

The 21st Century Comprehensive Plan

by Michael Chandler

The last issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal* featured an excellent article by planning historian Larry Gerckens reviewing ten key events that helped shape the growth of cities and towns into the 20th Century.

After reading Gerckens' article, I started thinking about the future and what form planning and plans might take in the coming century. Although many factors will undoubtedly shape planning, I want to focus on five ways in which local plans are already starting to change as we near the new century.

1. Vision Driven. Comprehensive planning experienced a boom following World War II. In fact, most communities developed their initial land use plans during the 1950s. A look back at those plans reveals, in general, a problem driven approach. Problems and issues were identified, and solutions proposed.

The problem driven model continues to the present day, but with a new twist. Instead of beginning the planning process with a listing of issues and concerns, communities, through the use of a visioning exercise, craft a picture or image of what the locality intends to make of itself, what it wishes to achieve or become.

Once developed and adopted, the preferred vision becomes the rallying point or goal to be achieved. The resulting planning process outlines the sequence of events and actions the community will need to take if the preferred vision is to be

realized. [Editor's Note: For more on visioning, see Mike Chandler's two-part series, "Putting Vision in Our Plan," in PCJ #21 and 22 (Winter, Spring 1996).]

2. Thematic Based. Traditions in planning change slowly. For example, consider your comprehensive plan and its

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content. I would venture a guess that your plan features chapters or elements devoted to housing, transportation, community facilities, and the like. As a result of this style of organization, the reader, as well as the community, sometimes assumes each chapter or element is independent of the other.

To overcome this mindset, plans are beginning to reflect a thematic style. Instead of having discrete chapters addressing single topics, plans focus on broader themes such as balanced growth, the preservation of rural character, enhanced economic vitality, and so on. This style of integrated planning helps the reader better understand the interdependencies that are present in the community.

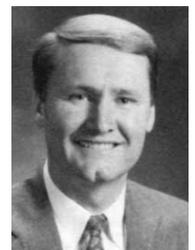
3. Collaborative Effort. For planning to be meaningful, citizens must be involved in the process. Planners, regardless of their personal talents and capabilities, working in isolation and apart from the clients of planning, will not be able to craft plans communities will embrace. A collaborative planning process provides a more open, inclusive, and interactive way of involving citizens and other "stakeholders."

4. Regional Focus. For much of this century, community land use plans were developed with little consideration shown for surrounding localities. Over the past decade, however, changes in technology, in business and economic systems, and in federal and state policies that bear on land use, have made clear that localities are interdependent. As such, localities are increasingly aware that they must work together to solve common problems. Inclusion of a regional assessment or impact strategy section in local plans — as well as broader efforts to ensure that neighboring communities' plans are consistent with each other — will undoubtedly become a more common practice in coming years.

5. Beyond Paper. Twenty-first century plans will also reflect the information age. In recent years, many communities have made use of local access television to introduce community planning issues to the broader public. Similarly, a number of communities are starting to use the Internet to post draft sections of their plans, as well as the final product. In the future, virtual reality images and computer simulations of land use changes will become commonplace, allowing people to actually "see" how the physical nature of their town or city might change in response to differing policies.

The next century promises to be an exciting time. It will be our challenge to make sure our plans remain dynamic and relevant. ♦

Michael Chandler is a Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Chandler also conducts planning commissioner training programs across the country, and is a frequent speaker at workshops. His column appears in each issue of the PCJ.



We hope to publish reactions to Mike Chandler's column in our next issue. *What direction do you see comprehensive plans (and planning) taking in the years ahead? Has your community shifted away from the "traditional comprehensive plan" in ways Chandler describes, or in other ways? Please mail or fax us your thoughts.*

Editor's Note: In our last issue, Mike Chandler outlined five trends in comprehensive planning as we near the new century. Mike spoke to plans becoming more: vision driven; thematic based; collaborative in nature; regionally focused; and reflective of information technologies, such as computer simulations. Some of the responses we received are set out below.



Responses to "The 21st Century Comprehensive Plan"

"Just a thought on the plans of the new information age. As more and more plans are taking advantage of this new technology — posting on the web, use of digital mapping, seeking input electronically — this provides planners and planning commission members [with the ability] to generate so much more, and immediate, citizen input. As two income households are all so busy... the ability to electronically review and comment on emerging plans is exciting.

Also, this process may well reduce the time frame of our plans. With the increased ability to update and produce plans electronically, we may well enter into an age of being able to produce plans more often with shorter planning horizons. Such plans may be able to have periodic updates on the implementation efforts of the goals, policies and objectives contained therein. We don't want to lose the long range view which is an important guidepost to keep; but, this can allow us to have fresh plans with the latest information, and with the most recent citizen input. All this is exciting stuff for planners and those who believe in citizen planning."

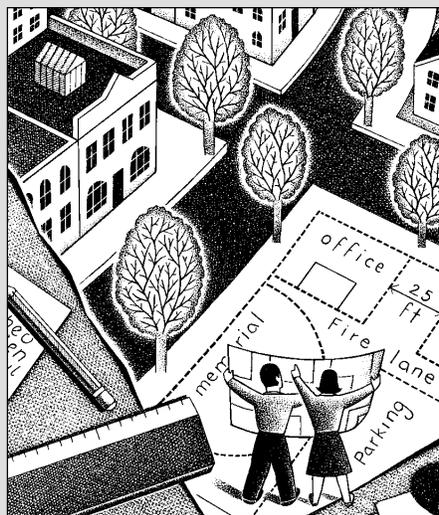
— Mike O'Leary, Enfield, Connecticut

"Mike's article on the 'look' of 21st century comprehensive plans was quite interesting and brought to mind several thoughts...

Each individual in the community should (like their right to vote) consider their role in the planning process to be an investment in theirs as well as their children's future. What could be worse than to sit at home watching the tube or surfing the net while your neighbors are down the block planning 'your' future. We are a democracy for a good reason, let's never forget what many people have given to assure our rights to participate in our government and our shared 'vision'. Get involved and welcome that involvement.

We planners should all consider that our plans are not read by the public as much as they should be, because in part we do not write them for popular reading. We are too technical, we use too much planning lingo, and we droll on about stuff that does not interest most Americans. I'm not advocating plans written like daytime soaps or romance novels, but we could write comprehensive plans that weave an interesting vision of the community's future using descriptive language and graphics that portray a place where people would like to live, work, raise families, recreate, and yes, pass away. Along the way, these plans could address the array of problems that need to be solved to reach this life."

— Gus Drum, Barboursville, West Virginia



"One way comprehensive plans are changing is that they are becoming more directly tied to the resulting zoning and regulations that are applied to specific parcels of land. Consistency requirements in many states have made the connection between the comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance a more direct link than in the past. This point is further reinforced by the fact that neighborhood groups are becoming more sophisticated when addressing planning issues. They have successfully brought litigation against local governments when zoning actions which were inconsistent with the comprehensive plan were taken."

— Bryan Stumpf, Indianapolis, Indiana

"Our experience is that while citizen involvement is the only way to do effective community planning, you must be prepared for this to lengthen the process. Citizens

must feel that they are truly a part of the process, and that means let them help lead it and work at their own pace. The plan will be completed when the citizens are ready to complete it, not because it is the end of the fiscal year."

— Jim Yarbrough, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

"I rather think there is a potential for more dramatic change in planning practice... driven partly by emerging technology, and largely by changes in the development industry.

For instance, I think that our cherished Euclidean zoning based on land use will diminish in importance, possibly to become simply a measuring system for economic studies of urban development. The technology is available now to capture actual land use by location and to estimate the 'fit' of proposed changes in land use into a community's plan, and the reality is that collaborative planning will drive the market for new development toward sites that provide accessibility to existing communities.

I think also that planning will become less preoccupied with regulation and more involved in developing the capacity of place-based communities to envision their own future. Mike's hits on collaborative and thematic planning err only by not going far enough. It's at the intersection of these trends that the exciting stuff is going to happen.

— Jerald Powell, Portland, Oregon

"While I agree that many hi-tech strategies (electronic plans, cd-rom, and so on) will become more commonplace, let's not forget that there are and will remain many 'low-tech' ways to be helpful and achieve goals. It doesn't always take lots of money or computer horsepower. For example: consistent with the 'vision based' approach to creating plans, I believe that plans will become more visual in nature. Rather than ever-more lengthy text that only creates fodder for arguments and legal wrangling, many of us are using and will improve our use of drawings to illustrate desired outcomes. Drawings are human, and easily understood, and work better than words at creating a common base of understanding. This works well on paper, whether by cut and paste or scanning into documents; it may also work on a cd, or on a holographic image."

— Lee A. Krohn, Manchester, Vermont