

## SMOKESTACKS & GERANIUMS

# Rise of the planners

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Waring's departure as city's land-use czar elevates long-term thinker

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Smokestacks & Geraniums



William R. Anderson has had a lot to do since the middle of last year when he became San Diego's 10th planning director. At the top of the list is completing a new general plan to guide the city's development for the next generation.

But as of last month, he's wearing an unexpected second and bigger hat, temporarily at least, as the city's new land-use czar.

As part of Mayor Jerry Sanders' inner circle, Anderson now has the power to referee disputes between big-thinking planners and short-term-oriented building-permit processors, between doing the right thing or the most expedient thing.

### PROFILE

#### William R. Anderson

Director, Department of Planning and Community Investment; interim deputy chief operating officer for land use and economic development.

**Born:** July 15, 1958, Chula Vista.

**Education:** B.A. 1980 in



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune  
Top city planner Bill Anderson, with son Ryan, 9, visited the Hillcrest farmer's market to pick up some flowers

economics and political science, Claremont McKenna College, including course work at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark; master's in city and regional planning, Harvard University, 1983.

**Employment:** Economics Research Associates, 1983-2006, senior vice president, with more than 350 assignments in 19 states and eight countries.

**Volunteer activities:** president, Citizens Coordinate for Century 3, 1993; chairman, San Diego Planning Commission, 2002-2003; Uptown Democratic Club, with experience in presidential campaigns dating back to Jimmy Carter.

**Personal:** Wife, Shawna, environmental planner at the San Dieguito River Valley Regional Open Space Park Joint Powers Authority; children Ryan, 9, and Mila, 5; residence, Mission Hills.

It's a job he inherited from his former boss, Jim Waring, who lured him out of the private sector in June 2006.

Waring suddenly left his post in August – either voluntarily or through dismissal – as he was dealing with the 180-foot Sunroad office building that the FAA deemed a flight hazard for nearby Montgomery Field. Twenty feet are being lopped off the top to bring it into compliance.

Ironically, Waring's departure catapulted Anderson into a position city planners have been pinning for since the 1950s – a bureaucratic power base to put vision into place through regulations and action.

“In some respects, planning has been elevated to its highest level in my memory,” Anderson said. “I think from the mayor's perspective, it illustrates the importance he places on planning.”

But even as he assumed Waring's post, Anderson is fighting an old battle akin to the Hundred Years War: new skirmishes that flare up every few years over familiar ground.

In this never-ending story, the recommendation under consideration is to merge the Planning and Community Investment Department, which oversees planning, redevelopment and economic development, with the city's Development Services Department,

which handles building permits, to achieve consistency and clear communication.

Anderson oversees those departments, as well as real estate assets, redevelopment, economic development and housing. The current city budget says the entire group of departments includes 764 positions and a combined budget of \$130.5 million.

Close up, it appears to be a boring debate over an organizational chart. But from afar, the idea poses the ultimate question for San Diego: Who's in charge and whose priorities are paramount?

“I've never been in a town that needs more separation from development services than San Diego,” said UCSD political scientist Steve Erie.

Particularly now, Erie said, San Diego's chronic budget problems tempt bureaucrats to focus on short-term revenue needs at the expense of long-term implications.

“You really need an arm's-length relationship between planning and development services,” he said.

And when the priorities flow from a new strong mayor system that took on the power of a city manager, Erie warned that campaign contributors who are also developers can exert too much influence – as some believe happened in the Sunroad incident.

“This is a town that really needs to go back 50 or 75 years to rediscover the public interest,” he continued. He pointed to the world's fairs in Balboa Park, Mission Bay Park and the formation of the UCSD campus.

“The amazing thing is that some of the public projects were done with the most venal of motives, but turned out beautifully,” he said.

This may all sound familiar to old hands monitoring City Hall.

Wracked by scandal and bureaucratic reorganizations, the role of planning in San Diego over the past 15 years has left the field with a tattered reputation.

The last time San Diego hit a real estate downturn, there was a sex scandal in the Planning Department and the City Council turned the agency over to then-City Manager Jack McGrory to run. He eventually eliminated the department along with the post of planning director, saying long-term planning was passe in a built-out city.

His successor, City Manager Michael Uberuaga, bowed to good-government advocates and reinstated planning and appointed Gail Goldberg as the newly reborn department director. She's now running Los Angeles' planning department.

Today, it's another scandal – Sunroad, not sex – and more talk of bureaucratic reshuffling.

Perhaps Anderson, 49, feels right at home, having worked at Knotts Berry Farm during his college days. At the Haunted Shack, he'd strum the “Deliverance” movie theme on his banjo before launching into stories of the Old West.

The symbolism to today's San Diego is too good to pass up: a city haunted by scandal and a need for deliverance from evil (or, at least, stupid mistakes).

Born in Chula Vista, the son of a dairy company credit manager, he spent his teens in Cerritos, five miles west of Knotts Berry Farm, and majored in economics and political science at Claremont McKenna College.

Fascinated by economic and international issues, he went on to earn a master's degree at

Harvard and interned with urbanologist Neal Peirce in Washington, D.C., where he helped the columnist complete a book on cities. A cross-country train trip that took him through the seedy side of some of America's largest cities convinced him that city planning and economic revitalization were for him.

“The thing about trains is you see the backside of cities,” he said. “For somebody that grew up in Southern California as a suburban kid . . . it's kind of a shock.”

Joining Economics Research Associates in 1983, he soon moved back to Los Angeles and then to San Diego, where his wife, Shawna, an environmental planner, also grew up. He started ERA's local office and headed up its national economic planning and practice group. Most of his 350 projects have involved consulting contracts around the U.S. and abroad.

In his off hours, he attends Padres and Chargers games, hikes with his children, Ryan, 9, and Mila, 5, putters around his Mission Hills house, listens to a wide range of music, particularly bluegrass, and favors histories and historical novels. (Wallace Stegner's “Angle of Repose” about frontier living is currently at his bedside.)

He used to spend pro-bono, nonbillable hours as a volunteer and president of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3, a good-government and planning organization, and eight years as a member and then chairman of the city Planning Commission through 2003.

He's been active in the Uptown Democratic Club, having volunteered for presidential candidates back to Jimmy Carter (he favors Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton for 2008). But he wisely stays clear of local politics.

Wanting to spend more time at home, Anderson accepted the city post. But he took it only on condition that he gained authority over redevelopment and economic development, tools he believes are useful to put good plans into action.

“As a consultant, you can only advise and your role is fairly low,” he said. “So to have an opportunity to get in a position where I could apply strategies that I could previously only recommend, where I could work with the mayor and City Council . . .” His voice trailed off into the unspoken hope that he could make a difference.

The general plan, in preparation for a decade, is still his top priority. He hopes public hearings this fall will lead to its swift approval, followed by a round of major updates to community plans, related zoning changes and financial plans to carry out necessary public improvements and upgrades.

But with only a few weeks to get used to his additional duties, Anderson cannot yet say what direction he might take for the bigger picture of permit processing, city real estate management and housing needs. He's still getting used to the complexity of city government *and the incessant rounds of meetings.*

*He echoes Erie's concerns in needing to provide checks and balances to development pressures. But he also sees the benefits of tying planning to implementation so that good intentions lead to good results.*

*“That's the problem with our regulatory system right now,” he said. “It's subject to a lot of interpretation so that reasonable people can interpret it differently.”*

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■ *Smokestacks and Geraniums* is an occasional look at the growth and development issues as they relate to historic trends in San Diego. The name is derived from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign pitting quick-fix forces against advocates of long-term planning.

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