



## Local News

### Q&A: Trevor Thomas

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Trevor Thomas is a transportation planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. Don Campbell / H-P staff

#### *Self-confessed nerd finds niche in urban planning*

**By RALPH HEIBUTZKI - H-P Correspondent**

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**BENTON HARBOR** - Trevor Thomas has taken the long route to becoming an associate with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

Thomas, 29, recently finished a master's degree in urban planning from the University of Michigan, where he completed a bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering. He is about to complete his first year with the SWMPC.

Thomas recently sat down with H-P Correspondent Ralph Heibutzki to discuss what made him shift gears, how he still taps his inner "physics nerd," and what a single urban planner does on their downtime.

### **How do we get from aerospace engineering to urban planning?**

I picked aerospace engineering originally because I really liked math, and especially physics, in high school. I guess I was kind of a physics nerd. I read Stephen Hawking, Brian Greene, stuff like that. ... I picked aerospace engineering just because I wasn't really confident that I wanted to be a physicist. ...

Pretty early on, I realized that (engineering) just wasn't for me. I didn't really have any passion for aeronautics. It's really interesting work to a lot of people, and I can definitely understand the value in it, but it just wasn't for me.

After I graduated, I took some time to figure out exactly what I wanted to do, and got to urban planning. I saw it as a way to do work that is really meaningful, really important, and still be able to use some of my undergrad degree .... but apply it to a different end.

### **Was there a moment that crystallized the decision to do the things you're doing now?**

I wouldn't say that there was any one epiphany. There's no blinding flash of light that showed me the particular career path I wanted to take - just readings and books. This is probably a formative moment for a lot of planners: reading Jane Jacobs' "The Death and Life of Great American Cities."

### **What was in it that particular book that spoke to you?**

She did a really good job of showing just how neighborhoods work, and how the function of a neighborhood is so tightly tied to the physical structure, and how that impacts the quality of life that people have.

### **So what brought you to this area, and what do you find attractive about being here? Ann Arbor's quite a bit busier.**

Well, I just thought it was a really attractive job opening. It was a chance to get a position of actually working with transportation projects. In terms of the area, obviously, there's a lot of physical beauty around here. It's really nice being on Lake Michigan.

I'm really attracted to the diversity of the area - I'm working within a small city setting, but there's also a lot of outlying rural areas. It's interesting to see how urban planning techniques and ideas can be used in both of those settings. Rural areas tend to get neglected in a lot of urban studies.

### **Is being aware of the long-range picture an important part of succeeding in this kind of job?**

Right, absolutely, and also, we're not elected officials. Our job is to inform people as to what we think are good transportation priorities to have, encourage what we consider better transportation options. But we can't force anything down anybody's throat. We're not going to go and do anything that people don't want to see built.

### **Do you fit the stereotype of urban planners being dowdy, studious, overly "techno."**

I think I might fulfill that stereotype. I'm still reading my popular physics books. Aside from that, I've gotten into swimming the last couple years. I try to make it to the Y as often I can. I go to the Livery a fair bit, just having a beer and talking with friends. I mean, that's pretty normal stuff. But definitely, you'll catch me "nerding out" on a Friday evening with some pop science books. I definitely try to strike a social balance, though. That's important.

### **So it's not a date killer, at this point?**

No (laughs), it hasn't killed any yet. We'll see. There's usually something that kills it (a date), long before I get around to (mentioning) me being an urban planner.

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