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Survey Finds Planners are Untapped Resource for Addressing Energy Problems

CHICAGO—A survey conducted by the American Planning Association (APA), in collaboration with the Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI), indicates urban and regional planners are highly interested in energy issues but often have difficulty implementing energy solutions due to a lack of information, training, tools, and technical support.

The survey assessed planners' knowledge, capacity, and educational needs on energy issues. Most respondents believe energy is very connected to their jobs as planners, primarily through transportation, sustainable development, smart growth, environmental protection, economic development and community quality of life. The respondents indicated that high utility bills are the primary motivating factor for energy concerns for their communities. Air pollution ranked as the second most pressing concern, and one-quarter of the respondents indicated that climate change concerns are motivating their communities to address energy issues.

However, the survey findings revealed mixed results about implementing energy efficiency policies and regulations. According to the survey, planners address energy indirectly, in conjunction with other livability or smart growth goals, such as the adoption of more energy efficient transportation options. Nearly 90 percent of respondents indicated their jurisdiction promotes pedestrian pathways as a transportation alternative; more than 75 percent encourage bicycle commuting; and more than one-fourth have regulations that encourage transit-oriented development.

A smaller percentage of planners directly encourage energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy technologies in the built environment. Forty-five percent said they provide builders or developers with information on how to improve energy efficiency in new construction; one-third indicated their community requires public buildings to be energy efficient; and more than 50 percent said that alternative energy technologies to some degree (largely solar) are being used in their communities.

“Through their influence over the built and natural environments, planners are vital to helping our country promote energy efficiency and reduce energy usage,” said Paul Farmer, AICP, Executive Director and CEO of the American Planning Association. “With tools, training, and support, planners can more effectively meet this responsibility and create communities of lasting value.”

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The survey illustrates that several opportunities exist for planners to enhance energy efficiency. Many communities are not yet using standard planning and regulatory tools to increase energy efficiency or the use of renewable energy. Energy is rarely addressed as a required element in comprehensive plans. Zoning ordinances, subdivision ordinances, energy audits, capital improvement programs, siting standards for power generation facilities, density bonuses, and solar orientation requirements are among the implementation options that planners have yet to fully employ to maximize the use of renewable energy resources and encourage energy efficiency improvements, the survey revealed. In a few cases, planners indicated that private covenants or deed restrictions actually prevented their communities from implementing renewable energy.

“We are encouraged by planners’ high interest in energy and eagerness to learn about energy issues,” said Carol Werner, EESI Executive Director. “We believe, with assistance, planners will assume a leadership role in integrating energy efficiency and renewable energy practices in all aspects of urban planning.”

APA and EESI have embarked on a joint project to educate planners about energy efficiency practices and available renewable energy options. With growing interest in greenhouse gas reduction and energy efficiency, states and localities will increasingly turn to planners to point the way toward energy saving measures and solutions.

The American Planning Association and its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners, are dedicated to advancing the art, science and profession of good planning -- physical, economic and social -- so as to create communities that offer better choices for where and how people work and live. Members of APA help create communities of lasting value and encourage civic leaders, business interests and citizens to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people's lives. APA has offices in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, Ill. For more information, visit its website at www.planning.org.

The Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI) is a Washington, DC-based non-profit organization established in 1984 by a bipartisan, bicameral group of members of Congress to provide timely information on energy and environmental policy issues to policymakers and stakeholders and develop innovative policy solutions that set us on a cleaner, more secure and sustainable energy path. EESI carries out work in the areas of energy efficiency and renewable energy, global climate change, agriculture, biofuels, smart growth, and transportation technologies that is disseminated through publications, briefings, workshops, and task forces. To learn more about EESI, visit www.eesi.org.

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A detailed analysis of the survey is available by e-mailing Roberta Rewers at rrewers@planning.org.