
CHAPTER

1

INTRODUCTION TO PLANNING

WILLIAM TONER

*Planning makes Denmark look good. . . .
The ugliness all got voted down in committee.*

—GARRISON KEILLOR

Introduction to This Text

The thing about planning is this: If it's done right, the result is often around for 100 years or more, to be enjoyed again and again by the thousands of people who will follow the planner. If it's done poorly, it's a 100-year error, annoying the thousands of people who will follow the planner.

Of course it's not always that simple or that dramatic. But even the minor decisions that local officials or planners make can have remarkable results. Take the matter of road curb cuts along a fairly well-traveled road. In Anaheim, California, subdivision residents turning onto



Richard Hedman and Fred Barr, Jr. (Art On Eighth Day, American Planning Association)

The Works of the Planner have a Permanence Not Found in Other Fields

2 Planning Made Easy

Katella Avenue face the normal hazards of oncoming traffic moving at 40-50 mph. That's bad enough, but within 100 feet or so on both sides of the road are three commercial driveways, each of which may be spilling cars onto Katella in either direction. Any driver pulling out of the subdivision must scan oncoming traffic as well as traffic from the three driveways before entering Katella. That's hazardous.

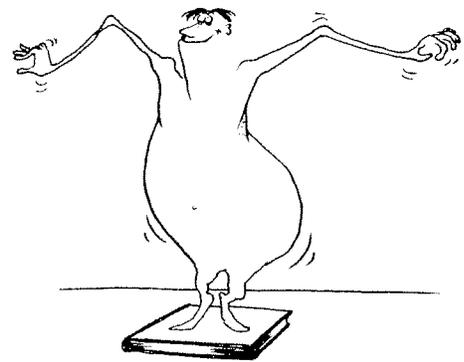
Roads like these are found all over the nation and it's instructive to note how they came to be such hazards. In 1950, traffic along Katella was light. There were few commercial establishments, mostly farmland adjoining the highway, and the road was safe. But over time, piece by piece, new developments emerged, traffic increased, and one by one additional road cuts were made. By 1993, the entire stretch was heavily developed and traffic loads were at

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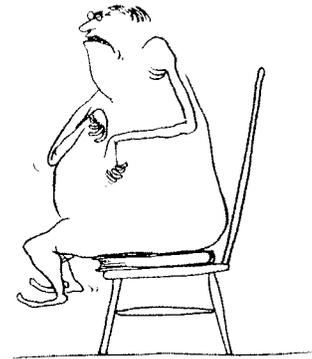
Richard Hedman and Fred Barr, Jr. (And On the Eighth Day, American Planning Association)



To Give Weight to Arguments



To Lend Stature to Your Argument



To Broaden Your Base of Reference

an all-time high. In the space of 33 years, a fairly safe and efficient road had evolved into one long and continuing traffic accident. A great and continuing hazard evolved through a simple matter of too many road cuts in too short a span.

Now note that any one of the road cuts, in and of itself, presented little hazard. It was only the accumulation of cuts that created the problem. Seemingly minor decisions, many of which are made by planners and planning commissioners, can lead to major results.

There are, of course, many decisions that have a dramatic effect in a very short time. Take the approval of a simple 25-unit subdivision. Once built, these homes, short of a disaster, will occupy that space for 120 years. So will the roads, sidewalks, sewer lines, and water lines. Small changes will undoubtedly be made, but the basic pattern will remain. Whatever the

local officials approved and the developer built, good or bad, will be evident in the year 2113. For 120 years, hundreds of people will rue or praise that work.

Change a single word in a zoning ordinance, and that change may reverberate for 20 or more years. It might change the entire look of your town or keep it just the same, it may start long-lasting neighborhood feuds or end them, it may increase the price of a new home or decrease the value of an old home. Just one word.

So planning is serious business, full of problems and full of great opportunities. It requires attention to detail—great attention to detail—while at the same time requiring a long look into the future, and figuring out how the future may be better than the present. Mostly it takes hard work, dedication, and huge amounts of common sense.

As authors we want to add a note on the text itself. Publishing an introduction to planning, zoning, subdivision regulations, and other planning topics for a national audience presented a practical problem for us: How do we describe planning tools in a general, simplified way without implying that what we say is exactly how it is done in every state and community. In fact, there are substantial and important differences. State law may permit, require, or prohibit particular practices. Even in the same state, planning practice may vary from community to community. Some states have adopted innovative new legislation that in effect redesigns the planning and zoning process, while others still follow model acts prepared in the 1920s.

Our approach is to present a basic, general model of planning and its tools that is essentially correct for a lot of places. The reader, and especially trainers, using these materials should be alert to this fact and must incorporate materials unique to the state or community.

MODULE 1: WHAT IS PLANNING?

The Process

Planning is the process through which we reach well considered decisions. In this sense, most every adult is a planner since the process used is much the same. Here are the typical steps in the process:

- Step 1. There is a problem—say we need a new car.
- Step 2. Collect information on new cars.
- Step 3. Compare the features of the various makes and models.
- Step 4. Pick one and buy it.
- Step 5. Over the years, evaluate the chosen car because, sooner or later, it's back to Step 1, and we need a new car.

That's the standard planning process. It may be approached in greater or lesser detail depending on the seriousness of the problem or the resources at hand, but the basic process remains the same.

So now let's look at it in more detail.

Step 1: Identify the Problem or the Opportunity. Note that we've added the word "opportunity" to our first step. That's an important point, since the first step in the process is an acknowledgement that there is a problem or an opportunity, or both. Further, given the complexity of towns, cities, and counties, there are multiple problems and multiple opportunities that need to be addressed. And these problems and opportunities change quite often.

Step 2: Collect Information on the Problems and Opportunities. Information is vital. Off-the-cuff planning on serious issues is typically a recipe for disaster, so considerable effort is given to gathering all the important information. This is something of a balancing act. Gathering more information can be used as an excuse to do nothing since information is seldom complete—there is always more to know. Thus, emphasis should be given to the critical or vital information on the problems or opportunities.

Step 3: Compare the Alternatives. This step really involves two actions: First, identify what the alternatives are. Having identified them, it is then important to compare them, one against the other, to identify the one that best addresses the problem or opportunity.

Step 4: Select a Plan and Put It to Work. In many ways, this is the most difficult and trying step in the planning process. Because plans are complex, putting them to work is no easy matter. It takes a great deal of effort over a long period to keep any plan in motion. And keeping a plan in motion leads us to the final step.

Step 5: Monitor Progress. As soon as a plan is complete, things change, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. Monitoring is important, not only to deal with change, but also to keep the plan on track. Should things go seriously amiss, it's back to Step 1, and time for a major revision. If the plan is working, leave it alone. The longer it works, the more powerful the conclusion.

This, then, is the process of planning—basically a five-step process. It is continuous. It is long-term. There are no shortcuts. But the benefits can be great indeed.

What process did you follow in the selection of your current home? Consider the five steps. Outline your thinking for each step and jot down a few notes on each. Did you follow all five? If so, the standard planning process is nothing new to you. (Exercise 1-1)

The Products

There are two basic products that emerge from the planning process—plans and regulations. The first is a blueprint, while the second is a tool. Plans represent goals, things to be achieved, while regulations represent the vehicle to reach these goals.



Richard Hedman (Step 1: Plan Again, American Planning Association)

Plans, generally speaking, are long-term—at least 5, and often 10 or 20 years—while regulations are made for the here and now. Yet the day-to-day decisions that are directed by regulations are designed to lead to the long-term goals. The plan represents where we want to go, and the regulations ensure that we are on the right track.

Think about this, for example. Two of the great planners of the late 19th century were Frederick Law Olmsted and his partner Calvin Vaux. In 1869, Vaux and Olmsted completed their general plan of Riverside, Illinois. It was a great plan, foreshadowing thousands of suburbs that would follow, full of winding streets, open space, modest homes, and a town center. In the 100-plus years that would follow, local officials in Riverside used local land-use regulations to keep the vision of Olmsted and Vaux. The vision is intact thanks to the day-to-day guidance that

local officials provided, and Riverside remains an outstanding example of what the combination of plan and regulation can do. Plan and regulation—the heart and soul of local planning.

But what exactly are these plans and regulations? What are their key features? How are they applied in practice?

For most communities the three key documents that form the planning effort are the comprehensive plan, the zoning ordinance, and the subdivision regulations. Other tools may include environmental regulations or economic development plans.

The Comprehensive Plan

This is the core document. It is the only document that considers all of the complex facets of a community, the things that, together, make up a town, city, or county. This means it considers neighborhoods, downtowns, industrial areas, as well as roads, highways, and bike trails. The comprehensive plan takes into account parks, open space, recreation, and the environment. Public services and utilities are also included, and maybe farmland, historic sites, and cultural amenities.

Yet the key feature of the comprehensive plan is that it treats all of these many subjects individually since all of these subjects together determine the makeup of the community.

The comprehensive plan typically reviews the current status of the community, identifies key problems and opportunities facing the community, and sets forth the community's goals and community development objectives. So the comprehensive plan usually contains detailed long-range plans for housing, business, transportation, public services, open space and recreation, and the natural environment.

These plans may contain maps and usually are filled with "policies"; that is, *statements* expressing an adopted policy position on a planning matter. For example, "The city will encourage the development of light industry within one mile of the interstate highway exchanges and discourage other locations."

Richard Hedman (Stop Me Before I Plan Again, American Planning Association)



Typically, the comprehensive plan also includes a land-use plan map that shows the location of various land-use activities. These long-range comprehensive plans, along with the map, specify the community's interest in regulating how land is used. The clarity and content of the complete comprehensive plan package is central to good planning.



The Zoning Ordinance

Once the comprehensive plan is approved by the planning commission and elected officials, the zoning ordinance is the key vehicle for putting the plan to work. The zoning ordinance is made up of two parts—a zoning map and a text of the regulations.

The zoning map designates every parcel of land within a specific zoning district. A community could have various zoning districts—residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, and so forth. A small town may have only three or four districts; a large city may have a dozen or more. The zoning text explains every zone on the map and describes all regulations pertaining to use and development of the property. For example, in Tower City, North Dakota, the residential district is limited to the following land uses: single-family homes, churches and schools, home occupations, and public parks.

The zoning ordinance also regulates development aspects such as minimum lot sizes, minimum setbacks, minimum side and rear yards, landscaping, fencing, signs, and parking. In this way, the zoning text sets descriptive standards for all zoning districts in a community.

The zoning ordinance (text and map) determines land uses throughout the community and controls some of the characteristics of those land uses. The zoning ordinance is used to achieve many goals of the comprehensive plan—the location of new neighborhoods, the population density of various areas, the preservation of historic areas, the location of commercial and industrial areas, the preservation of open space, the level of demand for various public services, the pattern of new development, and so forth.

When the zoning map and zoning text are developed from the detailed goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan, local officials put the plan to work by making proper zoning decisions. Over the long term, through hundreds or thousands of zoning decisions, steady progress is made toward the achievement of the goals of the comprehensive plan.

Subdivision Regulations

To understand subdivision regulations (and how they are different from zoning) let's take the case of a wooded parcel of land that is currently used for grazing. The land adjoins a new subdivision, and the owner of the wooded parcel, sensing development trends in the area, wants to convert the wooded land into a new subdivision.

The first step is to check the zoning on the parcel. If the current zoning is for residential use (or if the zoning is changed to allow residential use), the owner may then take the first step toward subdividing the property. But before the parcel may be subdivided, the owner must meet the standards for subdividing that are outlined in the subdivision regulations.

What are these standards? Think of what would need to happen before a single home could be built on the wooded parcel—streets, water lines, sewer lines, public utilities, storm water drainage, and so forth. Since these are of vital concern to the community, the subdivision regulation sets minimum standards for their placement and construction as a basic requirement for any proposed subdivision.

The subdivision regulation also governs the location and, sometimes, the shape of lots, as well as the patterns of streets, the location of parks or other public land within the subdivision, and perhaps minimum landscaping standards. It may also contain standards requiring that the subdivision be buffered from adjoining land uses, say by fencing or landscaping.

The actual process involves three stages: (1) sketch plan, (2) preliminary plat, and (3) final plat. In the first stage, local officials review a sketch plan of the subdivision provided by the developer. The objective is to determine whether the proposed subdivision meets the minimum requirements of the community in terms of its overall design; street pattern, number, size, and location of lots; and open space. If the sketch plan meets minimum standards, a preliminary plat is prepared.

The preliminary plat is the most important stage because here the real details are studied, discussed, and approved. Approval of the preliminary plat is tantamount to approval of the final plat. Thus considerable attention is devoted in this stage to topography, street design, lot lines and dimensions, drainage, entrances and exits, utilities, easements, and so on. In addition, the subdivision must meet the standards of the zoning district in which it is located.

In the last stage, a final plat is prepared. The final plat simply provides a further refinement of the approved preliminary plat.

Just as with the zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations are an extremely important tool in implementing the goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan related to new development. Like zoning, subdivision regulation puts the comprehensive plan to work on a day-to-day basis.

While the comprehensive plan, zoning ordinance, and subdivision regulations are the most important planning tools, a variety of other devices may be used to supplement them. These include capital improvements programs; plans for acquisitions of land for roads, parks, or areas with other public uses; and plans for special areas such as historic districts, a waterfront, or a unique natural or cultural resource, such as forest lands, agricultural lands, or downtowns. But all of these are an extension of and not a substitute for the three key documents: the comprehensive plan, the zoning ordinance, and the subdivision ordinance.