

# My Oakland

Erik Balsley, AICP, interviews Barry J. Miller, FAICP

First in a series of interviews of local planners and residents, in advance of the 2015 APA California Planning Conference.

**Balsley: Congratulations on becoming a member of the Planner Emeritus Network (PEN). Were you surprised?**

**Miller:** I was absolutely thrilled to receive this award, though the “Emeritus” part gave me pause. I’m a mid-career professional and hope people realize that I am still working!

**How did you discover Oakland?** I went to graduate school at Berkeley and quickly deduced that Oakland and Berkeley were more or less one extended city.

**Why did you choose to live and work in Oakland?**

Something about Oakland always resonated with me — maybe because I grew up in Brooklyn, in the shadow of the more glamorous borough across the water. San Francisco always seemed a little too precious for me, and a little too crowded. Oakland is greener, more diverse, more real, oh ... and a lot more affordable. Since I’m self-employed, locating my office here was a no brainer. It takes me 12 minutes to get to work, and I love my office and the cool Uptown neighborhood around it.

**What surprises you most about Oakland?** That it’s not currently exploding with development. It’s the geographic and population center of the Bay Area, with some of the most beautiful scenery, best weather, and greatest neighborhoods in the country. The San Francisco skyline is covered with cranes right now, but Oakland is still asleep.

**What do you see as Oakland’s strengths?** A legacy of great architecture, amazing scenery and vistas, fantastic weather, walkable neighborhoods, world-class restaurants, interesting people, and cultural diversity.

**What do you see as the biggest challenge facing the city?** Like many former industrial cities, Oakland struggles with high unemployment, public safety, underfunded schools, and a fiscally constrained government. It is a living laboratory for urban planners who seek creative solutions to these challenges. If the City can turn its schools around and generate quality local jobs, we’ll have solved our most intractable challenges.

**What changes have you seen in Oakland since Northern Section hosted the California Planning Conference in San Jose in 2007? And what do you make of these changes?** We’ve become “hip” — which was inevitable. I’m generally pleased about that. I like the

variety of restaurants, the revitalization of some of our neighborhoods, and the growing number of events like the Art Murmur, East Bay Open Studios, and the Running Festival. I love walking down Telegraph Avenue and seeing lots of 20-somethings in their lime-green skinny jeans and fedoras. I don’t like having to pay \$15 for a hamburger though.

**What is your favorite local neighborhood?** The Rockridge district. It’s everything a great neighborhood should be. It constantly turns up in urban planning PowerPoint presentations as an example of the “ideal neighborhood.”

**What do you think most surprises others about**

**Oakland?** That it’s so beautiful! Seriously, the physical beauty of this city blows people away, especially if they’re non-Californians. Many of them have fallen for the media hype that Oakland is the ugly stepsister that lives in the shadow of San Francisco. My last visitor (from Washington, DC) described Oakland as the “quintessential American city, with a little bit of everything.”

**Where do you take out-of-town visitors and why?** I have a specific route I usually follow, which highlights my favorite neighborhood shopping districts, the mansions of Piedmont, the views from Skyline and Grizzly Peak, Jack London Square and the Produce district, Chinatown and Old Oakland, and the Fox and Paramount Theaters. We usually end at Lake Merritt, and if there’s time, we walk the 3.2-mile promenade around the Lake. The Lake is called Oakland’s “crown jewel” — but it’s much more than that. It’s the great gathering place of our city. And with the completion of more than \$100 million in park improvements in the last few years, it’s spectacular.



**Barry J. Miller, FAICP**, is nationally known for his work on comprehensive plans and land use studies. He has been an Oakland resident since 1986 and an Oakland-based business since 1991. Miller’s portfolio includes plans for more than two-dozen communities, including Oakland itself. Most of his work has been in the San

Francisco Bay Area, where he has practiced for more than 25 years as a planning consultant. Miller also serves as the chair of the City of Oakland’s Park and Recreation Advisory Commission. ■