

# Urban Planner

## Job Description

Urban planners strategize how to meet the physical, social, and economic needs of the community. As with most government jobs, salary will increase in bigger cities/organizations - large cities like New York City have a larger budget than a small town. Employers will also generally pay more for candidates with extensive prior experience compared to others.

## Salary

Entry – \$45,640

Middle – \$73,000

Top – \$114,000

## Core Tasks

- Analyze population statistics, economic data, and other aspects of communities
- Create plans to manage or protect land
- Develop policies and programs on land use
- Focus on urban and city planning
- Meet with residents, politicians, and other stakeholders about land use proposals

## Workplace / Environment

- Work hours  
**Approx. 40 hours/week**  
(At key milestones overtime work may be required to meet deadlines)
- Environment  
**In-Office** meeting with others  
**Outdoors** in the field  
**Weather and Hazards** may depend on the site
- Travel  
**Moderate travel** between sites and meetings

## Education / Prerequisites

### Education Level

Bachelor's degree in Architecture, Economics, Urban Studies or related. (Master's degree is often preferred)

### Licensing

Usually not required (Varies by state)

### Pre-Job Preparation

Many urban planning jobs expect a few years of prior experience. This can be met with internship and job shadow experience, which are highly recommended to become an urban planner.

## Experience

### Soft skills

- Communication
- Project Management
- Understanding of Urban Area/Context of Location
- Vision for Urban Planning

### Technical skills

- Data Collection
- GIS Systems
- Office Software (Excel, Word, etc.)



## Career Path: Joe Meyer

### About Me

Economic Development Manager - Port of Seattle

B.A in Economics / Environmental Studies

Minor - Energy Policy

Minor - Business Administration

### College Choices

“Almost every four-year institution, private and public, in Washington has paying positions in student government. In my case, I was the chair of a board that heard election grievances in student elections. That exposed me to more positions and help me get a job as a student legislative liaison the next year.”



“I was also **paid** to be a **lobbyist in Olympia for the student body** of Western Washington University. It gave me a lot of experience to learn about what lobbyists do and **how to advocate for an issue to elected officials**. While I don’t do that primarily in my job today, when I was in a smaller economic development area that experience was very helpful when we talked with elected officials.”

“If you **get involved in a student government volunteer role** in **your freshman or sophomore year**, it will help you understand if you like that type of work and give you exposure to opportunities that will help you build your resume and get other paid jobs later on.”

“**Statistics and calculus** were requirements for my intermediate **micro- and macroeconomics courses**. If you understand economics and statistics, you will understand economic indicators and demographic data of your community. You need to be able to understand the data and economics, to be able to use them when planning programs or economic development strategies. Here is an example of an [economic development plan](#) for the City of Issaquah.”

### Into the Real World

“I worked for a year with a large public relations agency in the US, which helped me understand the fundamentals of marketing and PR. Knowing how a big company does public relations for a place like Microsoft, **helped me learn a lot about marketing and working with large companies.**”

“I also spent three years out in Grays Harbor County. Most of the economy revolved around timber products and tourism. The wood products industry is not as strong as it once was, and there was high unemployment in the area. In that case, the main focus of economic development there was focused on trying to keep local companies operating in the community and growing new industries like tourism.”

## About My Job

### “Economic development is very people-centric”

“When I first entered the field, I was told that **you’re trying to build the economy to create opportunities for citizens living in it**. There are three main ways to grow a local economy: **working with entrepreneurs**, working with **existing companies** that are already in the community to **helping them grow**, and **attracting new companies into the area**. I would add a fourth major focus that has emerged since I started, getting workers the skills employers need so they can access the jobs employers are hiring for.”

“When the economy was good, many local governments (including the Port of Seattle) realized that they **needed better pathways** to get people to a point where companies would hire them. Some people say that companies should hire people without a lot of skills and develop them, but that’s hard for a company to do; they **need people with skills somewhat developed** and they can further train them for what the company needs. In economic development today, you see a lot of **work focused on creating pipelines to family-wage or living wage jobs**.”

“There’s a vast array of projects you might be asked to do and people in the community to interact with: **small business, CEOs of big companies, city council members or the Port Commissioners addressing policy that deals with small or big business**. There are also conversations around workforce development with workforce development boards, schools and local colleges.”

#### Pros

- “Getting to **work with people**”
- “Learning about **different industries in the local economy**”
- “Finding **collaborative solutions with stakeholders outside of government**”
- “**Create new programs**”

#### Cons

- “Solutions can be **slow to develop**. I find that different economic developers are passionate about different forms of economic development; some are really excited about the workforce, and others would love to help land new companies in the community.”
- “Patience is key. You have to be **willing to work on a project for a long time** before you see results from it.”
- “You have to be **comfortable with failure** because some projects will turn out better than others.”

#### Office Work

- “Office work for deadlines and projects”

#### Fieldwork

- “You get out of the office to attend different meetings with companies and stakeholders”

## Skills

- “You will need **good communication skills**; both knowing how to talk about what you’re trying to do, to articulate it in a convincing manner, which involves being able to describe it and being able to convince people, but also being able to write about it.”
- “Good **public speaking skills**, both one-on-one and in front of a group, for a business and government audience are important.”
- “Good writing skills are key. Publishing reports that show your ability to research and synthesis information in your writing are great. I know people that did one project as an intern. They used it as a writing sample during an interview and it help him get his first economic development job.”
- “Marketing skills are important. One strength that I’ve had as an economic developer, is that I’m very comfortable with deploying digital tools like social media, a new website, and SEO.”

## Education/Experience

- “Informational interviews with urban planners and economic developers in the community are valuable; they can give you great advice on getting into the field and help you understand if you would like the job.”
- “Any experience that shows an ability to work in a community, through volunteering or internships, can help.
- I see all high school classes and extracurriculars as being fundamental to a liberal arts education, and I can say that I’ve drawn on all of them at different points, including the ones I never thought I’d use.”
- “Understanding statistics is important when you’re dealing with demographic data.”
- “If I were to emphasize one thing that a high school student could do to get a feel for this career path, it would be extracurriculars that help you get familiar with local and state governments.”
- “To improve your odds of getting the first economic development job, you should probably have at least an undergraduate degree in a field of social science that looks interesting to you.”

## The Future of **Economic Development**

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“At the end of the day, we’re brokers in opportunity for citizens in the community”

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“As the economy changes, the field has changed. For example, economic developers will be doing a lot of work to help local governments figure out how to manage economic changes related to COVID-19 in 2020. The industries and focuses shift over time based on the economic landscape, needs of a community, and interest in the field. As another example, after the 2008 recession, there was a focus on growing existing companies and start-up companies because many large companies were not opening new business locations.”

“As the economy changes and governing bodies at all levels try to keep up with that change to help stimulate their local economy, economic developers’ skills will need to change. Our keen ability to help local governments strategize and make positive changes in their community to support local businesses and citizens through workforce and other programs will be in constant demand. We’ll have to adapt our skill sets to what’s needed in the economy to deliver effective programs for local governments.”