiously attained concept of the public interest that is formulated through continuous and open debate. We shall achieve high standards of professional integrity, proficiency, and knowledge."

M-Group has a new design on urban planning that involves several factors, including a focus on customer service, planning with the uniqueness of each client city in mind, innovation, and best practices—expressed in the M-Group Manifesto. This focus has allowed us to grow as a firm and as individuals. From the beginning, M-Group has strived to hire planners whose experience provides the best fit for its client cities. We encourage a healthy work-life balance for all staff.

We are focused on providing a full-service city planning firm that includes the full range of urban planning services required by Bay Area cities in a way that is efficient, innovative, and effective, as described in our Manifesto:

The M-Group Manifesto

M-Group is committed to creating a new design on urban planning. This takes many forms and is an important part of what makes us unique and allows us to grow both as individuals

and as a firm. We create this new approach to city planning by:

- Working in a very open, mutually supportive and collaborative manner;
- Treating everyone with respect and with a high degree of professionalism;
- Being both creative and detail-oriented;
- An emphasis on problem-solving and teamwork;
- Being flexible and open to new ideas;
- Working for both private and public clients;
- Treating part-time and full-time employees fairly;
- Creating an employee-friendly firm that strives to promote employee retention, job satisfaction and career growth;
- Having a goal of working in the full range of city planning and related fields;
- Hiring the best planners and working with the most qualified sub-consultants to offer the highest quality planning services;
- Very clear and direct communication within M-Group, with clients and the public;
- An enthusiastic and fun approach to planning;
- Maintaining a commitment to continuous improvement and accountability;
- Creating a long-lasting, employee-centered, client-focused company;
- Respecting natural and man-made environments.

M-Group Projects

Sustainability Services

Since mid-2008 M-Group has focused on offering Bay Area cities four core services: Policy Planning, Urban Design, Sustainability, and Staffing Solutions. Sustainability includes Environmental Review, Historic Preservation, and Climate Action Planning. During this time we provided development review services for a number of significant projects including the following:

Stanford University Medical Center Expansion, Palo Alto

The City of Palo Alto engaged M-Group to provide project management of the largest development in the City's history, the Stanford University Medical Center Facilities Renewal and Replacement project (Figure 1). M-Group coordinated a multitude of consultants including an environmental team, legal counsel, fiscal consultants, a housing specialist, a medical facility reviewer, an urban design consultant, and multiple architects. M-Group facilitated discussions between Stanford and the City, wrote staff reports and helped with the presentations for approximately one hundred public meetings, coordinated community outreach, reviewed

technical documents for the environmental impact report, and reviewed the architectural plans for all of the project components. M-Group also reviewed design applications for compliance with City codes.

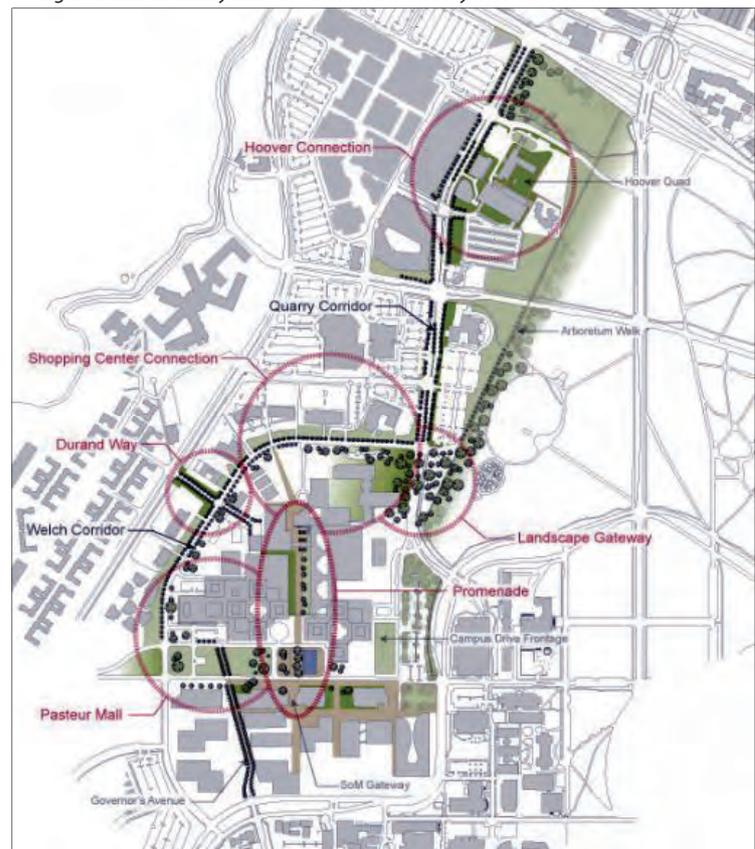
Moffett Towers EIR Management, Sunnyvale

The City of Sunnyvale engaged M-Group to process the EIR and land use approvals for a 79-acre parcel in the Moffett Park Specific Plan area. The project included development of 1.7 million square feet of new research and development/office space in seven 8-story structures, a pedestrian network to connect the office buildings to the Moffett Park Light Rail Station, and construction of approximately 4,600 parking spaces (Figure 2). The project had an accelerated timeline and construction schedule. M-Group was able to keep the project on track and it is seen as one of the most significant new office developments in the Bay Area.

Staffing and Full Service Planning

In 2009, M-Group began providing full planning services to the City of Petaluma, a city of over 60,000 people in Sonoma County with a rich city planning history. Our team of seven planners in Petaluma delivers outstanding customer service and highly responsive planning services for the community. In order to become familiar with the community, we hosted a well-attended Open House after our first few months in Petaluma (Figure 3). We also conducted a training session

Figure 1: Sustainability services - Stanford University Medical Center.



with 50 local realtors to enable them to research basic zoning and land use information using the City's online GIS system. M-Group worked hard to become acquainted with all sectors of the community by attending meetings and helping local non-profits. Planning staff attended Chamber of Commerce meetings to provide development updates. Planning work was donated to local non-profits including assisting Petaluma Bounty, a group committed to providing fresh local produce to low-income families, in attaining a Use Permit.

In 2013, M-Group was selected to provide full planning services to the City of Half Moon Bay in San Mateo County. Our team of three planners and one support staff in Half Moon Bay provides all day-to-day planning services and is responsible for implementing a comprehensive set of best practices recommendations prepared by a management consulting firm prior to M-Group starting. The city has a high level of community involvement and is located almost entirely in the Coastal Zone, which adds another layer of complexity to local planning efforts. M-Group staff is currently reviewing a variety of development projects as well as city projects and providing staff support for the recently started General Plan Update.

Policy Planning

In addition to our extensive staffing services M-Group has prepared numerous policy planning projects including General Plan Updates, Downtown Plans, and Zoning Ordinance Updates. Notable policy planning projects included the Belvedere General Plan Update, the Burlingame Downtown Plan, and the Coalinga Zoning Code Update. M-Group donated planning staff time to the City of Coalinga to pursue a Round 2 Sustainability Community Grant in 2012 made possible by the passage of Proposition 84 in 2006. M-Group collaborated closely with city staff to complete the \$100,000 grant application, which allowed for the completion of the project which had initially been delayed due to budget limitations. The Zoning Code Update is meant to bring sustainable planning principles to a small rural town and could be used as a template for other rural towns.

Burlingame Downtown Specific Plan

M-Group led a multi-disciplinary consultant team in preparing a new specific plan for historic Downtown Burlingame (Figure

Figure 3: The Petaluma staff.



Figure 2: Sustainability services - Moffet Towers, Sunnyvale CA.

4). Downtown Burlingame is an undeniable success, but like all downtowns it is subject to ever-changing lifestyles and consumer preferences. The plan called for a highly involved program for civic engagement informed by thoughtful analysis and evaluation, allowing the community to develop a vision and ultimately a plan that is realistic and compelling for the future while being "uniquely Burlingame."

Belvedere General Plan + Housing Element Update

M-Group partnered with Plan B Municipal Consulting to plan for the future of the City of Belvedere, completing a comprehensive update of Belvedere's General Plan. The project included a robust public outreach program to achieve community consensus on how to embrace the future. Our role was to provide Belvedere with a multifaceted, living-working document, which articulates the community vision and provides guidance for the future. We were engaged to conduct background research of land use elements, study existing conditions, assist with research for the Housing Element Update, evaluate various policies and programs, assist with community outreach meetings, facilitate the General Plan visioning process, and prepare the General Plan Elements. The General Plan Update was completed in 2010.

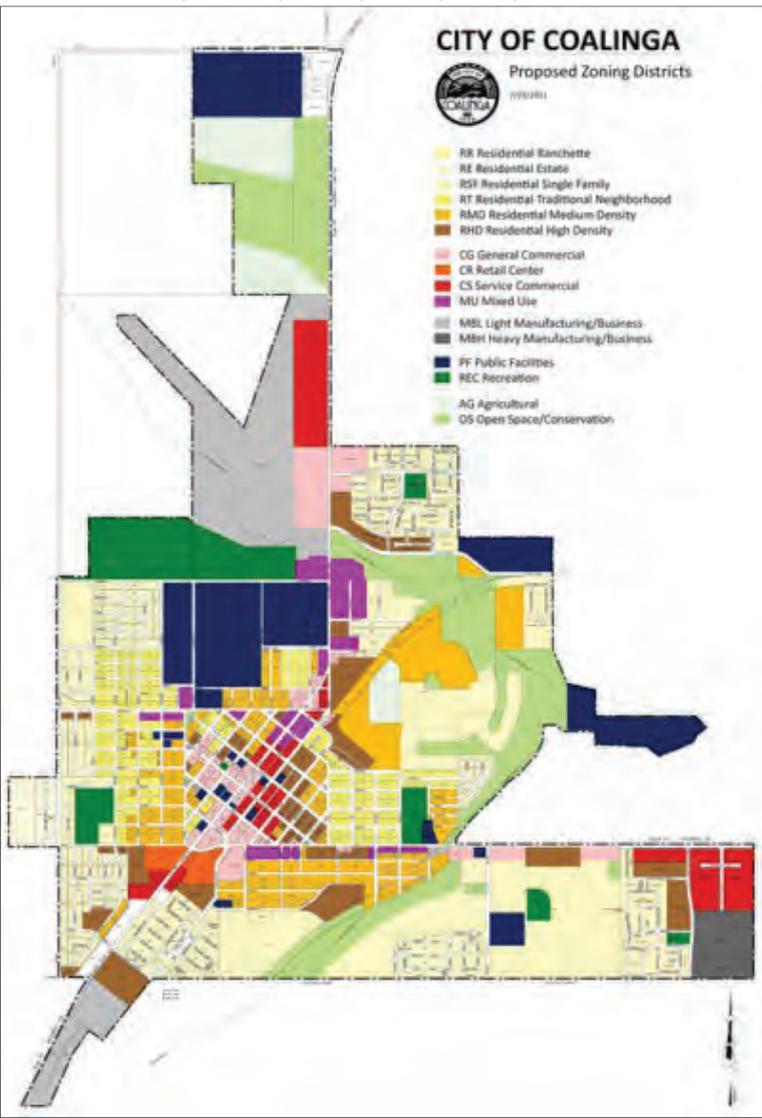
Coalinga Zoning Ordinance Update

M-Group is working with the City of Coalinga to develop an entirely new citywide zoning code (Figure 5). The goal is to include all development regulations in a clear, concise document that is easy to use and enforce, and that incorporates state-of-the-art planning practices. In Coalinga, the co-existence of both agricultural and urban land uses have helped to define the City's



Figure 4: Policy planning - Burlingame Downtown Specific Plan.

Figure 5: Policy planning - Coalinga Zoning Ordinance Update.



unique character. A key challenge and opportunity of the Zoning Ordinance Update project has been to develop a thorough and detailed understanding of the various opportunities that this mixture of land use creates, extending the tradition of making the City a unique place in the Central Valley.

Design

A special niche that brings us back to our roots of sketching and drawing has been the completion of several Design Guideline projects. We have completed these types of projects for Redwood City, Santa Clara, Monte Sereno, and Saratoga. Design Guidelines are fun to prepare and have relatively short timelines compared to the other types of planning projects. Our work at the cities gives us an ideal perspective to produce easy to understand and easy to implement design guidelines.

During the 2009-2014 Housing Element cycle, M-Group completed or managed twelve Housing Elements. In the current 2013-2015 cycle we are working on eight Housing Elements. Urban design efforts have focused on design guidelines and Downtown Plans. Sustainability related projects included environmental review, climate action planning, and green building review utilizing the LEED certification system.

M-LAB

For M-Group’s five year anniversary in 2011 we established M-LAB as the research and development arm of M-Group. M-LAB brings together the numerous educational, research and best practices efforts that M-Group supports. Staff members have shown a strong interest in planning related education, providing educational outreach to all ages of future planners:

- Argonaut Elementary School, Saratoga, California – City Planning program by Junior Achievement delivered by Geoff and Heather Bradley.
- La Paz Middle School, Salinas, California – City planning presentation by Geoff Bradley to over 300 middle school students participating in the AVID program (Advancement via Individual Determination) with comments like: “One thing that I learned is that being a city planner is not boring. I will use this experience and use it by not making fun of city planners and have respect for them”.
- Emiliano Zapato Street Academy (High School), Oakland, California – Former M-Group staff member Lauren Mattern wrote a planning curriculum and taught a 9th grade class on urban planning and the difference a person can make.

Several M-Group staff members have taught or provided guest lectures at the San Jose State University Urban Studies program.

M-Group Principal Geoff Bradley has been involved with the ULI UrbanPlan program. Geoff participated in a recent session at San Mateo Middle College High School.

M-Group staff has researched and written 20 articles on a wide

variety of topics including: housing elements, complete streets, French EcoDistricts, Reinventing Regional Malls, Reworking Business Parks, Rebuilding Ground Zero, A Primer on Cultural Landscapes, and Planning as Play: A fun approach to planning. This ability to look up from our work on occasion and focus on an area of personal and professional interest allows us to recharge and stay passionate about our work.

Ideals

Sustainability

Our belief in the future means we work hard to make our communities sustainable. M-Group staff has experience managing complex environmental analyses for large-scale projects. We are able to identify and anticipate relevant issues early on in projects, work with environmental consultants, and manage the Environmental Impact Report process from beginning to the end. We also conduct environmental review for projects, including categorically exempt projects, Initial Studies, and Mitigated Negative Declarations. We have completed numerous CEQA documents for both private and public projects from in-fill housing projects to pedestrian bridges and Housing Elements.

M-Group has been a certified green business since August 2008. This involves a commitment to green principles for the operation of the firm. Some measures the firm takes to accomplish this are: the use of 100% recycled paper and green cleaning products, an effort to reduce vehicle miles travelled, and encouraging walking, biking, and transit use. The handbook provides further guidelines for sustainable practices. As a planning firm, this commitment to green principles extends to the core sustainability values that infuse all its work.

In 2013 M-Group added Environmental and Historic Preservation to our services offered to Bay Area cities and grew to over 30 planners serving 25 cities. With the realization that sustainability informs all the work we do, we updated our list of services in early 2014 to include: Policy Planning – Urban Design – Environmental – Historic Preservation – Staffing.

Quality

M-Group has always strived to produce very high quality work, which has earned us many repeat customers and a solid reputation. We have received positive feedback for the quality of our staffing work from numerous cities including Petaluma, Milpitas, Sunnyvale, Palo Alto, Foster City, San Mateo, and Half Moon Bay. As noted by former Petaluma City Council member and current Sonoma County Supervisor David A. Rabbit, “M-Group staff were without exception a pleasure to work with and clearly committed to finding creative solutions to difficult issues.”

Policy planning efforts have resulted in high quality efforts for cities such as Belvedere, Daly City, Mill Valley, Sausalito, Sonoma,



Figure 6: Education - M-Group members get involved in several school projects.

Campbell, and Mountain View. As a firm, we have sought to create user friendly documents that provide a visual sense of the community. We also seek to communicate complex information using infographics as well as conventional charts and tables.

The Mill Valley General Plan, for which M-Group completed the Housing Element, received a 2014 Northern California APA Award of Merit for Small Jurisdiction Comprehensive Plans. M-Group utilized innovative GIS mapping strategies to identify the most sustainable sites for the housing sites inventory. M-Group collaborated with the city and a local GIS provider to utilize access to services, transit, and solar orientation to map the sites.

Influence

The firm has been active in supporting local planning institutions including Northern Section APA, Bay Area Planning Director's Association, San Jose State University, and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. M-Group planners have provided planning related education at all levels including elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. As a student from La Paz Middle School in Salinas wrote after a city planning presentation: “One thing I liked about your presentation was all the illustrations, because it made the presentation more interesting and enjoyable to see. I also liked how everything you explained was easy to understand and interpret. I learned what a city planner does and I also learned what I should do to become one, which will be very useful.”

M-Group has also been active in the ULI UrbanPlan program, which provides hands on planning and real estate development experience for thousands of high school and college students. The firm fully supports educational outreach, up to and including providing paid leave time for planners interested in planning education. The firm also regularly provides paid

internships for university students.

M-Group uses new technologies to support our city planning efforts. This takes many forms including utilizing online platforms to support community wide planning efforts such as General Plan Updates.

Ethical Practice

The firm has a strong commitment to ethical practice at all times. We are only as good as our reputation and one wrong decision can greatly damage a reputation. As a result, we take ethical issues very seriously and always err on the side of caution when evaluating possible ethical issues such as potential conflicts of interest. If we identify a possible conflict of interest, our practice is to immediately notify our client. This allows for full disclosure and discussion early in the process where possible conflicts of interests can more easily be disclosed or resolved.

The firm is operated based on the AICP Code of Ethics. This document provides a roadmap for dealing with ethical issues and removes much of the uncertainty and confusion that normally surrounds this subject. We believe that having a large number of AICP certified planners and APA members instills the professional planning values, including ethical values, deeply into our firm.

Outreach and Engagement

M-Group has a wide variety of experience providing effective community outreach and engagement. As a new firm, we have been able to experiment to discover what works best for different communities and different situations.

For larger, community wide planning efforts we have combined traditional large format community meetings with smaller focus groups and online platforms such as MindMixer and city hosted web pages. For community meetings, we always strive to create an interactive experience so that attendees can take an active role in the meeting and not just be passive observers. We have done voting and ranking exercises that are effective in gathering a true cross section of input.

Small-group focus-groups have been an important part of our work. We have been able to organize and conduct focus groups from a variety of groups including homeowners, property owners, developers, seniors, teenagers, environmental advocates, and high-tech business owners.

We have found that focus groups allow for a more relaxed, in depth exploration of community issues. Information gained from focus groups has led to specific policy recommendations that have been implemented.

Final Remarks

One of the known strengths of the firm is its ability to bring

practical solutions to solve complex problems. This requires a commitment to basing solutions and recommendations on clearly identified facts and assumptions. The practical, educational philosophy of Cal Poly has clearly played a role in this approach. The firm has benefited from the Cal Poly background of two of the firm founders as well as the ongoing hiring of Cal Poly City & Regional Planning graduates, who compose one third of the staff.

Advice from Geoff

The Cal Poly educational experience is founded on the idea of “Learn by Doing”. This mantra has true meaning in the world of planning practice as the only way to truly learn something new is by doing it. With our work in over 40 Bay Area cities, we have repeatedly utilized this approach to quickly familiarize ourselves with our client cities by launching into the planning work in a true “Learn by Doing” manner.

The most important lesson I have learned from working in the planning field for the past 22 years is to treat people with respect, kindness and empathy. Regardless of the situation or circumstances—whether working with residents, co-workers, employees, or clients—giving everyone thoughtful consideration will encourage others to do the same for you in the future. City planning can be controversial, contentious, and sometimes adversarial. In spite of this, if you can treat people well, issues will usually be successfully resolved.