

Urban Planning for a Better Future: Insights from an International Collaboration

Rick Kos, AICP

Research Associate, MTI

Practitioner in Residence & Graduate Advisor, Dept. of Urban and Regional Planning, SJSU

April 2023

In early April 2023 a group of 12 visiting German urban planning students and their professor spent a week exploring sustainable urban and regional development in the San Francisco Bay Area. [Professor Karina Pallagst](#) and her students traveled from the Rheinland-Pfalzische Technical University ([RPTU](#)), a public research university in the city of Kaiserslautern, to meet with urban planners throughout the Bay and see firsthand some of the major projects being undertaken here.

Prof. Pallagst secured EU funding for a four-year study that brings together research teams from Europe, the USA, Mexico, and Japan. These teams investigate, in an interdisciplinary manner, progressive approaches to improving quality of life, fostering sustainable open spaces, and climate change resilient urban planning policies. Her students from RPTU's undergraduate and graduate programs share these interests and are at different stages in their studies of urban and environmental planning. During their week in the Bay Area, the group met with planners and urban designers from SPUR, Urban Field Studio, the City of Palo Alto, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Authority, and the City of Mountain View.



Prof. Karina Pallagst (left) leads a discussion with her RPTU students and graduate urban planning students at San José State University.

By all accounts, their visit to San José on April 5 was a particular highlight. To support global information exchange in building a sustainable transportation future and foster international partnerships, the [Mineta Transportation Institute](#) (MTI) reached out to MTI Research Associate [Rick Kos, AICP](#) to host his German colleagues as a faculty member in the [Dept. of Urban and Regional Planning](#) at San José State University ([SJSU](#)). After

arriving in San José via Caltrain, SJSU urban planning students met their RPTU German counterparts for a lively discussion of approaches to urban planning in both countries, with a focus on a shared goal of building a sustainable transportation future. The American students expressed great admiration for Germany's advanced multimodal network while the German students wanted to learn more about

US-style community engagement techniques in the urban planning process. They also expressed surprise at the lack of regional and federal-level planning mechanisms in the US, in contrast with highly centralized land use planning approaches in their home country.



The German visitors enjoy a 'working lunch' discussion with staff of the San José Dept. of Transportation

Together, the group walked to San José's City Hall where they marveled at the view from the 18th floor while chatting with Acting Deputy Director for the City of San José Department of Transportation, Jessica Zenk, and members of her team. The lofty vantage point provided the perfect opportunity to discuss the city's tremendous post-war growth and expansion, revitalization and urban village planning projects in the downtown

core, and the impact of the city's urban growth boundary to preserve the green hillsides that frame San José. The RPTU students asked insightful and challenging questions to better understand the city's low-density development pattern as well as the Downtown West project spearheaded by Google. One of the German students was so taken with the architecture of City Hall and the sweeping views that he half-jokingly requested a job with the city!



MTI Research Associate Rick Kos, AICP (second from right) leads the German visitors on a walking tour of San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood.

Another highlight for the RPTU group's visit was a walking tour through San Francisco's Financial District with SFMTA transportation planners Jen Wong, Casey Hildreth, and Mark Dreger. This team manages

the city's Livable Streets group which is part of the agency's Streets Division. Beginning at the Ferry Building and ending at the stunning, five-acre rooftop Salesforce Park, the walking tour included visits to projects related to the [Embarcadero Enhancement Program](#). This program seeks to improve safety, mobility, connectivity, and accessibility for all users of The Embarcadero, which serves as a major transit corridor, tourist destination, marine-oriented commercial district, and public recreation area. The guides also focused on two of the city's Livable Streets efforts: the [Transbay Howard Quick-Build Project](#) and Embarcadero Quick-Build Project. Once these projects are approved, designed, and implemented, people traveling by bike will have a continuous and protected bike lane on Howard Street in both directions from The Embarcadero to 11th Street, nearly two miles. In addition to the bikeway, this project will also implement other pedestrian, greening, and transit improvements throughout the corridor.

The tours and conversations enjoyed by all during the RPTU group's visit will continue. MTI Research Associate Rick Kos and Prof. Pallagst have already discussed future visits, with Rick considering the development of a study-abroad course for his students in Summer 2024 to explore German approaches to multi-modal transportation planning and sustainable regional-level planning. Rick notes: "I was thrilled when MTI's Deputy Executive Director (and my long-time SJSU colleague) Hilary Nixon connected me with Prof. Pallagst and her students! Not only did their visit give me a chance to practice my very rusty German, but it also gave the American and German planning students opportunities to discuss the forces that will shape their careers as well as progressive solutions to address the pressing problems of the coming decades. Plus, the RPTU students' enthusiasm during their visit was infectious. What a great time we had!"