



*By Catarina Kidd, AICP*

**Shannon Fiala** is Planning Manager at the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). She served on the APA California Northern Section Board for three years, 2014-2016.

### **What brought you to planning?**

I followed a somewhat unusual path to planning. As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, I studied ecology, then moved to the west coast to work on habitat restoration projects in Marin and Napa counties. Through that work, I became interested in land use planning as a tool for habitat protection, which led me to graduate school at UC Berkeley. There I received a dual degree in city planning and landscape architecture with a focus on environmental planning.

### **What path led to your current role?**

While in graduate school, I wrote two masters theses, one analyzing the regulatory process for restoration projects and a second in partnership with SPUR about implementing the Ocean Beach Master Plan. In the latter, I analyzed case studies of urban highway removal — including Paris and Boston — that could inform the removal of portions of San Francisco's Great Highway. Based on that thesis, I was offered a position with SPUR in implementing the Ocean Beach Master Plan through a series of technical studies involving transportation planning, open space design, and coastal engineering.

Then I moved to the California Coastal Commission, where I worked closely with Caltrans on planning for rising sea level and the managed retreat of Pacific Coast Highway at various locations. Now I'm in BCDC's planning division as their planning manager, where I supervise a team of planners who work on updates to the San Francisco Bay Plan and



Meet a local planner, Shannon Fiala

special area plans.

**What was the biggest challenge in going from a project management role to supervision?**

As a project planner, you take a deep dive on a particular topic or proposal. As a manager, I need to be more focused on assisting staff, listening to their synthesis of the topic, and helping them by removing obstacles to their progress. Joining an organization as a manager has been a challenge, and in some cases I have had to learn side by side with my staff, tackling a broad range of topics together.

**Tell us about BCDC.**

The San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission is a California state planning and regulatory agency with regional authority over the San Francisco Bay, the Bay's shoreline band, and the Suisun Marsh. We are set up like a traditional planning department: there is a division that handles permits for shoreline development proposals, and my division handles long-range planning. Our mission is to protect and enhance San Francisco Bay and to encourage the responsible and productive use of the Bay for this and future generations. State law requires that development proposed in or adjacent to the Bay obtain a BCDC permit. In addition to lessening any fill and minimizing harm to Bay resources, BCDC is tasked with obtaining maximum feasible public access within the Bay's 100-foot shoreline band.

**Has the commission's role changed over the years?**

BCDC was created in 1965 to address a San Francisco Bay that was shrinking due to haphazard filling, and to increase shoreline public access. Today, as a result of sea level rise, the Bay is growing larger. That presents new challenges. We are currently amending the San Francisco Bay Plan to rethink our permitting process — particularly for habitat restoration projects, to allow increasing amounts of Bay fill to preclude wetland vegetation from drowning over time — and to incorporate findings and policies on environmental justice and social equity.

**How does this relate to local government planners?**

As a state agency, we have work closely with local governments. The infrequent city and county General Plan updates are resource-intensive. Each update is an opportunity to consider the public safety risks presented by rising sea level. Planners from local governments on the coast or bay shoreline: please urge your city or county to integrate consideration of rising sea level into your land use plans and zoning! This is what keeps me up at night.



Meet a local planner, Shannon Fiala

### **What projects stand out based on your passion for coastal planning?**

I am now working on two Bay Plan Amendments and the San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan. The waterfront plan hasn't been amended for 20 years and will guide future development along the Port of San Francisco ([www.bcdc.ca.gov/planning](http://www.bcdc.ca.gov/planning)). When I was at the Coastal Commission, I inherited a project with Marin County updating its Local Coastal Program (<http://bit.ly/2UwskuI>). We were integrating sea level rise considerations into zoning — something that has not been done in many places.

### **What advice would you give to mid-career planners making a change?**

Explore what avenues you have within your organization. Maybe take on a new project or assist a different unit. Ideally, we would all have supervisors interested in our career development, but that is not always the case. Attend APA happy hours and conferences. Reach out to colleagues, classmates, and your alumni network. Use volunteer work — or get yourself appointed to a local board or commission — as a way to try something new related to your core interests.

### **How do you as a manager see your role in mentoring? Is that different from basic supervision?**

I currently supervise three and enjoy the mentorship aspect of my position. I learn about their career goals and connect them to opportunities as they come up. While most entry-level planners would like to advance, not everyone is suited to a management role. Some planners have incredible technical skills, and some have people or conceptual skills. The most important thing is to care about your employees, be interested in their professional goals, and be courageous enough to give them the constructive feedback that will help them grow.

### **You mentioned “the spectrum of leadership.”**

As a new manager, I read a book called *Radical Candor*, which lays out a spectrum of leadership. At one end, a manager may be too hands-off, saying, “I hire intelligent people and then get out of their way.” At the other end is the micromanager, who hires great people but then tells them what to do and how to do it.

But intelligent and capable people still need guidance and mentoring. My goal is to strike a balance between the two ends of the leadership spectrum through “thought partnership” — listening to your team and helping to remove obstacles, perceived or real, to their progress. Maybe they need training to build new skills, or maybe they need help building and maintaining relationships with external partners.

Beyond the successful completion of a project, my biggest reward is to help emerging



Meet a local planner, Shannon Fiala

planners advance in their careers, and to contribute to their professional success.

*Interviewer Catarina Kidd, AICP, is Northern News' associate editor. All interviews are edited.*