

# PLANNING DIRECTOR

City of Aspen, Colorado



EXECUTIVE  
RECRUITMENT  
PROVIDED BY



## THE COMMUNITY

The city of Aspen, Colorado is a world-class resort community nestled in the mountain peaks of the White River National Forest. There are over 300 days of sunshine each year. Known for unparalleled outdoor recreation opportunities, breathtaking landscapes, and an abundance of arts and cultural amenities, the Aspen community is a close-knit, year-round community of approximately 7,000 residents, with seasonal fluctuations to around 15,000 visitors and part-time residents. Residents are passionate, highly engaged, and embrace the opportunities to advance the Aspen Idea: the integration of mind, body and spirit. The City Planning Director within the Community Development Department has a key role, opportunity, and responsibility to lead in this community.

In addition to the opportunities to connect with nature, the Aspen community is known for its open-mindedness, inclusivity, welcoming and pleasant disposition, and willingness to share experiences with visitors from around the world. There is a keen sense of culture and community in Aspen and the greater Roaring Fork Valley community, which is a big part of what makes Aspen's mountain culture unique and a cherished asset.

Aspen's built environment is characterized by a blend of historic charm and modern amenities. The town's architecture reflects its origins as a 19th-century silver mining hub, with well-preserved Victorian buildings lining its streets, particularly in the downtown area. These historic structures are complemented by contemporary developments that cater to the needs of a modern tourism economy. The community has a rich legacy of thoughtful, progressive planning approaches in response to this environment, including earning several awards for historic preservation and land use planning efforts.





## THE COMMUNITY, continued

Locals and visitors enjoy an influx of exciting events, such as the Aspen Music Festival, Winter X-Games, the Aspen Ideas Festival, the Aspen Food and Wine Classic, World Cup skiing competitions, and the International Design Conference. Living in Aspen provides access to outdoor experiences that are second to none including world-class skiing and snowboarding, hiking, rock climbing, hang-gliding, camping, white water rafting, and fly fishing in gold medal waters. The great outdoors is front and center here.

The Aspen dining scene rivals the experience of large metropolitan areas. There is something for everyone – ranging from quick grab-and-go to five-star dining with top executive chefs. Its offerings are a celebration of local ingredients and international flavors, featuring a vast variety of cuisines.

Other activities include the Aspen Institute, the Aspen Center for Physics, Jazz Aspen, Aspen Mountain Film, Aspen Comedy Festival, the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, Theatre Aspen, Aspen Film Fest, Wheeler Opera House, the Aspen Art Museum, and the Anderson Ranch Arts Center.

Major employers in the area include Stay Aspen Snowmass, Aspen Valley Hospital, St. Regis Aspen Resort, Aspen School District, Roaring Fork Transportation Authority, Aspen Skiing Company, City of Aspen, Aspen Music Festival and School, and the Aspen Institute.

The city of Aspen is located 40 miles south of the I-70 corridor on State Highway 82. At only 3.9 square miles, the community is part of a robust transportation system including a 10-minute commute to the Aspen Airport, with over 20 commercial flights per day into 11 direct flight markets. Aspen is part of the largest rural regional bus transportation system in the nation.

The Aspen School District is known for its academic rigor, including recently transitioning to International Baccalaureate curriculum from kindergarten to twelfth grades. The community is also served by multiple preschools, and a private k-8 school, Aspen Country Day.



## GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATION

The City of Aspen operates as a council-city manager form of government with home rule authority. There are five council members, including the mayor, elected at-large. The mayor is elected for a two-year term and council members are elected for four-year, overlapping terms. A majority of council (two councilors and the mayor) are elected every two years; thereby, ensuring continuity of government with maximum political responsiveness to the voters. The city manager, city attorney, and municipal judge are appointed by the City Council.

Sara Ott has been the City Manager for Aspen since 2019 and served as Aspen's Assistant City Manager from 2017-2019. She oversees 23 lines of business

providing a diverse series of community services and capital projects, such as renewable energy, utilities, downtown vitality, affordable housing development, community development, parks and recreation, police, public transit, and more. Prior to joining Aspen's management team, she spent 18 years in a variety of roles for midwestern local governments. Sara's leadership philosophy is simple: "We do work worth doing," meaning work that is meaningful to the employee, the community, and future generations of Aspenites.

Ben Anderson was appointed Community Development Director in 2023, and served previously as deputy director, principle long-range planner, and planner since joining Aspen in 2016. His appointment has brought renewed focus on the development review process, staff support, and advising governing bodies on significant land use policy considerations and implementation.

The City has 370 full-time employees, 250 part-time employees, and 60 seasonal employees with a 2024 budget of \$154 million.

## MISSION AND VALUES

The City of Aspen's mission is to engage with positive civil dialogue, provide the highest quality innovative and efficient municipal services, steward the natural environment, and support a healthy and sustainable community for the benefit of future generations with respect for the work of our predecessors.

### Our values guide our work.

**Service:** We serve with a spirit of excellence, humility, integrity, and respect.

**Partnership:** Our impact is greater together.

**Stewardship:** Investing in a thriving future for all by balancing social, environmental, and financial responsibilities.

**Innovation:** Pursuing creative outcomes, grounded in Aspen's distinctive challenges and opportunities

## ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

The Planning Department offers a range of services aimed at guiding and regulating the development and growth of Aspen. These services include land use planning for the orderly and sustainable development of residential, commercial, and recreational areas. The department co-manages the permitting process ensuring compliance with local, state, and federal regulations. Additionally, it facilitates community engagement and public hearings, and develops long-term strategic plans to address future growth, infrastructure needs, and urban enhancements. The department collaborates with other departments, government entities, developers, and the public to create a balanced and vibrant urban environment.



The Planning Department is arranged into four primary areas of historic preservation, current planning, long range planning, and zoning enforcement. Comprised of 13.5 FTEs, the department provides support to the Historic Preservation Commission, Planning and Zoning Commission, Board of Adjustment, and City Council in all land use matters. The annual budget is \$2M.

The department is currently evaluating the regulations and processes that have emerged over the last 50 years and reimagining how to reshape land use planning in Aspen for the next 50 years. The position will play an important role in these efforts, including:

- Code alignment efforts across City agencies and process improvement initiatives across all agency functions.
- Support of Aspen's affordable housing efforts in a variety of ways: review of entitlements for affordable housing projects, continual evaluation of the land use code for mechanisms to further encourage public and private sector affordable housing development. Support in evaluation of establishing a community land trust for affordable housing and key commercial spaces.
- Environmental sustainability programs: Initiatives focused on reducing environmental impact and promoting green practices in the built environment. Aspen is currently pursuing the implementation of building performance standards and electrification.

The department is part of the Community Development Agency, comprised of Planning, Building, and Environmental Health and Sustainability departments. Departments are supported by a shared services team for the agency for most administrative and finance matters.

## ABOUT THE POSITION

Under the direction of the Community Development Director, the Planning Director is responsible for the overall management of the land use entitlement process, historic preservation, zoning enforcement, and long-range planning, including policy analysis and recommendations.

The Planning Director is responsible for achieving goals and objectives for the department set jointly with department staff and the Community Development Director, consistent with the organization's values and mission statement. This position exercises direct supervision over multiple technical positions and land use planners. The position is responsible for development and execution of annual operating and capital budgets, with support from the Community Development Director.

The Planning Director will possess a knowledge of laws, legal codes, court procedures, precedents, government regulations, executive orders, agency rules, and the democratic political process. The Planning Director will be experienced with the use of relevant equipment, policies, procedures, and strategies to provide effective policy implementation.

The Planning Director will work well with diverse groups of people, both inside and outside the organization. The planning director should demonstrate technology skills sufficient for the nature and level of position and a willingness to learn new technologies.



## ABOUT THE POSITION

The ideal candidate for the Planning Director in the City of Aspen is someone who aligns with the City's mission and values. This person will demonstrate the experience and expertise to meet current and future community demands based on an appreciation for the best elements of the Aspen's history. The City seeks a Planning Director who can 'lead from the front' in support of a quality team in bringing out the best of the team's expertise. The ability to collaborate with community stakeholders – from elected leaders to developers to historic preservationists – will allow a candidate to thrive in this environment.

The Planning Department has wide-ranging responsibilities and works to consistently apply a well-entrenched, legacy development code to a complex development context. Bearing this in mind, the new Planning Director will need to learn this code, but expectations are realistic for being able to do that over time, even by means of reviewing some land use reviews first-hand in gaining proficiency. While administering the current code is essential, working with stakeholders and balancing interests to modernize and clarify the code for better consistency and results is a recognized need moving forward. The Comprehensive Plan is from 2012 and remains the policy document that guides the Land Use Code.

Competitive candidates will have experience in high profile and high expectation environments. The next Planning Director understands the economics of real estate while valuing environmental stewardship and open spaces. The role requires finding balance in the intensive realities of development review with the aspirations of implementing planning best practices. Aspen has responded for decades to local development dynamics with progressive planning tools, including: a growth management quota system, transferable development rights, accessory dwelling units and affordable housing policies. Many of these responses have been either pioneered or adopted early in Aspen. The Planning Director should expect to be tasked with a taking a fresh look to ensure that these tools continue to provide outcomes consistent with community expectations. Structuring dialogue to adapt these tools for the next generation will be led by the Planning Director and team, with considerable input from stakeholders.

Comfort with and embracing the mountain resort lifestyle and a love of the outdoors will support a long tenure for the next Planning Director.





The most competitive candidates for the Planning Director position will have experience in collaborative executive teamwork, along with a record of developing partnerships within the community. Preferred candidates are dedicated to serving as a servant leader, one who builds up and supports the growth and success of others, while upholding high-performance expectations.

The ideal candidate will also:

- Provide service with excellence, humility, integrity, and respect in daily work; build trust by listening; treat people with respect; acknowledge opportunities for improvement; and follow through with commitments.
- Be a problem solver and know when to lead and when to follow. Be honest in articulating what is possible and what must be set aside for another day.
- Positively accept constructive feedback, buffer and protect the staff from community pressures while holding planning staff accountable to commitments and expectations. Remain positive in navigating challenges, is committed to end goals in mind while remaining adaptable.
- Be secure and confident and willing to suggest new strategies or approaches. Be ready to make decisions and improve what can be controlled or managed, especially for internal processes and communications. Keep the team engaged and be a good team member, within the Planning Department, Community Development Department, and the City-wide team.
- Be energized by the opportunity to evaluate and restructure the way that the planning function contributes to the overall development review process. Collaborate with the Community Development Director to ensure the continued role of Aspen as a leader in developing planning best practices in response to the development context of mountain-resort communities.
- Be knowledgeable of business and management principles involved in strategic planning, resource allocation, leadership technique, and coordination and inspiration of people.
- Be able to identify complex problems and review related information to develop and evaluate options and implement solutions.

## EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

A bachelor's degree in urban planning, public administration, or related field, and five (5) years' experience in urban planning or a related field, including three (3) years in a supervisory capacity is required. A master's degree in urban planning, public administration, or related field, 7-10 years of progressive responsible experience, including that of leading a team, and AICP certification is preferred.

This position requires the candidate to satisfactorily pass a criminal background check upon hire. Must be willing to work evening and weekend hours in addition to normal hours.



## COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

The hiring salary is +/- \$165,000 dependent on qualifications and experience. The City of Aspen offers a comprehensive benefits program including health, dental, vision, disability, and life insurance; generous paid vacation and sick leave; and a City cell phone and computer. The City of Aspen participates in social security, and contributes 6% towards a 401a deferred compensation plan, with additional employer contribution upon five-year vesting. A 457-retirement plan is also available. Additional benefits include a wellness incentive, tuition assistance, free recreation center passes to staff and families for volunteering at City-sponsored events, and flexible work arrangements.

Housing within the urban growth boundary of the City of Aspen is available for this position, with terms negotiable with the preferred finalist. Housing availability is matched to household size, with rental and purchase options available at pricing considerably below free-market pricing. Relocation assistance is available. Residency within the Roaring Fork Valley preferred.

# APPLICATION PROCESS

[Please apply online](#)

Applications will be reviewed as they are received. Interested candidates are encouraged to apply immediately, as the position may close once a sufficient number of qualified applications have been received.



For more information on this position contact:

**Clay Pearson, Senior Vice President**  
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713-816-8639

*The City of Aspen is an Equal Opportunity Employer and values diversity in its workforce. Applicants selected as finalists for this position will be subject to a comprehensive background check.*

## RESOURCES

**City of Aspen**  
[aspen.gov](http://aspen.gov)

**Economic Development**  
[aspenchamber.org/membership/economic-development](http://aspenchamber.org/membership/economic-development)

**Chamber of Commerce**  
[aspenchamber.org](http://aspenchamber.org)



CITY OF ASPEN

