

Press Release

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On February 10th, Andy Cassano, CEO of Nevada City Engineering, Inc. in Nevada City, celebrated 40 years in his career as a private sector City/Regional Planner and Land Surveyor. With the exception of a 2 year U.S. Army stint as an information technology specialist, Cassano's entire practice has been based in Nevada County, while also serving the surrounding counties of Placer, Yuba, Sierra, Plumas, and Butte.



Cassano, a native son, was born in Miners Hospital in Nevada City, grew up in Camptonville, and attended Nevada Union High School and Sierra College. In 1969, Ken Baker launched his career in the surveying and engineering profession by hiring him to work at Cranmer Engineering, Inc. in Grass Valley.

Over his career, Cassano has seen Nevada County grow from 20,000 in population to around 100,000 today. Cassano said that in the beginning, the only primary industries were resource based, including timber, ranching, and mining. But Cassano caught the career wave of a new land resource based industry, growth itself: the creation of places; places to live, work, play, learn, govern, worship, and be healed.

Cassano began work as a cadastral draftsman using ink and hand lettering on vellum and linen. He quickly learned field surveying, survey computer operation, and customer service. He worked extensively on the surveying, mapping, and construction staking of Alta Sierra, Tahoe Donner, and portions of Lake Wildwood and Lake of the Pines. All were envisioned as recreational subdivisions but all except much of Tahoe Donner quickly showed that their true market was to retirees from urban areas. "A good mixture of 'equity immigrants' from the liberal Bay Area and conservative Southern California soon led to vigorous community debates that have never really stopped," he observed. "But all who have come contribute greatly to the community through volunteerism, local shopping, and general support," he added.

After seeing early subdivision processes create some lots that were clearly defective building sites, Cassano began to take an interest in community planning. He furthered his observation and study of land use and growth patterns in Europe while serving in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam era. He found the Old World village clustering, open space conservation, public transportation, and low automobile ownership patterns impressive and inspiring. "I realized that these people had been learning how to live in sustainable ways centuries before the automobile," he said.

After military service, Cassano went back to work at Cranmer Engineering, Inc., under Ken Baker, as an all around draftsman, computer operator, and field surveyor. He applied his military skills to run the company's computerized client billing and payroll. When Baker left to establish Nevada City Engineering, Inc. in 1978, Cassano took over the position of Surveying and Planning Director under Keith Sauers, the Chief Engineer and Jim Cranmer, the company owner.

Cassano had already become an accomplished planner and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) practitioner processing land use permits as California struggled to learn and apply environmental review to all projects. He continued honing his skills as a planner adept in obtaining planning permit entitlements for both the private and public sector.

In addition to his extensive private sector consulting, Cassano served contractually as the first official City Planner for the City of Nevada City, a town nationally recognized for its historic preservation, cultural diversity, and quality of life standards. He was originally hired to oversee the permitting of the Grass Valley Group campus.

During that City contract, he became versed in small town planning, historic architecture, historical preservation, affordable housing, general plan updates, housing element implementation, and code enforcement. He oversaw technical studies to assist in the conservation and viable use of the Miners' Foundry and Nevada Theatre and to suggest ways to promote the Seven Hills Business District. He advised the Planning Commission and City Council during construction of a number of community entry-statement buildings, including 505 Coyote Street and David Vertin's Uren Street stables.

He provided environmental planning consulting, writing environmental impact reports, staff reports, and findings for the Nevada County Campus of Sierra College and the City of Grass Valley Wastewater Master Plan, among other projects. For 17 years, Cassano provided regional consulting out of his "mom and pop" office in Nevada City. His employees and office mates included his wife Kathy, son Ryan, and friends/colleagues Cindy Siegfried (now City Planner of Nevada City) and Keith Sauers, the founder of Sauers Engineering, Inc.

Cassano also provided computer programming services, combining his military experience, the personal computer, and database programming language to write custom software applications. These included systems for professional billing, file indexing,

assessment spreads, mitigation monitoring, growth projections, and various engineering applications.

In 1998, Cassano merged his practice with Nevada City Engineering, Inc. to rejoin many friends that were co-workers at the start of his career. These included company founders Ken Baker and Tom Lott. Lott and Cassano attended Nevada Union High School together. Baker retired in 2004 selling his interest to Cassano, Bill Green, and John Baker, while Lott retained his company interest. Cassano was appointed CEO/managing partner. All of the owners are Nevada Union High School alumni. Nevada City Engineering, Inc. continues to provide all planning, civil engineering, and surveying services to private and public clients.

Cassano said “Planning is an amazing combination of science, art, law, and politics. It has been so interesting to make case studies of each major project that has come forth in the community over the years. First there is the proposal, then the professional impact assessment, then the opponent/proponent debates, and finally, the political outcome. It is a sometimes painful but almost always worthwhile exercise to meld competing community visions. It’s been good to live in a region where people love their communities enough to worry about doing the right thing.”

Cassano has been an active land surveyor throughout his career, helping all manner of clients with boundaries, easements, design surveys, construction surveys, land divisions, and lot line adjustments. He said, “I would have loved to have worked in the field throughout my career, but there were just too many excellent field surveyors around. I could better compete in the consulting market with my survey supervision, customer service, business management, and planning skills.”

Cassano stays current on the latest planning trends of new urbanism, sometimes called traditional neighborhood design (TND) and the clear need to create more mixed land use arrangements to minimize new traffic impacts. “Projects on level land can easily be designed toward TND concepts,” he said. “But in hill country, it is necessary to be more creative and to sort out conflicting goals and constraints. You can’t build a building to street level if it requires a 50’ high cut bank behind, and often some of the existing native trees and site features deserve preservation.”

Even after 40 years, Cassano does not visualize retirement. “My career is just too much fun,” he contends. “I love the land and environment, of course, but I suppose the very best satisfaction comes from the people: my partners, my co-workers, my clients, and all of my community associates in title, real estate, local government, and special districts. I count my clients as my friends. I come to believe in their causes and visions. And the professionalism and excellence of the people that I interact with is always inspiring to me. My favorite American heroes mostly live nearby.”