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AI in Community Development

Practical Perspectives on AI for Planning Commissioners

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About Me & The Davenport Institute

- Executive Director – Davenport Institute and Professor of Practice at Pepperdine School of Public Policy
- Former City Manager, Los Altos Hills & Foster City
- 27+ years local government leadership
- President, Cal-ICMA (2025–26)
- President Cal-Cities Planning Commissioners Academy (2013-14)
- 2 Years Oracle - Strategy Lead for State and Local Gov
- Bridge between academic research and practitioner application
- GovTech Advisor

AI is not a tech issue. It is a governance issue.



Where AI Fits in Community Development

The Workflow - AI Can Assist at Every Stage

1. Inquiry

→ AI chatbots, intelligent FAQs

2. Application

→ Smart forms, completeness checks

3. Plan Review

→ Code compliance checks, anomaly detection

4. Public Engagement

→ Multilingual support, sentiment analysis

5. Hearing & Deliberation

→ Data visualization, automated meeting summaries

6. Inspection & Enforcement

→ Scheduling, image analysis, GIS Based Visual Changes

7. Long-Range Planning & Policy

→ Scenario modeling, growth analysis, simulation



Category 1: Intelligent Process & Application Validation

Problem:

- Incomplete applications waste staff time and create frustrating re-submissions

AI Role:

- Code-aware intake systems with automated completeness checks
- Zoning validation prior to submission
- Flagging inconsistencies with adopted standards

*AI improves procedural integrity —
not policy direction.*

Impact:

- Reduces counter friction • Shortens review timelines
- Improves applicant experience • Lowers planner workload



Category 2: AI-Powered Records & Institutional Memory

Public-Facing:

- Searchable archives of agendas, minutes, and staff reports
- AI-assisted retrieval of validated public records

Staff-Facing:

- Summarization of past actions and similar case cross-reference
- Draft synthesis support (with internal protections)

Impact:

- Preserves institutional knowledge • Reduces research time
- Enhances transparency and public access

Guardrails around what constitutes a “public record” are essential.



Category 3: Civic Engagement & Sentiment Intelligence

AI Assists In:

- Aggregating surveys, emails, and public comments at scale
- Identifying themes and tracking sentiment shifts over time
- Detecting misinformation trends in public discourse

Critical Distinction:

- AI surfaces patterns. Commissioners still exercise judgment.

Impact:

- Better-informed hearings
- Broader input capture
- Data-supported engagement strategies

AI does not replace deliberation. It informs it.



Category 4: Accessibility & Language Equity Tools

AI Applications:

- Real-time meeting translation and post-meeting transcripts
- Auto-captioning for video and live meetings
- ADA-accessible content formatting

Impact:

- Expands participation • Reduces barriers
- Improves legal defensibility • Strengthens community trust

*One of the fastest-deployable,
lowest-risk AI use cases available
today.*



Category 5: Pre-Application & Code Navigation Chatbots

Use Cases:

- Resident exploring what's permitted on their property
- Small business considering tenant improvements
- Homeowner asking ADU questions before submitting

AI Role:

- Code-based Q&A with links to adopted ordinances
- Scenario exploration with clear disclaimers

Impact:

- Reduces staff call volume • Encourages informed applicants

AI answers questions. Staff makes decisions.



Category 6: Plan Check, Inspection & Code Enforcement Support

Emerging Tools:

- AI-assisted plan review (setback, height, FAR checks)
- Automated checklist validation
- Image recognition for inspection support
- GIS-integrated violation detection

Critical Principle:

- AI flags. Humans decide.

Impact:

- Accelerates review cycles • Reduces inconsistency

Higher complexity than other categories.

Proceed with deliberate governance.



Category 7: Long-Range Planning & Scenario Modeling

AI Can Assist With:

- Housing element scenario simulations
- Climate adaptation and buildout modeling
- Traffic impact projections and fiscal modeling

Impact:

- Better policy testing before adoption
- Stronger EIR defensibility
- Clearer communication of trade-offs to the public

Scenario acceleration, not policy substitution. Commissioners set direction.



Category 8: Risk, Ethics & Governance Guardrails

Commission-Level Questions to Ask:

- What data is this AI being trained on?
- What constitutes a public record in AI-generated content?
- How are draft materials protected from disclosure?
- How is bias detected and corrected?

Responsibilities:

- Procurement diligence • Transparency disclosures
- Policy adoption before deployment

AI in planning is ultimately about governance design.



The Role of the **Planning Commissioner** in the AI Era

You Are NOT:

- Replaced by AI
- Automated away
- Marginalized from the process

You ARE:

- Setting policy guardrails
- Ensuring transparency
- Protecting due process
- Upholding fairness

AI Should:

- Reduce friction
- Expand access & improve clarity
- Support professional judgment



Where AI Helps Community Development Most

High Impact (Start Here)

- Application intake & completeness validation
- Public records search
- Engagement summarization
- Translation & accessibility
- Long-range scenario modeling

Lower Priority / Higher Complexity

- Automated code enforcement
- Full AI plan review replacement

These carry higher legal, political, and technical complexity. Build trust incrementally.



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