

APA Fall Leadership and Policy and Advocacy Conference

Sept. 27-29, 2015

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I'd like to begin this column with a short thank you to our Chapter President, Lydia Jemison, as well as the rest of the Executive Committee for selecting me as the recipient of this year's travel scholarship which enabled me to attend this Conference. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to go, and had a wonderful time. I would encourage others to apply for this scholarship in the future, as it provides both young and seasoned planners with a great chance to see our advocacy in action.



The Conference itself was jam packed; it felt like we were running from the start at 1:00 Sunday afternoon until we left Capitol Hill late Tuesday afternoon. I was trying to think about how best to distill the themes of this conference into short, digestible bites, and settled on an approach that works day by day but highlights what I feel were the most important "take aways" from each day. Many of the sessions were videotaped, and I would encourage all members to check in at the APA's website (planning.org) to find them and review the topics that were discussed. So, with this limited space remaining, here we go!

Sunday

The conference started off with a bang—APA led off with an opportunity for attendees to provide input on the redraft of several Policy Guides that the APA has in the works, on topics such as sustainability practices, freight concerns

and transportation and water concerns and issues. Many of these Policy Guides will be going out for public comment shortly; planners should keep an eye out for additional opportunities to provide input on these key issues.

Following this session, the highlight of the day for many, including myself, came up next. Renowned public relations expert **Christopher Graves** took us through 3 "Accidents" of human psychological development to explain how we as planners and advocates can better interact with the public. Using creative sound effects supplied by the audience, as well as humorous anecdotes, Mr. Graves bestowed upon us the following tidbits most useful for planners seeking to inform the public:

1. Almost all decisions are made by emotion, not fact – we as planners need to harness this by telling a STORY, not just facts;
2. Arguing facts will not help change a mindset, the opposite occurs;
3. GET RID OF THE JARGON – talk to people as people and not fellow planners; and
4. Remember that for most people the fear of potential LOSS will outweigh any gain you can propose. This applies to rights, freedoms, property, convenience, or a perception of the loss of any of this.

Sunday concluded with an excellent panel discussion on trends in affordable housing and social mobility at the incredible National Building Museum.

Monday

Monday was very much a traditional conference day – multiple concurrent sessions throughout the day designed to enhance and improve the

attendee's grasp on policy issues that we would be advocating for as we went to visit the legislative delegations the next day. Notes of interest from Monday included:

1. **Dr. Harriet Tregoning** reminding us that we need to stop looking at CDBG funding as the "universal donor" for housing problems and use the new HUD rules to create new best practices in affordable housing delivery that emphasize better planning on the front end and effective financing on the back end of development;
2. **Gabe Klein**, noted transportation revitalization expert, encouraging us not to be afraid of the autonomous car revolution and to embrace city revitalization from the street instead of from the buildings, and that while we are rebuilding our cities, don't be afraid to make mistakes—learn from them; and
3. For the first time in over 40 years, **HUD** has issued a new Rule that will greatly transform the way we are "affirmatively furthering fair housing". Planners should look to HUD for more guidance on the new Rule soon, but it is safe to say that it will affect the way we use affordable housing funding for a long time to come.

Monday's sessions concluded with our own Lydia Jemison introducing the day's concluding speaker, former **Sen. Mary Landrieu**. Both Lydia and Mary used fun anecdotes and personal stories to inform the attendees about issues and changes facing New Orleans and the region since Katrina, and the work yet to be done.



Planners ended the day at a local restaurant in Washington, DC, listening to former Louisiana planner and now DC Planning Director Eric Shaw discuss opportunities and challenges that he has faced handling planning issues in the District.

Tuesday

Tuesday was **Planners Day on the Hill**. After last minute prep and training sessions, attendees flocked to the Hill via taxi, metro, and even some hard souls on foot. Armed with advocacy information from the APA as well as information gleaned over the previous two days, planners spread out over the Capitol Hill office complexes to meet with members of their legislative delegations. I am pleased to report that the Louisiana delegation is knowledgeable and supportive of legislation that will, of course, benefit our planning activities here in Louisiana, but they are also eager to hear from us back here on our needs and priorities. Despite the chaos of the Speaker's unexpected resignation and the looming shutdown possibilities, all staff members were genuinely pleased to meet with us and to give us a bit of their valuable time to discuss port concerns, the transformation of ports for intermodal transit options, the preservation of our coast and inland waterways, and the reauthorization of funding mechanisms that will include planning activities.

All in all this was a great conference. Social media was a key theme that I really haven't touched on much, but I warn those of us who are not in touch with how to use it – get ready! We will need more information and education, but we as planners and local governments need to embrace social media as the new vehicle for informing our constituents of things in THEIR neighborhoods.