

Why does Jamestown have a Town Planner?

Recently, some individuals have questioned why Jamestown has a Town Planner. After all, the argument goes, we are a small town. Some have even claimed that the former Town Managers have fulfilled the duties of a planner as part of their role in the Town government. I hope to shed some light on what our planner does and just how fortunate we are to have someone with this training working on behalf of all of Jamestown's citizens.

I think it is important to understand just exactly what a planner does. Planners help to develop long- and short-term plans for the use of land and the growth and revitalization of urban, suburban and rural communities - as well as the region in which they are located. They help elected officials alleviate social, economic, and environmental issues by recommending locations for infrastructure such as roads, utilities, and suggested zoning and land use issues.

This is work that requires the planner to understand future needs while balancing the interests of many different opinions from local citizens. Planners often review plans, but their work is not limited to that - particularly in a small town. Planners must be cognizant of changes in the State and Federal laws and work to ensure that the local government is in compliance. Planners can assist a town in growth, in preserving historical sites, in recreation planning, environmental issues, and a host of other topics that help keep a town looking nice and operating smoothly.

Our Town Planner, Matthew Johnson, was hired in 2006 after Kathryn "Cookie" Billings became the Town Manager. Cookie wisely saw the need for Jamestown to have someone who was trained in the planning discipline to assist Jamestown in updating their plans and ordinances. She worked closely with the Piedmont Triad Council of Governments, who provide management support and services to local governments in our region, to define the role of a town planner. Jamestown was compared to several other "sister" communities of similar size, population, and other demographic qualities and, after consulting with the Town Council, the decision was made to hire a Town Planner.

Unfortunately, some citizens of Jamestown have attacked Matt for his work. I am unsure of their motive, but I believe we are very fortunate to have an experienced Planner in Jamestown. I'm disappointed that anyone would want to single out any member of our team and say that they are unnecessary. A well-run town offers certain services and one of the most important service is planning and zoning.

Claims have been made that a "competent" Town Manager could easily do the job of a planner - and that former managers have performed those duties. However, no former manager has ever fulfilled all of the duties of a town planner. Matthew reviews plans, creates maps, is responsible for zoning enforcement which keeps our Town beautiful, issuing building permits, works with citizens to resolve issues, and *many* other duties. It would be difficult for any manager to successfully lead their team while attempting to perform these duties. In fact, past managers relied on a number of staff members and outside consultants to do the work that a planner now provides. Hiring consultants to do this work adds additional costs to the Town and consultants do not have the accountability of a dedicated employee. Asking other staff members to fulfill duties for which they are not trained and which could expose the Town to legal and financial liability was not responsible. Currently, we have a much higher level of service and professionalism with a devoted Town Planner who is working to keep Jamestown viable and beautiful.

Matthew came to Jamestown from the City of Greensboro, where he worked in both the Planning Department and the Water Resources Department. Matt was also trained as an arborist and worked for several years in that field. Having training in multiple disciplines is a great benefit to the Town's citizens. Matt has been recognized for his many accomplishments and his work has been recognized by the State planning association. Here are just a *few* of the accomplishments of the Planning Department:

- Jamestown has received over \$93,000 in grant funds from grant applications prepared by the Planner.
- Jamestown's Planning Department received an award from the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association for the Town's Development Ordinance.
- Matthew is a Certified Planner with the American Institute of Certified Planners, designating his professionalism in his field.
- Matthew is also an International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Certified Arborist.
- Matthew helped Jamestown to become a Tree City USA and we have kept that designation for 4 years and received a Growth Award for the past 2 years from the Arbor Day Foundation.
- Matthew maintains certification in Stormwater Best Management Practices (BMP) Inspection and Maintenance - saving the Town valuable time and money in administering State laws.
- Matthew also brings experience in Geographical Information Systems (GIS) mapping software, allowing the Town to save valuable time and money in creating and maintaining maps required by the State and local laws.
- Matthew serves as a Commissioner on the Guilford County Parks & Recreation Board - representing Jamestown's interests at the County level.
- Matthew volunteers in our community through Rotary, United Way, Salvation Army, the Volunteer Center, and a host of other venues to "give back" to the residents.

It is difficult to list all of the responsibilities of the Town Planner because, as a small town, we continue to ask more of our employees. For example, at the October Council meeting, several citizens requested that the Town create a Historic Preservation Commission. While we believe it to be a worthy cause, the staff responsibilities for such efforts will fall entirely upon the Town Planner.

I'd like to list a few of the items Matthew does for our Town:

- reviewing development plans for compliance with local, state, and federal laws
- meeting with property owners to answer questions about a myriad of topics
- reviewing zoning requests
- issuing building permits
- seeking recognition as a Tree City USA
- assisting with Stormwater education and inspections
- working to obtain grant funding for additional sidewalks and parks
- working to lure appropriate businesses to Jamestown to expand our tax base
- represents Jamestown as a Guilford County Parks & Recreation Commissioner
- updates plans and ordinances required by the State as well as to keep Jamestown as the type of community we desire it to be
- assisting citizens with tree questions, as Matthew is a Certified Arborist
- creating and updating maps using GIS software
- promoting Jamestown through civic efforts and in professional capacities throughout the State

I've also been asked how the Planning Department impacts our budget and I have seen several emails which would lead you to believe that our Town Planner is overpaid. Those emails are quite misleading and the fact is that we often do studies to ensure that our pay grades are comparable with other towns our size, with our demographic qualities, and which have similar staffing levels as Jamestown. I think it worthy to note that the Planning Department's budget for expenditures this year was approximately 33% **less** than the year prior. Matthew is aware of the economic issues that everyone is facing and presents a fiscally responsible budget for his department. To put it into perspective, the budget for the Planning Department this year is only about \$95,000. Some expenditures would remain for the Planning Department even if there were no Town Planner. With such a wide range of professional services, expertise, and dedication for such a minimal investment, I cannot understand why anyone would not be proud to have a Town Planner in Jamestown.

With our location between High Point and Greensboro, it is imperative that we have a dedicated employee with the expertise in the planning field to help us safeguard Jamestown's interests relating to growth, services, and environmental issues. I have heard many citizens and candidates for the Town Council express a desire for the Town to 1)enhance our downtown area, 2)keep neighborhoods beautiful, 3)consider changes to our ordinances, 4)consider appropriate development, 5)consider appropriate annexation opportunities, and 6)expand our sidewalks. Without a Town Planner, these projects would be difficult to accomplish. I urge anyone who has not met our Town Planner to make an appointment to meet with him and discuss your concerns. I trust that you will agree that we are truly fortunate to have someone with Matthew's experience and expertise available to help Jamestown maintain its charm while planning for our future.