

City of Calistoga  
Planning Commission  
**Agenda Item Summary**

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<b>MEETING DATE</b>	February 27, 2019
<b>AGENDA ITEM</b>	<b>Discussion: Innovation in staff reports and seeking Commission insights</b>
<b>STAFF CONTACT</b>	Zach Tusinger, Senior Planner
<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>	Receive presentation from Professor Bonnie Johnson from the University of Kansas and conduct discussion session regarding innovation in staff reports.

**To:** City of Calistoga Planning Commission  
**From:** Bonnie J. Johnson, PhD, AICP, School of Public Affairs and Administration, University of Kansas  
**Date:** Feb. 7, 2019  
**RE:** Study Session - Innovation in the Everyday: Avant-garde Staff Reports – Seeking Commissioners and Planners’ Insights

**Description of Research Project**

Thousands are written every year, but how many are read, understood, let alone, empowering?

The purpose of this research is to revamp a critical communication device in local government - staff reports. Staff reports are written typically by city or county planners in response to applications for rezonings, comprehensive plan amendments, variances, special use permits, site plans, or plats, among other things. Staff reports make their way to advisory boards, such as, planning commissions, historic preservation committees and then on to governing bodies, like city councils or county commissions who make the final, legally binding decisions on applications. Though planners and administrators write thousands of staff reports every month in the United States, there have been few scholarly publications on the topic, and one of those was my own study published in 2016.

This past summer I was an Integrated Arts Research Initiative (IARI) Fellow with the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas. I, undergraduate research assistant Savannah Wakefield, and museum staff Joey Orr and Jeffrey McKee worked on creating staff reports inspired by art. We created avant-garde staff reports using fashion thinking. Fashion designers create avant-garde pieces of clothing that may not be very wearable in hopes of inspiring ready-to-wear. We are creating avant-garde staff reports seeking to completely rethink every-day staff reports. We are using style boards (images of actual staff reports compiled into a poster), mood boards (images compiled into a poster to create a certain ambiance, but also to boost fresh thinking), and prototypes of avant-garde staff reports to open our eyes to other ways of thinking. We created avant-garde staff

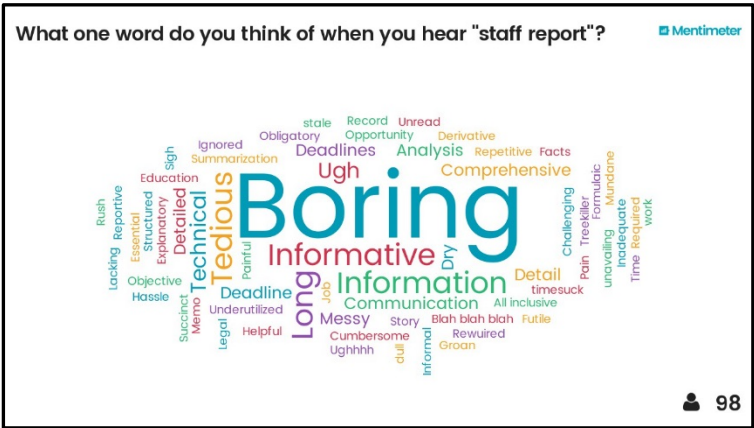


Figure 1 – Word Cloud of Audience Texts, National Planning Conference Session, "Leading with Staff Reports", May 8, 2017

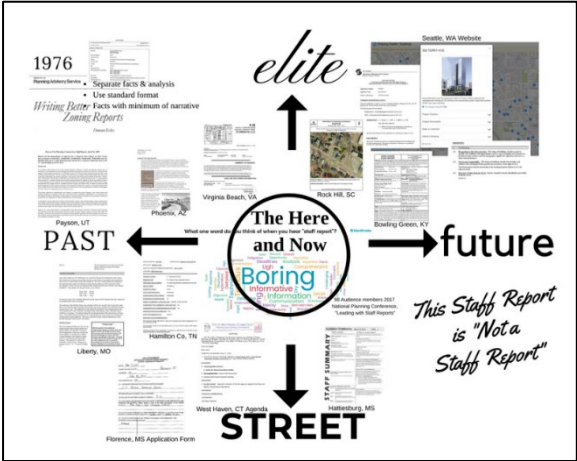


Figure 2- Style Board of Staff Reports

reports in the form of long and short videos, a game board, newsletters, a collage, a mobile, and an e-book.

I am now testing the avant-garde staff reports from the IARI fellowship through focus groups and interviews of planning commissioners and planners. The first focus group was with the Mainland and Islands planning commissions in Glynn County, Georgia in August of 2018. My second was with the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission in November of 2018. In early 2019, I will conduct more focus groups and interviews with other commissions and planners recruiting them from each region: northeast, southeast, middle of the country, northwest, and southwest. The commissioners and planners will evaluate formats, how the staff reports are presented, and rethink staff reports in hopes of improving their readability, effectiveness, and usefulness. I am hoping that with your help I can turn these avant-garde staff reports into “ready-to-wear” (practical yet interesting) staff reports.

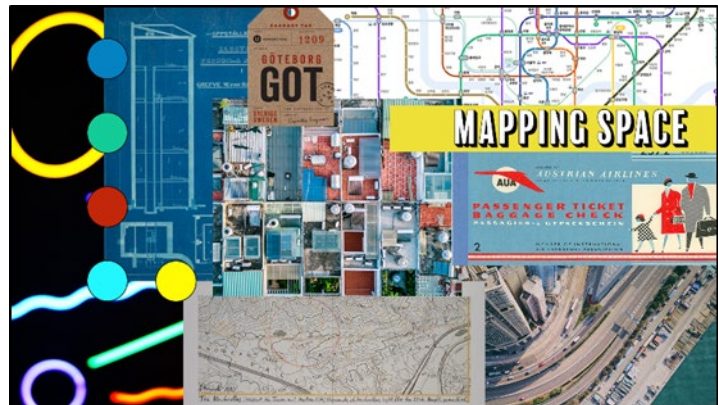


Figure 3- Mood Board - Staff Report as Ticket to the Future

### Study Session – What to expect?

I am looking for your opinions about what makes for a “good” staff report. However you define that. I will be collecting your thoughts at the study session on Feb. 27<sup>th</sup>. I hope the overview of staff reports and the more avant-garde staff reports you will see in an introductory video and in the link provided below will spark your suggestions and perhaps some unexpected ideas. The link below is a folder with different components or homework for you to do before the Feb. 12<sup>th</sup> session. The directions of what to look at, and in what order, are as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> - Watch video of staff report overview (or read presentation notes) – video is 36 minutes on YouTube.

2<sup>nd</sup> - Take a look at a typical staff report from Lawrence, KS – this example forms the basis for some of the avant-garde staff reports you will see.

3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> - Try out the same Lawrence, KS case but these two staff reports have a bit more style (written by two planning students).

5<sup>th</sup> - Try some new ways of thinking about staff reports through a style board and mood boards.

6<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report based on the Lawrence, KS example, which is a game board.

7<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report as a mobile.

8<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report that is minimalist.

9<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report as a newsletter.

10<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report as a video staff report (there is a long version and short version).

11<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report as a collage.

12<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report as “fancy” newsletter.

13<sup>th</sup> - An avant-garde staff report as an e-book.

Here is a link to the resources 1 – 13:

[https://kansas-my.sharepoint.com/:f:/g/personal/bojohjohn\\_home\\_ku\\_edu/EmUOdGcUDz5CmolTq71zQ-cBIH53uCV7kjTgFbAYqFFqA?e=5CzgOo](https://kansas-my.sharepoint.com/:f:/g/personal/bojohjohn_home_ku_edu/EmUOdGcUDz5CmolTq71zQ-cBIH53uCV7kjTgFbAYqFFqA?e=5CzgOo)

You will see in the online packet of information a “consent form” and a form for “notes”. The Consent Form is to give me permission to conduct a focus group of the Commission and planners and collect your thoughts. We will have forms for you to sign at the meeting. The form describes the research and tells you who to contact if I do not perform the research in an ethical manner. The other form for “notes” is just that, for you to take notes as you look over the items in 1 – 13.

At the meeting, I will assume you have looked over the materials and that you are ready to jump in with ideas. I will ask you the following questions:

- What do you like or appreciate about staff reports today?
- Do you have any worries or concerns about staff reports today?
- New information – Did the avant-garde staff reports (mobile, game board, minimal, newsletter, video, collage, e-book) spark any new ideas or unexpected ideas for what staff reports could be like?
- How do you use staff reports in your decision-making? Could that change if staff reports changed? How or how not?
- Of the various staff reports you saw in the materials given before the meeting, what parts did you like? Not like?
- How should staff reports be made available? Paper? Podcast? Video? Online? Poster? Other ways?
- Is there anything I have not asked about but you would like to share about staff reports?
- What are your hopes and wishes for staff reports?

I will get everyone’s thoughts on the questions at the meeting. I will take notes on a flipchart and record the meeting. Let’s see if we can reinvent “the staff report”.

**Thank you for your assistance in this project, which could improve the work of commissions across the country.**