You know APA as a membership organization, with 40,000 members the last time I checked. You know APA as a conference convener: The National Planning Conference is the largest gathering of planners anywhere on the planet—the 2018 conference just concluded in New Orleans with nearly 6,000 planners in attendance. And you know that APA offers many more benefits and services (which I’ll leave to the experts in the membership department to explain at another time.)

What you may not realize is that APA is a source of cutting-edge applied research. APA has three national research centers, respectively focusing on hazards planning, planning and community health, and green communities. You have probably read blogs or attended webinars sponsored by these centers, and may have seen their published reports. In this column, let’s take a look at a handful of projects undertaken by the three centers. A common thread is that these centers produce practical tools, and they do so in concert with an array of national partners.

THE HAZARDS PLANNING CENTER is managed by Shannon Burke. In Burke’s words, “The name of the game in hazards planning is integrating mitigation into local plans and planning practices.” The center’s work is particularly topical, given the ever-increasing frequency and severity of wildfires, floods, landslides, and hurricanes. It receives funding from a variety of sources, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. An example of a PAS Report produced by this center, Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery: Next Generation, is available at planning.org/research/postdisaster. Burke’s assessment of hazards planning—that it must be integrated into local plans and practices—is at work in the center’s development of a flood-risk assessment tool for community engagement. Developed using the software platform CommunityViz, this tool has been applied to three sites in Downers Grove, Illinois, where citizens were shown how built environmental features like rain gardens or patios affect the on-site impact of flooding. The end product is a technical report and a template in CommunityViz that can be applied to other locations (planning.org/nationalcenters/hazards/innovations). FEMA, the funder, looks at this as a best practice for hazard mitigation planning.

THE PLANNING AND COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER is managed by David Rouse, FAICP. APA’s managing director of Research and Advisory Services, following the move of the center’s long-time manager Anna Ricklin, AICP, to Fairfax County, Virginia’s health department. This center’s work is based on the idea...
that planners can help create places that promote health and safety.

Perhaps its best-known project is Plan4Health, a three-year initiative funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with the American Public Health Association as a partner. Plan4Health provided 35 communities with grants to enhance local capacity to improve health using planning strategies. The strategies focused on access to healthy food and physical activity.


Given a personal interest in traffic calming, my favorite project of the center was done by one of the Plan4Health grantees, the Healthy Eating Active Living partnership in St. Louis. This effort applied pop-up traffic calming (temporary measures like old tires made into planters constricting the right-of-way) to St. Louis neighborhoods, as described in the publication Slow Your Streets: A How-to Guide for Pop-up Traffic Calming (planning.org/events/eventsingle/9109284). Traffic calming has proven to increase walking and bicycling, which is why it comes up in connection with public health; APA has also published (along with the American Society of Civil Engineers) the U.S. Traffic Calming Manual.

THE GREEN COMMUNITIES CENTER is managed by Deputy Research Director Jennifer Henaghan, AICP. It has a broader focus than the other centers, covering everything from green infrastructure to renewable energy to the planning implications. (In this column, I am full of potpourri and have decided to continue on with Plan4Health instead of just mentioning it in passing. I will soon correct that.)

The Green Communities Center, in partnership with the National League of Cities and other organizations, convened a symposium in October 2017 on the planning implications of autonomous vehicles for cities and regions. The event brought together 85 top thinkers on the subject to develop a playbook for planners to “maximize the potential benefits and minimize the potential negative consequences” associated with the technology. APA now hosts a KnowledgeBase collection (one of 41 currently available on various different topics), a searchable database of AV articles, reports, plans, and other resources. APA also produced a report of the symposium, with a collection of land use and transportation strategies and other actions planners can take (planning.org/resources/av).

APA is also home to the Research and Advisory Services Department, which conducts research outside the focus areas of the three centers. One example is Smart Codes: Model Land-Development Regulations (planning.org/publications/report/9026880), which includes 21 model codes on a variety of topics promoting the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Smart Growth Principles. In another example, APA and AARP are currently planning to conduct a joint research project on accessory dwelling units. Paraphrasing Rouse: APA aspires to become the go-to place for applied planning research that produces resources and tools planners can use.

It looks to me like it already is.

—Reid Ewing

Ewing is a distinguished professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah, an associate editor of the Journal of the American Planning Association, and an editorial board member of the Journal of Planning Education and Research, Landscape and Urban Planning, and Cities. He is the coauthor with Steve Brown of the U.S. Traffic Calming Manual, published by APA. More than 60 past Research You Can Use columns are available at mrc.cap.utah.edu/publications/research-you-can-use.