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Local Planning

**Contemporary Principles
and Practice**

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Some private planning consultants specialize in serving nonprofit community groups. They help local development entities determine which physical, economic, or social actions are most likely to improve the quality of life for neighborhood residents. These services require planners who can gather and organize community opinions, build consensus on how to address a particular issue, and identify the projects and actions that need to be undertaken by the community. Sometimes their efforts result in specific planning products; in other cases, planning consultants help secure commitments from public or private agencies to design and implement particular projects.

Distinctions between private and public planners

All planners have the skills required to do the following:

- Organize and assemble information that decision makers need
- Prepare plans that address the concerns of the local governing body and community planning boards and commissions
- Manage a planning program or process within a community while responding to the needs of the client, whether the client is a planning commission, a zoning board of appeals or other authority, a private landowner, or a special-interest group
- Generate ideas for good planning, advocate those ideas, and serve as the community's planning "conscience"
- Convey the tenets of good planning to citizens and to lay members of boards and commissions
- Prepare plans that, when implemented, will meet the goals and vision of a community.

A key difference between private and public sector planners, however, is that private consultants tend to be product oriented, while public planners tend to be process oriented. Clients usually retain product-oriented firms to prepare specific types of plans. Process-oriented public sector planners customarily identify the goals of the community and help residents determine how best to meet those goals. The public planner also manages the work of planning commissions; interacts with citizen groups; and builds constituencies for

plan development, approval, and implementation. When these activities require the preparation of specific products that are beyond the capabilities of a local planning department, the public planner may contract with a private planning consultant to produce them. Or a public sector planner may ask a private planning consultant to test the reaction to ideas that, if proposed by the planning staff, might entail political risk.

Private versus public planning

Private planning consultants have an ever-changing client base. Thus, they must always be on the cutting edge of planning expertise and practice. In addition, unlike the public planner, who concentrates on serving one community, private planning consultants serve many clients at once. Although variety makes life interesting, it does have its drawbacks.

Public planners become part of their community and come to know it intimately. They can focus on the problems and challenges of one place. This can provide insights that are difficult for a private planning consultant, who has much less familiarity with the community, to acquire. At the same time, public planners may have less understanding of approaches and solutions beyond their communities. As a result, public planners often seek the advice of private planning consultants to identify the best practices used to address problems elsewhere.

FOCUS ON

Collaborating to prevent sprawl

Carey S. Hayo, Frances Chandler-Marino, and Nancy Roberts

Several Florida communities have used collaborative, focused planning efforts to address the complex issues associated with suburban sprawl. Working with planning consultants to develop their varied approaches, these communities used the following five strategies:

- Establish a public-private partnership
- Respect the regional context

- Create a sustainable land use and transportation vision
- Prepare financing strategies
- Adopt written policies and regulations.

Establish a public-private partnership

Even the most thoughtful planning efforts stand little chance of influencing development if they lack the enthusiastic support of the landowners who are affected by the plan, and of the local government that is responsible for making land use decisions. Because political processes drive governmental decisions about land development, and because the financial success of developments hinges on short-term variables such as continued housing demand, dependable and sustainable land use plans require sound partnerships between public and private actors.

For example, to create a long-term vision for the future of 22,000 acres of primarily agricultural lands referred to as Pasadena Hills, the Pasco County regulating authority established a partnership with the landowners. This partnership funded the development of an area plan that involved in-depth collaboration with the community, including a series of stakeholder meetings and community workshops, and a design charrette. Public and private partners worked jointly to agree on the ultimate vision for the area and to draft the amendment to the comprehensive plan that was needed to implement the vision.

Respect the regional context

The context in which a plan is created makes a difference. (For further exploration of the planning context, see “Planning and the Community Context” in Chapter 2.) Data collection and analysis that are limited to a specific site or study area will not fully illuminate the issues, challenges, or opportunities associated with the area.

Sarasota County, Florida, for example, looked at the regional context in preparing its Sarasota 2050 Plan.¹ Instead of continuing the practice of “sprawling just a little at a time”—periodically moving the urban service boundary outward whenever it was necessary to accommodate population growth—the Sarasota 2050 Plan provides an alternative: accommodating future development in compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly villages so as to preserve open

space and create a connected system of environmental lands. The open areas are regulated through an overlay called the Greenway Resource Management Area, which protects native habitat by requiring that open areas be maintained in their natural condition and managed to sustain or enhance their native function.

In determining the appropriate locations for development and open lands, Sarasota County planners recognized the importance of identifying and understanding key regional features, including environmentally sensitive areas, historic settlement patterns, the current transportation network and built environment, and area demographic and economic characteristics.

Create a sustainable land use and transportation vision

Land use decisions affect transportation needs—and, conversely, the decisions about the location and design of transportation linkages can affect the land use opportunities for the properties they serve. When communities fail to address the relationship between mobility and land use, sprawl—multilane roadways lined with ribbons of roadside development—typically results. Many communities, however, are developing closely related, context-sensitive land use and transportation systems.

The Pasadena Hills Vision Plan developed by Pasco County established a progressive vision for this previously agricultural area by requiring all new urban development to be organized into mixed-use villages, connected by a transportation network that includes local roads specifically designed to reinforce the land use vision by including smaller lane widths and on-street parking within the mixed-use centers, and large landscaped buffers on roadway segments that separate villages one from another (see Figure 4-7).

For Haines City, Florida, one of the pivotal steps in ensuring that an area of potential sprawl would take on a sustainable pattern was to institute a shift in transportation plans: instead of going ahead with a typical suburban roadway (a small number of multi-lane arterials, with wide rights-of-ways), the city opted for a network that respects and extends its historical roadway grid of smaller and more numerous two-lane roads.



Source: Pasco County/Pasadena Hills Area Property Owners Group

Figure 4-7 The Pasadena Hills Vision Plan integrates land use and transportation to promote long-term mobility; uses smart growth design principles to provide a logical extension of urban uses and accommodate additional growth; and successfully transitions to existing rural neighborhoods.

Prepare financing strategies

A financially feasible infrastructure improvement plan is essential to the realization of any vision. Practical funding solutions for such a vision may include the creation of special districts, community development districts, or other bonding entities. One benefit of addressing financing early, during the visioning and planning processes, is that it allows public entities and private interests to reach consensus on a funding strategy.

The Pasadena Hills Vision Plan included a detailed analysis of alternatives for financing the essential infrastructure for the urban design and transportation components. Conversion of this agricultural area into a collection of urban villages required numerous off-site and on-site infrastructure improvements, as well as a tiered funding mechanism that requires regional improvements to be funded by the entire plan area and more localized improvements to be funded by each village or neighborhood. The funding analysis offered governance alternatives for the improvements district and public-private financing partnership initiatives that included methods to determine what entity (public or private) would finance different types of improvements.

Adopt written policies and regulations

Development options designed to prevent suburban sprawl on specific sites often involve planning for larger land areas, under multiple ownership, that will be developed over long planning horizons. Regulations, specific implementation guidelines, and action steps for the future must accurately translate the vision plans into clear and accepted policies for private development, even when that development occurs in a piecemeal fashion.

In 2004, Sarasota County adopted specific regulations to guide the development process for its village development districts. These regulations included a system of land subdivision; a development approval process; and minimum standards for land use, transportation, and design. In addition, they mandated coordinated, mixed-use development; an interconnected street network designed to balance the needs of all users; and specific design codes to regulate the character and form of development.

Note

- 1 See Sarasota County, Florida, Comprehensive Plan, scgov.net/PlanningandDevelopment/CompPlan/Sarasota2050.asp (accessed July 8, 2008).