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Planners' Web Accessibility Guide

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AUTHOR

Jing Zhang, FAICP, is a transportation planner at the Morgantown Monongalia MPO. Jing's journey into web development began in 2004 with Adobe Dreamweaver, sparking an early interest in building websites. In 2019, Jing expanded his skills by diving into PHP, MySQL, JavaScript, HTML, CSS, and Python. Alongside traditional coding, he has also gained extensive experience working with no-code and low-code platforms such as Google Sites, Wix, Webflow, FlutterFlow, and Bubble. Jing has built and maintained websites for various initiatives within the APA community, the MPO he worked for, and his side projects. Jing is the founder of Urban Planning Post (www.UrbanPlanningPost.com) and the Planning Community (www.Planning.Community)

The "What"

This guide is a toolkit for planners to ensure digital outreach is inclusive. It provides a straightforward way to audit digital products to ensure the planning process is legally compliant and truly representative.

The "Why"

Planners need to make project website accessible for at least four reasons:

1. Laws like the ADA apply to websites.
2. Equity is a part of AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (Section A: Principles to Which We Aspire).
3. Sites built for accessibility are easier for everyone.
4. It feels good to build an accessible website.

The Planner’s Checklist

Use the following table to check the website's accessibility.

Element	What to watch
Contrast	Eye-ball the content. If the text is light gray on a white background or the font is very thin, it fails. Text must pop clearly against the background to be readable for everyone.
Form Labels	Every input field (like a "Name" or "Email" box) must have a visible label. Screen readers rely on these labels to tell users exactly what information to type into each box.
Images	Meaningful Alt Text is mandatory. Alt text provides a text description of the image for people who cannot see it. How to check: Right-click an image and select Inspect. Look for alt="exaple". If it is empty (alt="") or says something useless like alt="image123", it fails.
Buttons / Links	Labels must be descriptive. Use "Download the Zoning Map" instead of "Click Here". The label should clearly state the purpose of the action.
Videos	Captions are required. All videos must have synchronized text at the bottom.
PDF	Open the PDF and try to highlight or search for a specific word. If you can’t select the text, it’s just an image and is invisible to screen readers.

Element	What to watch
Text Resizing	Many users with low vision zoom in to read. How to check: Press Ctrl and + (or Cmd and +) to zoom the page to 200%. If the text overlaps, disappears, or you have to scroll horizontally to read a single sentence, the site layout is broken.
Motion	Avoid flashing content, as this can trigger seizures. There also should have a pause/play toggle for auto-playing content.
Keyboard Test	Try to navigate the page using only the Tab key and Enter key. If you can't reach a button or a link without a mouse, the site is inaccessible.

Planning-Specific Challenges

The "Map" Problem

Interactive maps are notoriously difficult for screen readers. *Solution:* Always provide a text-based alternative (e.g., a searchable table or a list of projects) alongside the map.

Data Visualization

Don't rely on color alone to convey meaning in charts (e.g., "Red zones are high density"). *Solution:* Use patterns, textures, or direct labels to distinguish data points.

Procurement

- Ensure third-party engagement platforms are vetted for accessibility before using. Ask the vendor for a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT). This is a standard document that proves how their tool meets accessibility laws.
- Always include a clause in contract requiring all digital deliverables (websites, PDFs, maps) to meet WCAG 2.1 AA standards.
- Test the platform yourself. You should be able to navigate "interactive map" or "idea wall" with only your keyboard.

Social Media

Outreach happens on social media, but screen readers struggle with some posting habits. Do the following helps ensure better accessibility on social media:

- **Add Alt Text on Images**

  Every photo or graphic you post on Instagram, LinkedIn, or Facebook must have Alt Text. Use the "Advanced Settings" or "Edit Alt Text" button before you hit post to describe what is in the image.

- **Use CamelCase Hashtags**

  Capitalize the first letter of every word in a hashtag (e.g., #MainStreetPlan instead of #mainstreetplan). This allows screen readers to hear "Main Street Plan" instead of a jumble of letters.

- **Avoid Emoji Walls**

  Limit yourself to 1 or 2 emojis. A screen reader reads the full description of every emoji (e.g., "Smiling face with heart eyes") out loud. Too many emojis make your post unreadable.

Accessibility Statement

No system is perfect. You must provide a way for people to get help if they hit a wall. This shows a good-faith effort and provides a resolution path before a resident files a formal complaint.

Place a short statement in the footer of your project website."If you need this information in an alternative format or are having trouble using this site, please contact [Name] at [Email] or [Phone]."

The Tools

Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool

WAVE (Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool) is a visual tool that highlights accessibility issues directly on a webpage. It is a quick and effective way to identify errors and features for website accessibility.

WAVE adds icons directly on the webpage, showing:

- Errors (Serious issues that need to be corrected)
- Contrast errors (Specific contrast issues that need to be corrected.)
- Alerts (potential issues needing review)
- Features (accessible elements / good stuff)

- Structure (headings, landmarks / good stuff)

WAVE is free on https://wave.webaim.org/.

Contrast Checker

Contrast Checker developed by WebAIM provides a simple interface to validate that color combinations are readable for all users, particularly those with low vision or color blindness. It supports hex code entry and features an eyedropper tool to sample colors directly from a design or browser.

Contrast Checker is free on https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/