



Meet a local planner - Elizabeth "Libby" Tyler, Ph.D., FAICP

By Catarina Kidd, AICP



Elizabeth "Libby" Tyler, Ph.D., FAICP, is Planning Manager at the City of San Pablo. She holds a Ph.D. in Regional Planning from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, an MLA in environmental planning from the University of California, Berkeley, and a BA in environmental conservation from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Tyler serves as Ethics Director on the APA California - Northern Section board and is on the steering committee for PHEAL (Planning for Health, Equity, Advocacy and Leadership). She is Vice Chair of APA national's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee. Tyler is a charter member of APA, having joined in 1978 as a student. She was the first woman in Illinois to be recognized as a Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners in 2008.

How can planners be more inspired?

I think planners should take a broad view of planning. You are a world citizen, not just on the clock at your job. When you travel, locally or otherwise, you are learning and viewing things with informed eyes. To further your practice, be intentional and volunteer or choose things to work on that especially interest you.

Examples of that curated experience?

Planners are such versatile professionals. There is so much to be done right now with new conversations about planning and public health and the need to build more equitable places. And we need to start assessing racist practices in planning and how they can be corrected. If not planners, who can do this work? There is no room for cynical or limited thinking such as, "I am just a cog in the wheel," so I can't effect change. If you are feeling cynical, stretch yourself. Take even a little side-step in your career and you will never regret it. If you look for opportunities, you can find the impact you were meant to have.



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You recently joined the City of San Pablo. What are your goals there?

Developing planning staff, supporting economic opportunity for our residents, and accelerating housing production — which requires updating the General Plan and Housing Element. Also, many properties in the city are not zoned to accommodate more intensive development, and I'd like to see that change.

Recent accomplishments?

We just completed the ADU ordinance for San Pablo. Our ADU production has more than doubled over the past year. People are investing in their homes in a way that is adding value to the city and offering residents more choices.

Your planning work has been diverse.

I was fortunate to work in both the public and private sectors and in planning education. My longest tenure — 17 years — was as Community Development Director for the City of Urbana, Illinois. I also taught planning as an adjunct lecturer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

What project stands out and why?

Rebuilding public housing sites in Urbana for more affordable housing. With innovative work and careful community engagement, we were able to change the way planning for affordable housing was done. It was a big stretch for me to work with HUD and to obtain grant funding so the work could be accomplished — but the outcomes were important, and there are now two new beautifully designed affordable communities in the city, including Crystal View Townhomes and the adjacent Highland Green Apartments.



Crystal View Townhomes, Urbana. Housing Authority of Champaign County, IL. Credit: Brinshore. Photo: @balloggphoto

Your comments on retirement?

I retired from a job (Urbana), but not from making a difference. I enjoy having the freedom of being selective and giving more love to things that bring me satisfaction. Those include teaching, consulting, and working with new planners. When I was that overworked mid-career planner, I imagined a total release with retirement. But retirement is not an all or nothing proposition, and for me, it does get better with time. People are becoming more creative in retirement. Planning is a great field for retirees who want to be creative.

What mindset has made you successful in your career?

I would think of three key approaches for success in the planning field:

- *Dare to be versatile.*

Since planning is such a broad field, you have an opportunity to be many things — an environmental planner, a transportation specialist, a housing expert, or an economic developer. You can actually do it all if you wish.

- *Realize you can make an impact.*



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If you can make things better than they would have been, you can make a huge impact, incrementally, over time. Project reviews, daily administration, outreach — they all add up. You make things better even if you are not in a position with great visibility.

- *But don't overplay your hand!*

The community must be in charge. Planners who want to put their personal mark on something miss the point. Keep your ego in check. Find the tools and the right people to work on a project — it might not be you. Maybe it is your staff or a community leader — and if so, let them shine. The important thing is not who is doing what but doing what is right for the community.



Interviewer Catarina Kidd, AICP, is senior development manager at FivePoint and a guest writer for Northern News. All interviews are edited.

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