

Where Do We Want to Go?

HOW DEVELOPMENT BEST FITS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. “I don’t much care where –” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat. (Alice in Wonderland, Chapter 6).

In our last column (PCJ #71, Summer 2008), we discussed the importance of defining your community’s identity as part of the planning process. The next question a community must ask in developing a comprehensive plan is, “Where do we want to go?” We’ve both been known to paraphrase this conversation between Alice and the Cheshire Cat when working with communities: “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there.”

Your community’s plan establishes the priorities for development patterns, mixes of land uses, areas that should grow, and those that should not. It should provide a framework for determining where and how development best fits. If framed properly, your plan can even recommend limiting the quantity of certain types of business, something Los Angeles implemented in its recent (and controversial) decision to not permit any new fast food franchises.

For any number of reasons, many cities and towns are afraid to turn down development. They fear that development will go somewhere else, taking jobs and local revenue with it, if they don’t accept whatever proposal a developer advances. As planning commissioners, you too may feel like any growth in your community would be good. However, wanting growth does not mean that you have to accept it at any cost.

If your plan articulates your community’s identity and establishes clear-cut goals for future growth, you can work

with developers to make sure their plans will mesh with yours. In fact, most developers are interested in fitting into a community – so long as they can clearly understand what you are asking them to do.

There’s an old saying that goes something like this: “Be careful what you ask for, because you might get it.” We’ve seen many communities whose ordinances put so much emphasis on separation of uses and low-density development that they actually require sprawl rather than good and efficient planning and urban design – and sprawl is exactly what they get. It isn’t necessarily that the growth is bad for the community; sometimes it’s that the growth isn’t in the best location, or at the best density, because decision-makers are hesitant to apply the standards that would implement the comprehensive plan.

We frequently hear from local governments that requiring compliance with the plan would unduly burden the developer. Rarely considered is the fiscal cost

that poorly located development can place on the community, as well as the intangible cost of incompatible or poorly designed development that isn’t sensitive to the community’s character (while we say “intangible,” damage to a community’s character can also have real, long-term negative impacts on the local economy; many businesses consider “quality of life” factors in location decisions).

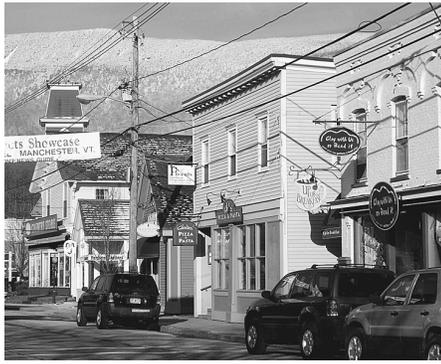
The cost differential between “business as usual” and development that meets your standards is often negligible to the developer, and almost always a significant savings to the community.

Let’s consider an example: the McDonald’s restaurant in Freeport, Maine. When McDonald’s proposed a restaurant in the pedestrian-oriented downtown, Freeport told them, “if you’re going to be here, you’re going to look like us.” To make a long story short, rather than knocking down the existing farmhouse on the site to construct corporate architecture, McDonald’s used the existing structure. After more than a decade, hamburgers are still being served in this historic building. We like this example because it demonstrates that communities don’t have to close the door to national franchises, nor accept corporate architecture that would stick out like a sore thumb, or make you look just like everywhere else.

Another example of creative development that matches community character can be found in the town of Manchester, Vermont. There’s a huge outlet mall there, but it isn’t the kind of outlet mall people normally think of (i.e., flat-roofed concrete block structures ringing a vast square sea of asphalt parking, built on the edge of town by a state highway or interstate). Instead, the outlets in Manchester are in downtown storefronts. They have landscaping and sidewalks.



Michael Menge poses with his “business icon” outside his Maine restaurant.



Manchester, Vermont's new outlet stores match the scale of the nearby main street.



Not only are they attractive and inviting, the stores also mesh with the overall character of the town.

The outlet developer didn't go somewhere else because the community said, "if you're going to be here, you have to look like you belong here." In fact, on a rainy Tuesday afternoon before the "high" season, it was obvious to us that shoppers were having no problem finding the outlets even without their corporate image and acres of asphalt parking spaces and gigantic brand signs fronting the interstate.

One of the best ways to protect your community's identity is by maintaining a healthy local economy, providing opportunities for home-grown entrepreneurs. In fact, many comprehensive plans are now focusing on ways of encouraging this. This reflects the fact that people across the country are interested in investing in their own community, or providing ways to facilitate this.

A great example we came across recently is the Blue Moose Restaurant in Blue Hill, Maine. Owner Michael Menge features local organic produce, meat, and cheese, as well as local-harvest fish and shellfish on his menu, which he rotates seasonally. He checks out each fishing boat and each farm before using their products. Even the coffee he serves is fair trade. After a cup of the best clam chowder we ever had, we asked Michael how he competes with the national identity offered by franchises. "Local food is safe food," he replied. "When spinach was contaminated, we were serving spinach. When tomatoes were contaminated, we were eating tomatoes. My customers

come here for great local food and the connection to the community."

This kind of entrepreneurship is the mark of a healthy local economy. It provides value-added products and capitalizes on the talents of people from the area. It keeps your financial resources circulating right at home. How, as a planning commissioner, do you create or enhance an atmosphere in your community that supports and encourages this kind of entrepreneurship? You can use this checklist to get started and stay on track:

1. *Define your community's character.* This was the focus of our column in the Summer 2008 issue.

2. *Articulate the elements of that character in your plan.* Describe what makes your community unique. Draw pictures, literally, and use photos to capture ideas for clarifying your community character. We will show you how this powerful technique can make your local plan work for your community in our next column.

3. *Establish target areas for future growth that maximize the use of your existing infrastructure.* Steer new growth to areas that already have roads, water, sewer, and other public services to support it. Look for opportunities for infill development rather than opting for sprawl that will require costly infrastructure extensions.

4. *Offer incentives for development that implements your plan.* For example, having a streamlined approval process can be an incentive for quality development in your community.

5. *Negotiate with developers, but keep firm to your plan's goals and priorities.*

Don't minimize the importance of maintaining your community character just because a development you think you need is dangled before you. Certainly, work with developers to see how they can best fit into your community, and help them see the benefits of belonging there. But remember that you don't have to sell your community short to get the development you want.

6. *Consider whether the development proposal would benefit your community.* If you already have a good supply of a particular kind of development, having more of the same isn't necessarily a good thing. A variety of businesses, a range of housing choices, local entrepreneurship, and balanced land uses creates a healthy economy.

7. *Review your plan annually.* This will help you make sure your priorities remain on target, your identity remains strong, and you are getting the kind of development you were expecting in the locations you established for it.

So here's the bottom line: your plan is not just a document, it is a process to help your community respond to the question "Where do we want to go?" This involves considering your community's unique character and identity; and how and where new development will best fit. In our Winter column we'll take a nuts-and-bolts look at some creative ideas that can help you as the planning commissioner move your community towards a plan that is easy to use, easy to implement, and shows your community's priorities at a glance. ♦



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