

# How Former Teachers Revamped Public Participation in Planning in Summit County

Madlyn McDonough

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(Photo: Summit County, UT)

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By: Maddy McDonough, Planner in Summit County, UT

His name was Shamar – a bright, smiling, and contagiously positive (most of the time) fifth grader living in East New York, Brooklyn. Though possessing all the social skills a kid could ever hope for, Shamar was missing something. He couldn't read. Then there was Tyreek – a kid so smooth-talking Louis Armstrong would be jealous. A few years older than his classmates, Tyreek was repeating fifth grade hoping to improve his first-grade reading level. A few neighborhoods and a few years apart, there was Kelese who had the toughest exterior but was unflinchingly loyal. She struggled through hours of remedial lessons as a sixth grader trying to bridge the gap.

Working as an educator in Brooklyn and Los Angeles, it became clear that the design of our cities, neighborhoods, and communities has a profound impact on people's lives. Because of their zip code, Shamar, Tyreek, and Kelese didn't have access to safe, affordable housing, libraries, parks, or grocery stores carrying fresh fruit and

vegetables. Seeing the impact of planning on people is what led to my career shift.

Though a far cry from city life and teaching literacy, the Planning Lab is a way to use my skills as an educator to build a community that is better connected and more empowered to make a difference.

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*"I am left with a greater understanding of how our voices can influence decision makers. I feel better informed and [find myself] wanting even more knowledge." – Planning Lab Participant, Fall 2023.*

Summit County, Utah is the tenth largest county in Utah with a population of about 43,000 people. Although the entire County is rich with natural and recreation resources, the western and eastern sides have historically differed in development pressures. With ski resorts and hundreds of miles of trails, the Snyderville Basin has experienced many of the housing, transportation, and affordability challenges facing other gateway communities for decades. However, Eastern Summit County is only recently experiencing those same hurdles. Summit County residents in the Basin and the Eastern side are now both trying to understand how to protect the places they love while still proactively planning for the future.

Local governmental processes, including planning, are something of a mystery to most people. And this lack of understanding can lead to feelings of frustration and mistrust. As an educator, I thought I could improve this by developing a course for those who want to learn more. Seeking additional resources and expertise, I reached out to the nearby University of Utah MCMP program to find interested students that could help make this dream a reality. Interestingly, another former teacher turned planning student shared the same love of public outreach and helped to develop the award-winning [Summit County Community Planning Lab](#).

The goal of the Planning Lab is to empower community members to be more involved in shaping the future of Summit County. It is an 11-week, in-person course designed for community members, leaders, business owners, and other stakeholders who want to be more engaged in and better understand processes that drive local planning and land use policy decisions. Throughout the course, guest speakers and Summit County staff members provide information about planning in general and about planning specifically in Summit County. Session topics include the history of planning, transportation planning, urban design, meaningful engagement in the

public process, and even a lesson on GNAR communities. The course concludes with a science fair-like presentation presented by participants and about any planning topic, issue, or proposal to County officials, local press, and the larger community.

Certainly not the first of its kind, the Planning Lab is just one way for community members to directly shape the future of their communities. Currently, the Planning Lab runs twice a year. Future changes might include fully-remote classes or one-day intensive workshops. So far, two graduates of the Planning Lab have gone on to become Planning Commissioners, one has been appointed to public office, and two more are currently seeking either election or appointment.

Although the Planning Lab required lots of upfront work to develop curriculum and structure activities, less prep-work is required with each semester, and it ends up to be a similar work-load to weekly planning commission presentations. Regardless, the Planning Lab has been worth every ounce of effort for no other reason than simply getting passionate community members together to discuss the communities they care so much about.



**Maddy McDonough, MS, MCMP**, is a life-long learner, educator, and planner with Summit County, Utah and the co-creator and instructor of the Community Planning Lab. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre from Loyola Marymount University, a Master of Science in Teaching from Fordham University, and a Master of City and Metropolitan Planning from the University of Utah. With over a decade of experience in community building, Maddy specializes in developing interactive and meaningful opportunities for community engagement. Readers are welcome to [visit the website](#) for more information about the Planning Lab.